

Letter: Increasing the Minimum Age to Purchase Tobacco

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Letters to the Editor

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To the Editor:

A recent study by the Institute of Medicine looks at the public health implications of raising the minimum legal age to purchase tobacco products. Thanks to this report, we can add another evidence-based strategy to the toolbox of strategies cities and towns in Massachusetts can use to prevent youth from becoming addicted to nicotine.

A committee of experts at the Institute of Medicine conducted a rigorous review, used mathematical modeling and concluded that increasing the minimum legal access age from 18 to 21 will have a positive impact on reducing youth initiation of tobacco use, particularly in adolescents aged 15 to 17. The report brief states, "Raising the MLA to 21 will mean that those who can legally obtain tobacco are less likely to be in the same social networks as high school students."

According to the report, if the minimum legal age was raised to 21 now, by the time today's teenagers are adults, we would see a 12 percent decrease in smoking rates.

Many municipalities in Berkshire County have worked tirelessly to adopt a variety of policies — like eliminating the sale of single cheap cigars, limiting the number of new tobacco sellers and removing flavored tobacco from stores that minors frequent — that, when taken together, can have real impact on youth tobacco use. It's encouraging to have another evidence-based strategy to employ.

Most of the policies cities and towns use to prevent youth tobacco use are aimed at reducing the tobacco industry's influence. Without local regulation, the tobacco companies target young people with products that are cheap, sweet, and easy to get. While raising the minimum sales age to 21 helps reduce youth access, it alone does not eliminate the sales to minors or impact other access channels. For this reason, the strategy of raising the minimum sale age to 21 is just one of several key strategies to be used by municipalities to reduce youth smoking.

In Massachusetts, coordinated by the Massachusetts Tobacco Cessation and Prevention Program, our goal is to de-normalize tobacco use by youth. Using a variety of approaches to reduce youth access to tobacco, we can reduce the influence of the tobacco industry in places frequented by young people. With a comprehensive approach, over time, smoking-related disease and mortality could become so low that tobacco would no longer be a public health challenge. We know how to achieve a tobacco-free generation and with coordinated actions and investments we can get there.

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