

Ban tobacco sales until age 21. It's a bipartisan way to reduce addiction and death.

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Raise the smoking age to 21 and save lives. There's bipartisan support for a ban on tobacco sales to teens, who are susceptible to nicotine addiction.

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Patricia Garson was a smoker who died of lung cancer. Her husband inhaled second-hand smoke for over 20 years and died of lung cancer too. Their daughter smoked for 30 years and has lung cancer. And their son — a co-author of this column — smoked for three years. One thing uniting those Garsons: Their smoking began in their teenage years.

Unfortunately, this experience is far too familiar for many Americans. Tobacco is the leading cause of illness and death in the United States, claiming the lives of nearly half a million people each year. That is equivalent to three 747 planes crashing in this country every single day. However, we have the opportunity to prevent today's teenagers from the harms experienced by the Garson family. The question is, are we willing to seize it?

There is an effective solution that can dramatically curb smoking — and one that has broad, bipartisan support. Across the country, several states and hundreds of cities have passed a law that can help ensure teenagers never start smoking — and therefore, never become addicted. These laws, known as “Tobacco 21 laws,” make it illegal to sell cigarettes and other tobacco products to anyone under the age of 21.

Tobacco 21 effectively reduces teenage smoking

These laws work. A study of the nation's first Tobacco 21 law in Needham, Mass., found that smoking rates in high schoolers declined by 47 percent in the four-year period after the law was passed in 2005. Since then, over 300 communities in 21 states have passed similar laws, ranging from Sitka, Alaska to New York City.

We often hear stories in the media about how bitterly divided Americans are when it comes to health policy. But there is almost uniform agreement on the value of Tobacco 21 laws. Nationally, 82 percent of Americans support preventing the sale of all tobacco products to those under age 21, according to a 2018 poll conducted by Texas Medical Center Health Policy Institute, to be released Wednesday.

Both Republicans and Democrats back these laws to keep tobacco out of the hands of teenagers. Support for the laws is high across different income and education levels. Support is high even among those under 21, who are most directly affected.

It's important to enact these laws because teens are especially susceptible to the addictive effects of nicotine. Young people need less nicotine than adults to become addicted, and their impulsivity prevents them from recognizing the serious risks they face if they choose to become smokers. But if you prevent them from smoking when they're under 21, many will choose not to take up smoking, even when they're of legal age.

Tobacco is harmful, unlike other freedoms

Critics of these laws charge that they unfairly limit liberty. They argue that if you are old enough to vote or get married at 18, you are old enough to smoke cigarettes. This argument, however, is flawed. Marriage, voting, and tobacco each have very different risks and benefits. Other freedoms allowed to those at age 18, like marriage and voting, have the potential to bring about more good than harm.

Tobacco, however, is addictive, and it has been clearly and repeatedly shown to cause significant harm to all who consume it. Perhaps that is why, in the same survey, more than half of Americans said they believe tobacco sales should be banned altogether, regardless of age.

The Garson family and millions of others have lost their loved ones to lung cancer caused by tobacco. We can spare future families this pain. The Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids has an online resource that shows the location of cities and states with Tobacco 21 laws. If your community isn't listed, contact your elected officials and ask them to take action today. The time has come to protect teenagers from tobacco by passing Tobacco 21 laws.

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