

Tobacco 21

“If a man has never smoked by age 18, the odds are three-to-one he never will. By age 24, the odds are twenty-to-one.”

-RJ Reynolds researcher, [1982](#)



WHAT ARE TOBACCO 21 POLICES?

Tobacco 21 policies raise the minimum legal sale age of tobacco products to age 21. More than 200 municipalities have passed laws raising the minimum age of purchase for tobacco products to 21. These policies lead to fewer young people using tobacco products both immediately and over the course of their lives.

HOW DO TOBACCO 21 POLICIES IMPROVE THE LIVES OF BIG CITY RESIDENTS?

Tobacco use remains the single most preventable cause of death and disease in this country, resulting in almost 500,000 deaths each year. Evidence shows that people who begin using tobacco before age 21 are at greater risk of lifetime use. Because adolescents' and young adults' brains are still developing, they are more susceptible to addiction.

Approximately [ninety-five percent](#) of adult smokers begin smoking before they turn 21. Delaying the age when young people first experiment with or begin using tobacco can reduce the risk that they will become addicted smokers.

Research shows that raising the tobacco sales minimum age to 21 years would decrease tobacco retailer and industry sales by approximately 2% but could contribute to a [substantial reduction](#) in tobacco use and addiction.

WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE THAT TOBACCO 21 POLICIES WORK?

The 2015 report by the Institute of Medicine (now the National Academy of Medicine) validated significant health benefits from [raising the tobacco age to 21](#). Key findings included:

- 25% decline in smoking initiation by 15-17 year olds
- 12% drop in overall smoking prevalence
- 16,000 preterm birth and low birth weight cases would be averted within five years

The Academy also predicted that this policy change would save 4.2 million years of life for today's youth.

Other research models estimate that increasing the legal smoking age from 18 to 21 years of age could lead to \$212 billion in savings over 50 years, driven largely by reduced medical costs.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE POLICY IMPROVEMENT

Like many public policies, the law is only as effective as its implementation. Unfortunately, youth access laws are often poorly enforced. A 2015 national survey found that 2/3 of tenth graders consider it “[fairly easy or very easy](#)” to get access to tobacco products. A federally-mandated compliance assessment reported that [one in ten retailers](#) sell to youth under age 18. Ideally, compliance strategies should be incorporated into city ordinances or regulations.

RESOURCES FOR CITIES ON IMPLEMENTING TOBACCO 21 POLICIES

[Tobacco Control Legal Consortium](#)

Raising the Minimum Legal Sale Age for Tobacco and Related Products - Tips and Tools (includes sample city ordinance)

[Tobacco 21](#) - Preventing Tobacco Addiction Foundation. Tobacco 21.

[Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids Fact Sheet](#): Increasing the legal minimum age sale for tobacco products to 21

[Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids Fact Sheet](#): States and Localities that have raised the minimum age.