County’s Youth Have Shockingly Easy Access to Tobacco and Alcohol Near Schools

Results from First-Ever Survey in California Analyzing Tobacco, Alcohol and Food in Stores

Santa Barbara, CA – It’s just as easy for many kids to buy tobacco as candy bars, according to the results of a new study in Santa Barbara County. Data from a groundbreaking survey show that tobacco products are sold next to candies at check-out areas in over 50% of stores. These findings come from a new study about the availability and marketing of tobacco, alcohol, and food products in stores that sell tobacco—the first time all three categories of products have been analyzed together.

The statewide survey collected information from almost 7,400 diverse stores—including convenience, supermarket, liquor, tobacco, small market, discount, drug and big box stores—in all 58 counties. Roughly 700 people helped gather the data statewide between July and October 2013. This major surveillance effort provides a snapshot of how product availability in stores can impact our health.

Flavored little cigars or cigarillos have grown in popularity in recent years. One national study found that 2 out of 5 middle and high school students who smoke reported cigarillo use. Locally, close to 80% of tobacco outlets sell these products and most are located near schools. It’s not surprising that youth are drawn to these with their colorful packaging, and flavors like bubblegum and grape. Furthermore, the most popular brand costs under $1.00 in almost three quarters of the sites visited.

Other novel products are enticing to kids in retail settings. Alcopops, alcoholic beverages that resemble soda or fizzy juice drinks, are sold at 91% of tobacco outlets in our county, exceeding the state average. This is coupled with the finding that just over half of the stores had alcohol advertising near candy, toys—or at a child’s eye level.

Over two thirds of tobacco retailers surveyed are located within 1,000 feet of schools, meaning many of our kids are exposed to unhealthy products on a regular basis. Just over 10% of stores had advertising that promoted healthy foods, like fresh produce. Not all the news is troubling—local stores sold low or non-fat milk in more than half the stores—well above 37% statewide.

“As adults, we’re desensitized to these influences,” said Ellen Stewart, a mother in Santa Ynez Valley who helped with data collection, “but this opens my eyes to how many unhealthy messages our kids are bombarded with every day. Even if they don’t enter a business, they can be exposed to the ads on the storefronts and windows.”
Additional survey findings in Santa Barbara County include:

- 66.7% of the stores selling tobacco at check-out areas were also near schools, compared to 40.5% statewide
- Over half of stores display exterior alcohol advertising
- Tobacco outlets are located in 54% of lower income communities, exceeding both regional and state rates
- Only 46.9% of stores had any fruit or vegetables available
- 76% of stores sold sugary drinks at the checkout and near schools

“We all need to be more aware of these influences in our neighborhoods,” said Dr. Takashi Wada, Deputy Health Officer and Director of the County’s Public Health Department. “We are committed to working with store owners, families, and other partners throughout Santa Barbara County to protect our kids and make our communities healthier.”

Today marks the launch of the Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community, a statewide campaign that seeks to improve the health of Californians by informing them about the impacts of unhealthy product marketing in stores. This new campaign is a collaboration of tobacco prevention, nutrition, and alcohol partners.

For state, regional, and county specific data and more information on Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community, visit www.HealthyStoresHealthyCommunity.com.

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