

Keeping ALL Washington youth healthy: strategies for addressing disparities in local communities

Why it Matters

All Washington youth need and deserve healthy, safe communities in which to live, learn, and thrive. The neighborhoods where youth grow up set the stage for their social, emotional, and physical health.

Research shows us that youth who identify as Black, Indigenous, or a person of color (BIPOC), youth with sexual or gender-minoritized identities, and youth living in lower socio-economic-status communities may be unfairly exposed to risky and unhealthy environments. This increases the likelihood of outcomes like substance misuse and poor mental health.¹⁻⁵

An increasingly pivotal aspect of a healthy environment for youth is limited access to retailers where substances are being sold, used, and promoted. Research and data indicate that youth are even more influenced by these environments in comparison to adults. This can result in early substance use and increased likelihood of future addiction.^{6,7}

Investing in effective prevention programming and policies that reduce exposure to substances in retail environments is key to promoting health for all Washington youth. These policies apply to alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis retail locations and marketing.



Effects of exposure in adolescents

Adolescents are particularly likely to see and be influenced by alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis marketing and signage as well as environmental usage. Adolescents are more likely than adults to see alcohol advertisements in print, digital, and social media platforms.¹⁰

Research indicates that exposure via social media, particularly content promoting tobacco products and alcohol, is associated with use, regardless of youth demographic.^{8,9}

Some social media platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter, restrict youth younger than age 21 from following alcohol brand pages. However, these age-restriction codes can be easily bypassed. Other platforms, specifically Instagram and TikTok, do not have such restrictions.¹⁰ A lack of restrictions or restriction codes that are easily bypassed subsequently increases the likelihood that youth will see alcohol advertisements.¹⁰

Disparity in the effects of exposure

Not all youth are shown to be at equal risk from exposure to substance marketing. Tobacco and alcohol marketing disproportionately targets racial and ethnic minorities, particularly Black and Latin or Hispanic individuals and youth as well as those with lower socio-economic statuses.^{1,11,12}

For example, Black and Latin or Hispanic adolescents are twice as likely to be exposed to alcohol advertisements than predominantly white adolescents.¹² Youth in primarily BIPOC communities and individuals with sexual- or gender-minoritized identities are exposed to more advertising for electronic cigarettes.^{13,14}

Effects of proximity to substance retailers

People who live closest to alcohol retailers, and who live in areas with a higher number of alcohol retailers, are more likely to use alcohol, die from alcohol-related causes, and experience violence in their home and community.^{4,15}

Similarly, those who live in areas with a higher number of cannabis retailers are associated with both cannabis use and use-disorder symptoms in young adults. Those who live closest to retailers are associated with at least monthly use and higher perceived access.^{16,17}

And while the presence of substance retailers may build the local economy, the presence of these retailers may also increase crime or disrupt neighborhood social cohesion.¹⁸

Marketing and location of substance retailers disproportionately targets vulnerable groups.

Retailers selling alcohol, tobacco, or cannabis are over-concentrated in low-income neighborhoods and in Black and Latin or Hispanic communities.^{4,19-21}

Communities with socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to allow cannabis retailers to open in their area and less likely to have policies that restrict the number and location of retailers to protect the community.²²

What can be done

There must be policies developed and enforced that limit youth access to retailers where substances are being sold, used, and promoted. Such policies must also help youth gain skills needed to make healthy choices. Ways to do this are:



Support strategies to reduce youth exposure to, and effects from, substance marketing.

- Monitor compliance with existing policies.
- Pay special attention to marketing techniques used on social media.^{5,14,23,24}
- Implement age-restrictions on social media that are harder to bypass.²⁵
- Develop counter-marketing campaigns about the risks of substance use, especially for marginalized populations.²⁶

Introduce and support strategies specific to substance marketing.

- Reduce sponsorship activities that promote alcoholic beverages.
- Restrict or ban promotions in connection with activities targeting young people.
- Introduce and support strategies specific to tobacco marketing.
- Especially focus on e-cigarettes and digital and social media platforms.¹⁴
- Introduce and support strategies specific to cannabis marketing.

- Monitor compliance with existing policies by requiring cannabis marketers to provide data on ad placement and audience demographics.²⁷
- Liquor and Cannabis Board, counties, and cities sufficiently resourced to regulate compliance with marketing regulations.²²

Reduce the number of retailers in low-income minority communities.

State and local public health agencies should partner with local communities to increase and standardize surveillance efforts documenting the number and density of substance retailers.²⁸ To measure alcohol outlet density, teams should utilize the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention toolkit as it provides step by step guidance on how to use and calculate count-based and distance-based alcohol outlet density indicators for surveillance.²⁹

State and local governments should consider spatial equity while developing and revising neighborhood zoning laws to ensure retailers are not disproportionately placed in disadvantaged areas. For example, they could assess how zoning restrictions will contribute to the concentration of cannabis retailers in low-income areas.¹⁹

Support evidence-based prevention programming for youth.

Implement media literacy programs and other prevention programs that have proven effective in reducing or counteracting the effects of youth being exposed to substance marketing.^{10,30}

Additional information

More information can be found in these [research briefs](#). Questions: prevention@hca.wa.gov

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