Checking Identification for Tobacco Sales to Minors in Retail Stores: A Problem Rather than a Solution

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Retail stores that sell electronic cigarette (e-cig) and combustible tobacco products are supposed to check identification when selling these products to minors to avoid underage sales. But does this actually happen? To answer that, Levinson et al (10.1542/peds.2019-3253) had "undercover" minors ask for e-cig or combustible products from retail stores in 17 states, and see if (a), they were asked to show identification (ID), (b) whether they still sold products even if the ID said they were underage, and (c), whether rates differed if the teen said they were required or forbidden to have ID.

The results are disappointing and also surprising. For example, 20% of the time, the minors were not asked for ID. When there was no ID shown or the ID noted the teen being underage, 22.8% of the time products were still sold to the minor, and was 42% more likely if the request were for e-cig products versus combustible tobacco cigarettes. The authors found that if the minor showed any form of ID rather than no ID, they were three times as likely to be offered product. While this study was done in 2017 and 2018, one wonders if the findings would change in states that have instituted "Tobacco 21" legislation forbidding sales of e-cigs and tobacco products to those under 21 years of age. If not, then the Tobacco 21 legislation will not be the answer we hoped for when it comes to reducing vaping and smoking behaviors in our teenagers given how often retail stores violate their compliance-check protocols based on the findings in this study. You don't have to show ID to read this study and perhaps share it with those who work at your local retail store as well.

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