

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Qualitative Exploration of Canadian Youth and Tobacco Retailer's Views Regarding the Prohibition of Tobacco Sales to Youth**

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Ce sommaire est aussi disponible en français.

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# Introduction and Executive Summary

## ***Background***

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable death in Canada. Every year, over 37,000 Canadians die prematurely as a result of disease and illness caused by tobacco use. At least 1,000 of them are non-smokers. The Government of Canada's Federal Tobacco Control Strategy (FTCS) is championed by many parties working collaboratively towards reducing, possibly eliminating, tobacco use. Health Canada's Tobacco Control Programme (TCP) plays a leadership role in implementing the Strategy.

The Tobacco Control Programme has formed a committee, the Tobacco Retail Environment Committee (TREC) which is charged with examining how tobacco products are sold, accessed and promoted in the retail environment. TREC will examine how this environment might be changed to enhance the goals of tobacco control by the timely provision of evidence based recommendations for changes to the retail environment. The committee will work in partnership with the provinces and territories, in order to further the goals of the FTCS, as well as those of the National Strategy (New Directions for Tobacco Control in Canada: A National Strategy).

## ***Research Objectives***

As input into the work of TREC, Health Canada is interested in gaining a better understanding of the situation with respect to youth and retailers' opinions on the prohibition of tobacco sales to youth: for example, the effectiveness of the current regulations regarding age restrictions, signage, and acceptable proof of age. Health Canada is also interested in the opinion of youth and tobacco retailers on how changes could be made to the prohibition of tobacco sales to youth and regulations and policy interventions to further restrict youth access to tobacco. This research was conducted among retailers and among youth with these objectives in mind.

**Research Objectives (Retailers):** This project was intended to gather information from English and French speaking retailers who sell tobacco products. Retailers were asked about their knowledge, attitudes, views, perceptions, and behaviours associated with the tobacco retail environment, and specifically prohibition of tobacco sales to youth. Specific objectives included:

- Assessing Retailer’s current knowledge, attitudes and behaviours associated with current prohibition of tobacco sales to youth.
- Examining Retailers’ views and attitudes about the effectiveness (from a prohibition perspective) of compliance checks, age restrictions, retail signage, display restrictions, visits from tobacco inspectors, etc.
- Assessing current training of staff who sell tobacco products;
- Examining Retailers’ views and attitudes towards possible future modifications to the tobacco retail environment to improve sales prohibition to youth.

**Research Objectives (Youth):** This project was also intended to gather information from youth and young adults (aged 16-19) who use tobacco products. Youth were asked about their knowledge, attitudes, views, perceptions, and behaviours associated with the tobacco retail environment, and specifically prohibition of tobacco sales to youth. Specific objectives included:

- Assessing youth’s current knowledge, attitudes and behaviours associated with current prohibition of tobacco sales to youth legislation.
- Examining youth’s views and attitudes about the effectiveness (from a prohibition perspective) of compliance checks, retail signage, age restrictions, display restrictions, retail staff training, etc.
- Examining youth’s views and attitudes towards possible future modifications to the tobacco retail environment to improve sales to youth prohibition.

**Methods**

Twelve (12) focus group sessions were conducted in February 2007 in four locations: Halifax (3 sessions), Montreal (3 sessions), Ottawa (3 sessions) and Edmonton (3 sessions). The Montreal sessions were held in French; the others in English. In each location, one session was conducted with retailers, and two sessions were conducted with youth aged 16-19 years – one with youth smokers and one with youth non-smokers. Retailers were recruited from all the retail sectors in each of the four provinces, where tobacco is available for sale.

Date	Location	Time	Segment
February 1	Ottawa	12:00	Retailers
February 1	Ottawa	5:30	Youth Smokers
February 1	Ottawa	7:30	Youth Non-smokers
February 5	Halifax	12:00	Retailers

February 5	Halifax	5:30	Youth Smokers
February 5	Halifax	7:30	Youth Non-smokers
February 7	Edmonton	12:00	Retailers
February 7	Edmonton	5:30	Youth Smokers
February 7	Edmonton	7:30	Youth Non-smokers
February 8	Montreal	12:00	Retailers
February 8	Montreal	5:30	Youth Smokers
February 8	Montreal	7:30	Youth Non-smokers

Ten participants per group were recruited for the study. In total, 93 participants took part in the sessions. Each group lasted approximately two hours. The discussion agendas for the project are appended to this report.

Dr. Donna Dasko, Senior Vice President, Environics, directed the project. All qualitative research work was conducted in accordance with the professional standards established by the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA – previously the Professional Market Research Society and the Canadian Association of Market Research Organizations).

Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held, as would be measured in a quantitative study. The results of this type of research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable.

## ***Executive Summary***

### ***Retailers***

#### **Role of tobacco sales**

Most retailers reported that 20% to 80% of their raw sales are tobacco related, but most also mentioned that the profit margin on tobacco is quite low, and that tobacco sales are important mainly for the ancillary sales that it generates. They also reported that tobacco products are a major target for thieves.

#### **Awareness of restrictions on tobacco sales to youth**

There was universal awareness among retailer participants that 19 or 18 is the age at which people can legally buy tobacco products in their province. Retailers were also quite well versed about the types of ID that are acceptable or unacceptable as proof of age. There was

some confusion in Ottawa over the acceptability of health cards and of out-of-province ID (especially from Quebec).

Retailers were aware of the requirements in terms of in-store signage, though there was confusion as to what is a federal, provincial or municipal requirement.

Awareness was high about the related restrictions on giving away matches and lighters and on single cigarette sales and rolling paper sales, though there are some issues in Ontario where the legal age to buy rolling paper is lower than the age to buy cigarettes. Some retailers from larger chains also had corporate policies to follow that were more restrictive than what is mandated by law.

Retailers were very aware of the penalties for non-compliance with laws on selling tobacco products to those under-age, and most also knew that individual employees can also be fined. The prospect of losing their license to sell tobacco products for a period of time was seen as a particularly strong penalty.

### **Experiences and challenges**

Most participants felt that they have done a good job over time of adapting to restrictions on tobacco sales to minors. Many retailers reported that they have a regular clientele and rarely get “questionable” people coming in for the first time.

The retailer participants that were most challenged are those who are close to schools where there is a constant influx of new customers who may try to buy tobacco despite being under-age. This can create stresses for younger employees in particular who sometimes lack the confidence to challenge their peers who try to buy tobacco from them.

Retailers with major chains and also specialty tobacconists reported fewer incidents of under-age youth trying to buy tobacco. This seems to happen more to smaller “corner” shops that may have more informal enforcement policies.

Retailers complained that it can be difficult to judge the age of young women in particular. They have rules of thumb for spotting youth trying to buy tobacco illegally, but they also know that youth will sometimes have their own strategies such as buying from people they know, or shopping when the store is very busy and the sales people are under pressure to serve everyone in line as quickly as possible.

There was little reporting of cases of people using fraudulent ID to buy tobacco, but there was a perception that some youth will use the ID of parents or siblings that look like them, or others. As well, a big “loophole” for young people involves getting someone older to purchase cigarettes for them.

Many retailers reported being sceptical about whether the enforcement of laws against selling tobacco to youth are having any real impact on the smoking rate among young people. There was a perception that the smoking rate is as high as ever or is even rising and there was a feeling that youth who want to buy cigarettes can always find a way to get them.

There were several complaints over the perception that the entire burden of compliance is on the retailers. There was a perception that under-age youth can try to buy tobacco as many times as they want without any fear of consequences, while retailers get punished for any infraction.

There was little or no spontaneous mention of “native” or smuggled tobacco products being an issue in terms of being a common way in which under-age smokers get tobacco.

### **Youth possession laws**

Retailers were very much in favour of youth possession laws, although in places like Halifax and Edmonton where these laws exist, most of the retailers were unaware of the youth possession laws, and felt that they were not being enforced.

### **Staff training**

Training of staff regarding under-age tobacco sales was inconsistent. Retailers from the bigger chains generally have a more formal process and in many cases have training materials from their head offices. Smaller shops tended to train on ad hoc one on one basis. In Ottawa, retailers reported more formal training programs and instructing staff to read toolkits that they had received. This was less the case elsewhere.

Retailers’ toolkits were well distributed in Ottawa, Halifax and Edmonton and were seen to be useful – although a bit long in some cases in terms of the amount of information to read.

### **Inspection, compliance and test-shopping**

Retailers in Ottawa reported that tobacco inspectors were often confrontational and unpleasant. In Halifax and Edmonton experiences were more mixed. Retailers in Montreal were much less likely to report having been inspected.

Participants had mixed feelings about the use of test-shoppers. Some saw this as unfair entrapment. Others acknowledged that it is the only way to enforce compliance.

### **Suggestions**

Retailers gave a variety of suggestions on how the system could be improved, such as being able to swipe IDs instantly, more publicity about fines to employees who sell to the under-age, and enforcement of youth possession laws.

Most of all retailers want to be treated more like partners in the process of stopping under-age youth from buying tobacco. They wanted to know that their efforts were paying some dividends – such as seeing statistics on what percentage of test-shoppers find people breaking the law.

## **Youth**

### **Awareness of restrictions on tobacco sales to youth**

Almost all participants, both smokers and non-smokers, were aware of the age at which it is legal to sell tobacco products to young adults in their province.

Most believed that an acceptable form of ID is a government-issued card with a photograph and date of birth; frequently mentioned IDs were: driver's licence, passport, and a government-issued proof of age card. There was some confusion concerning health cards and student IDs.

### **Personal experiences with tobacco sales**

Virtually all have seen signs stating that it is illegal to sell cigarettes to minors and most have also seen signs stating that ID is required. Some have also seen signs listing acceptable IDs and giving details about fines, “no smoking” signs, and signs with health warning messages about smoking. Many participants thought that the signs they have seen are required by law to be displayed.

Virtually all agreed that restrictions on tobacco sales to minors were not universally enforced, and that any under-age smoker who really wants to purchase cigarettes can find a way to do so. Most knew of stores where compliance was lax.

Smaller, owner-operated convenience stores are seen as more likely than chain stores such as Mac's Milk to sell tobacco to minors. Most felt larger stores are more concerned about their reputation, while small stores are more concerned about profit.

Participants were aware of a wide range of strategies for obtaining cigarettes while under-age, including:

- Using fake IDs or IDs borrowed or otherwise obtained from older people.
- Approaching clerks known to them or younger clerks who might be sympathetic
- “Chatting up” or making friends with the staff at corner stores or going to stores where they are known.
- Behaving in a confident manner.
- Going to stores believed more likely to be lax, such as those near schools, stores owned by people from cultures where smoking is more acceptable, and busier stores.

### **Impact of tobacco sales restrictions**

Most agreed that restrictions make obtaining cigarettes less convenient but that there is little impact on those minors who really want to obtain cigarettes. Some did think that the restrictions may deter newer smokers or those who are not yet addicted.

A number of participants acknowledged that they did not want their younger siblings or other young people to have unrestricted access to cigarettes.

### **Improvements to tobacco sales restrictions and enforcement**

Suggestions for improving restrictions on tobacco sales to minors or compliance with such laws included:

- Tougher sentences and larger fines for retailers, employees and those who smoke under-age
- Swiping valid ID cards prior to purchase
- Selling cigarettes only in special “government” stores
- Asking for two pieces of ID or issuing a special ID that says in bold letters “Over 18.”
- Frequent and unannounced use of “undercover” or test shoppers
- Enhanced training for store clerks



### **Youth possession laws**

Awareness of youth possession laws was low in Ottawa, Montreal, and Halifax, but relatively high in Edmonton. Most participants, with the exception of smokers in Montreal and Halifax, felt youth possession restrictions were reasonable and would likely reduce youth smoking to some degree.

### **Experience with selling tobacco and staff training**

Most of those who had worked in a store selling tobacco products reported that their training about tobacco sales consisted of being told not to sell to minors and to check ID. One participant was given a brochure and two had heard about videos but had not seen them. There was no other mention of training materials or retailers toolkits.

Most participants expected that, while most store owners, managers and employers were aware that it is not legal to sell tobacco to minors, training is likely to be inconsistent, with larger and chain stores more likely to give better training to staff.

### **Inspection, compliance and test-shopping**

Awareness of inspection was low, although most assumed that there probably is some inspection to ensure that laws are being observed.

Awareness of test shoppers was notably higher. Most agreed that test-shopping is an appropriate method of determining compliance. Some thought it was appropriate as long as the test-shopper did not use fake ID. Some felt that test shoppers should be at least 16, but there was no concern about using someone who was a smoker.

Most participants agreed that in order to be effective, test-shopping has to be done frequently and that all stores selling cigarettes have to be visited regularly, at random, and unannounced.

Most youth who smoked were at least somewhat aware of the consequences faced by stores that sell tobacco products to minors (non-smoking youth know that punishments exist but are less aware of details). Awareness of fines was high, although the amount of the fine was not always known; some youth smokers also believed that a store could lose its licence to sell tobacco. There was less certainty as to whether the person who actually sells to minors will be fined.

## **Conclusions**

The focus groups revealed quite high awareness among tobacco retailers of the restrictions on tobacco sales to youth including legal age, forms of identification, signage, and general penalties. Youth, as well, were generally well aware of the issues involving legal age and forms of acceptable identification for purchasing tobacco. However, findings from both the retailers and youth sessions suggest that the areas for action involve training, communications, such as sharing positive success stories with retailers, as well as some additional targeted activity in the compliance and inspection areas.

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