

# Raise the Smoking Age to 21

Editorial  
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Public health in the U.S. has come a long way from the 1960s, when almost half of adults were still smoking. Today that rate is [14.9 percent](#). The problem is, that's still far too high. Bolder steps to prevent and reduce tobacco addiction are needed -- like the one Hawaii took last summer when it raised the legal age for tobacco purchases to 21.

## [The War on Smoking](#)

Hawaii became the first state to make this change after observing the success of the first such local law, in Needham, Massachusetts. Since Needham's ordinance was adopted in 2005, youth smoking there has fallen by more than half. In 2013, New York became the first big city to follow suit (under then-mayor Michael Bloomberg, the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg LP). Today, [nearly 100 localities](#) in eight states have done so, and more are [considering](#) it. States have been slower to act; the California Senate passed such a bill this summer, and the Massachusetts legislature is also weighing the change.

A higher age limit is a good strategy, because the best way to reduce tobacco addiction is to prevent it. Young people are [especially prone](#) to falling into the smoking habit, the evidence shows. Four out of five adult smokers became daily users before they turned 21. No wonder a Philip Morris [memo](#) from the 1980s warned, "Raising the legal minimum age for cigarette purchaser to 21 could gut our key young adult market (17-20)."

If not just individual states but the federal government were to raise the smoking age to 21, it could cut future smoking among today's teenagers by 12 percent, according to the [National Academy of Sciences](#). It would also prevent approximately 223,000 premature deaths among people born between 2000 and 2019.

Critics make a familiar counterargument: If 18-year-olds can vote and serve in the military, why can't they light up? It's a fair point. This age group also can't drink alcohol, however, and the case for limiting access to tobacco is even stronger, because there's no safe level of tobacco use. Moreover, society pays a [heavy cost](#) for smoking, in both medical bills and lost productivity. Cities, states and the federal government share a compelling interest in avoiding those costs and helping young adults live longer, healthier lives.

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