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Abstract

Objective: This study examined the current rate of illegal sales to minors in 68 cities and towns in Massachusetts that lost their Board of Health Tobacco Control Programs due to funding cuts, and compared it with the rate of illegal sales to minors in these same cities and towns before their tobacco control programs were eliminated. The study was commissioned by the Massachusetts Coalition for a Healthy Future.

Methods: A compliance check occurs when a minor, under the supervision of an adult, attempts to purchase tobacco. Compliance checks to determine the rate of illegal sales to minors were done in 68 cities and towns, a statistically significant sampling of the 143 cities and towns that were defunded by the Department of Public Health as a result of budget cuts. Municipalities were chosen based upon several factors that demonstrated consistent enforcement efforts in 2002, when the programs were operational. These factors include, but are not limited to periodic checks, imposition of penalties for illegal sales and training of minors involved in the checks. Results of these compliance checks were compared with reported results in these same communities in 2002, prior to the elimination of the programs.

Summary and Results: By November of 2002, as a result of budget cuts to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Tobacco Control Program (MTCP), 143 of the existing 305 local board of health tobacco control programs were eliminated. One obligation of these programs is to conduct periodic compliance checks. Research indicates that when boards of health conduct compliance checks on a regular, periodic basis, and when penalties are assessed on retailers that sell tobacco to minors illegally, fewer sales to minors are made. As a result of the elimination of these programs, compliance checks are no longer occurring in the vast majority these cities and towns.

The average rate of illegal sales to minors in 2002 in the 68 identified cities and towns was 9.3%. When checked in February, March and April of 2003, the average rate of illegal sales to minors more than tripled to 29%. Tobacco vendors illegally sold to minors three (3) times as frequently as they did last year in cities and towns that no longer have the ability to enforce local youth access regulations. Massachusetts has not seen the illegal sales to minors rate this high since 1995. It is more than twice the national average.