

Where Do Youth Get Their E-Cigarettes?



While tremendous progress has been made in reducing youth access to cigarettes, research shows that e-cigarettes are significantly easier for underage youth to purchase than cigarettes. Some youth buy the e-cigarettes they use, either directly from retailers or other sources, or by giving money to others to buy for them. Others get their cigarettes from social sources. For youth who purchase their own e-cigarettes, vape shops, gas stations and convenience stores are the most common sources for illegal sales to minors. According to the 2024 Monitoring the Future Survey, nearly half (48%) of 10th grade students say it would be easy to get vaping devices if they wanted to.¹

Social Sources of E-Cigarettes

Social sources, such as friends and classmates, are the most common source for accessing e-cigarettes among youth:

- According to the 2021 NYTS, 32.3% of youth e-cigarette users report getting e-cigarettes from a friend, the most commonly reported source for accessing e-cigarettes. Another 10.2% reported getting e-cigarettes from a family member.²
- The 2021 NYTS also found that 28.7% of youth e-cigarette users reported having someone else buy e-cigarettes for them, undermining the impact of youth access and age-of-sale laws.³
- The August-December 2025 wave of the national Tobacco Epidemic Evaluation Network (TEEN+) Study similarly found that 39.3% of youth (ages 13-17) e-cigarette users reported getting e-cigarettes from a friend and 34% reported having someone else buy e-cigarettes for them.⁴



In-Store Purchases of E-Cigarettes

E-cigarettes are significantly easier for underage youth to purchase than cigarettes. Underage purchase attempts of vaping products are 35% less likely to trigger an ID request and 42% more likely to result in a sales violation, compared to purchase attempts for cigarettes.⁵

- According to the 2021 National Youth Tobacco Survey (NYTS), 22.2% of youth e-cigarette users report obtaining e-cigarettes from a vape shop or tobacco shop in the past month and 17.7% from a gas station or convenience store.⁶
- The August-December 2025 wave of the TEEN+ Study found that among youth e-cigarette users who had reported buying their e-cigarettes, 30.3% reported buying them from a vape shop and 26.5% reported buying from a gas station or convenience store.⁷
- Older data from the 2018 NYTS found that among youth who had tried to buy tobacco products, only one quarter reported that they were denied sale because of their age.⁸
- A study in *JAMA Pediatrics* found that in California, e-cigarette sales to minors violations are significantly higher in tobacco and vape shops than any other type of retailer, with 44.7% selling to underage buyers.⁹

With nearly half of adolescents visiting a convenience store at least once a week,¹⁰ the odds that kids will have easy access to an e-cigarette retailer is high. Stanford researchers found that in 30 large U.S. cities, an average of 62.6% of public schools are within 1,000 feet (about 2 city blocks) of a tobacco retailer (ranging from 32.8% in Sacramento to 94.1% in New York City). They also found that on average, 70% of city residents live within a half mile (about a 10 minute walk) from a tobacco retailer.¹¹ Like cigarette and smokeless tobacco companies, e-cigarette companies are focusing their marketing at the retail level. In

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2021, e-cigarette companies spent 77.3 percent (\$664.3 million) of their total advertising and promotion expenditures on price discounts, point-of-sale advertising, coupons, and payments to ensure prime retail space.¹² Consequently, it's no surprise that retail stores are the most common source of exposure to e-cigarette marketing among youth: 58.7% of middle and high school students—14.37 million youth—reported marketing exposure in retail stores in 2021.¹³

Online Purchases of E-Cigarettes

According to the 2021 NYTS, 2.9% of youth e-cigarette users report buying e-cigarettes online.¹⁴ In addition to traditional online e-cigarette distributors, youth also report accessing e-cigarettes through delivery apps like gopuff and Doordash, as well as social media platforms like Snapchat, TikTok and Instagram.¹⁵

Inadequate age verification methods, such as requesting only self-reporting age without ID verification before check-out or upon delivery, enable youth to purchase e-cigarettes online.¹⁶ Delivery drivers for apps like Doordash may not be trained to verify age.¹⁷ Some social media accounts explicitly advertise discretion or hiding products within bundles to avoid detection by parents or guardians and that they will not verify age to attract underage buyers.¹⁸ Some states have delivery sales laws pertaining to e-cigarettes, but those laws vary in their requirements for age verification, package label requirements, and penalties.¹⁹

In 2020, the Preventing All Cigarette Trafficking (PACT) Act was extended to cover e-cigarettes, which, among other things, required that online and remote sellers comply with all state, local, Tribal, and other applicable laws regarding tobacco sales, distribution, and delivery, including age verification.²⁰ In addition, under the PACT Act, e-cigarettes cannot be mailed through the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). Other major delivery services, including FedEx²¹ and DHL²² added policies prohibiting e-cigarette shipments, but data show those companies still deliver e-cigarettes.²³ Studies have found high rates of noncompliance with PACT Act restrictions, including using inadequate age-verification methods on websites, no ID check or signature upon delivery, and continuing to deliver products with USPS.²⁴

Making it More Difficult for Youth to Access E-Cigarettes

Research shows that making obtaining tobacco products as inconvenient, difficult and expensive as possible for kids reduces both the number of kids who try or regularly use tobacco products.²⁵ To the extent that these measures directly affect youth who buy their own e-cigarettes or be sources for other youth, then they can also reduce the supply to other kids.

On December 20, 2019, President Trump signed legislation to amend the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act to raise the federal minimum age of sale of tobacco products from 18 to 21 years, effective immediately. While raising the tobacco sale age to 21 is a significant milestone, age restrictions alone are insufficient to reduce youth access.

Restricting the sale of flavored tobacco products is an important strategy that can help reduce youth access to e-cigarettes. According to the 2024 NYTS, 87.6% of youth e-cigarette users use flavored products²⁶ and according to the TEEN+ study, nearly all (92.5%) youth and young adults who have ever used e-cigarettes started with a flavored product.²⁷ Restricting or prohibiting the sale of flavored e-cigarettes will therefore reduce the availability of the products most popular among youth. Over 420 localities and six states have passed restrictions or complete prohibitions on the sale of flavored e-cigarettes, along with other flavored tobacco products.²⁸

Increasing the price of e-cigarettes is also an effective way to discourage youth use because youth are particularly price sensitive.²⁹ Price hikes may also make it less likely that parents and other adults will give e-cigarettes to kids.

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