

NOTEBOOKS TO NICOTINE

How Big Tobacco Targets
Kids Near Schools Across the
Eastern Mediterranean



A GLOBAL
TOBACCO
INDUSTRY
WATCHDOG

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Executive Summary

Tobacco and nicotine companies target children around the world with advertising and promotions to addict a new generation of smokers. This includes advertising their products and making them easily available for purchase at points of sale near where children congregate, such as schools and playgrounds.

This report presents an analysis of tobacco and nicotine product advertising and promotion near primary and secondary schools in three countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR): Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan. This region, with a young and growing population, is a prime target for the tobacco and nicotine industry. The industry continues to expand its presence in the region, contributing to the abundance of cheap and accessible tobacco products.

Findings from research undertaken in these countries reveal tactics that enable the industry to reach children, encourage them to use its products and become lifelong customers:

- Most points of sale that were surveyed near schools in the EMR sell tobacco and/or nicotine products.
- In Jordan, 86% of surveyed retailers that sold e-cigarettes sold flavored e-cigarettes.
- In Pakistan, 65% of surveyed retailers displayed tobacco and nicotine products near sweets, snacks and/or toys.
- In Egypt, 85% of surveyed retailers sold single cigarettes; in Pakistan, that figure was even higher at 99%.

To prevent children from being targeted and hooked by the industry, countries must take the following proven actions that deter children from starting tobacco use:

- Implement distance- and population density-based retail regulations, reducing the number of outlets—particularly those near children.
- Adopt and implement age-specific sales restrictions.
- Require tobacco-selling licenses.
- Limit where and when tobacco can be sold.
- Ban tobacco retailer incentive programs.
- Implement and enforce comprehensive tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS) bans that include advertising and display at the point of sale, such as checkout counters.
- Ban flavored products.

Introduction

As tobacco prevalence is projected to steadily decline in many parts of the world, the smallest declines are expected in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR), where an estimated 31% of the population uses tobacco.¹ In fact, it is the only region in which tobacco use is expected to increase among men.²

More than 213,000 people in Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan die from smoking every year.^{3, 4, 5} Yet these countries have young, growing populations, which the industry sees as an opportunity to recruit new customers.

To protect the youngest generation from the tobacco industry's attempts to lure them into lifelong addiction, Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan have put some regulations in place to discourage young people from starting to smoke. Each country has implemented smoking bans in primary and secondary schools, graphic health warnings on cigarette packaging and varying levels of bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS).^{6, 7, 8}

But what young people see within a two-minute walk or less of their own schools sends a different message.

Students might see brightly colored banners advertising cigarettes hanging outside of a kiosk; flavored e-cigarettes displayed at eye-level, next to candy, at a street vendor; or single cigarettes sitting in a paper cup on the check-out counter at a grocery store—easy to grab and cheap to buy.

What they don't see in these retail environments matters, too. Often, signs stating age restrictions are absent. And in locations where products are displayed, products may be positioned so that health warnings are not visible.

This is the tobacco industry trying to send these young people another message: Give tobacco a try.

Using retail environments to target young people in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Retail environments, such as grocery stores, minimarkets, kiosks and street vendors, are one of the most direct ways the tobacco industry can reach its target customers.⁹

Points of sale are where tobacco companies can directly advertise to consumers, facilitate preferential displays of their brands, offer price discounts to make tobacco more affordable and offer incentives for store workers to sell more of their products.

One market that is critically important to the industry—as its entire future relies on hooking them—is young people. Research undertaken in Egypt, [Jordan](#) and [Pakistan](#) has examined the tactics the industry uses to target children in these countries via retail environments.

A common finding across all three countries: Many children are exposed to tobacco marketing and products within just a couple minutes' walk of their schools.

The Industry Targets Young People to Secure Its Future Profits

Trying to get young people hooked on its addictive products is a key tenet of the industry's business. If tobacco companies didn't recruit new users, they would go out of business once their current customers quit or die from using their products.

The industry claims that it does not target youth. Evidence shows, however, that it systematically designs promotions and products to appeal to young people, and fights regulations that protect them.¹⁰ Tobacco and nicotine companies market and sell flavored products, knowing they appeal to young people.¹¹ They have sponsored youth-focused events such as music festivals and popular football teams, including Cairo's Eastern Company Sporting Club.^{12, 13} They've paid influencers to promote their addictive products on social media and bombard young people with online content and ads.^{14, 15}

Retail environments help them reach their youngest potential customers and, often, skirt tobacco control regulations.¹⁶ A 2022 study found that Big Tobacco advertised cigarettes to children at points of sale near schools and playgrounds in 42 countries.¹⁷ The majority are low- and middle-income countries, where most of the world's current tobacco users live.

The youth of the Eastern Mediterranean Region are at particularly high risk of exposure to this marketing

The region has what the industry wants:

- A young and growing population: About one-third of the region's population is between the ages of 15 and 29—a key demographic for the industry, as most tobacco users start before the age of 21.¹⁸
- An environment in which tobacco use is common and normalized: The EMR has among the highest tobacco use rates in the world. Jordan and Egypt have the region's highest tobacco use rates among men, at 57% and 48% respectively, or possibly even higher.¹⁹
²⁰ While there is a considerable gender gap in tobacco use, waterpipe use rates among women are increasing.
- Noncomprehensive tobacco control policies: Tobacco is more affordable in the region compared to other regions, and many policies known to prevent youth

uptake, such as flavor bans and single stick bans, are not in place.²¹ Existing tobacco control regulations are often not fully enforced, either.²²

Further, the use of waterpipe is growing among young people in the region, due in part to the introduction of flavored waterpipe tobacco and inadequate regulations around waterpipe use.²³ It is estimated that 13-15-year-olds use waterpipe more frequently than cigarettes.²⁴

These conditions are ripe for youth uptake of tobacco and nicotine products, and industry marketing in retail locations will only accelerate this.

The Industry Uses a Playbook of Retail Tactics Designed to Addict

The tobacco and nicotine products and advertising that youth see in retail spaces is not by chance. The industry influences how retailers display its products and optimizes their placement to reach their target audiences.

The industry does this around the world in several ways:²⁵



Location: The industry uses retailers' locations strategically to target products at specific groups.²⁶

The industry targets children and young people around the world by incentivizing retailers in locations near schools and playgrounds to hang cigarette banners outside their stores or to place flavored products at kids' eye-level.



Signage and displays: The industry offers incentives to stores in exchange for control over how their products are displayed.²⁷

They pay retailers or offer other incentives to hang branded banners and signage outside and inside of the store, and to place their products in prominent spots around the point of sale, such as on checkout counters. They also design their own brightly colored advertising and product display stands to use in stores.



Discounts and promotions: The industry tries to increase its sales by offering discounts to both stores and customers.²⁸ Companies may offer retailers discounts in exchange for prominent display spots in the store, or with the notion that retailers will reduce their prices for consumers, making the product more accessible. They also may offer discounts to customers at the point of sale, such as "buy one, get one free" deals or bulk purchase discounts.



Single sticks: Directly or indirectly encouraging retailers to sell their cigarettes individually, as single sticks, makes them more accessible and affordable to young people, increasing the likelihood they will try smoking and become regular users.

The industry uses these tactics to help it reach young people around the world. The research from Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan described below helps illustrate the magnitude of the industry's targeting—and the threat to the region's youngest generation.

Findings on Industry Marketing Near Schools in Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan

Big Tobacco is invested in the EMR, and is eyeing its youngest generation

Big Tobacco is expanding its presence in the EMR, buying tobacco companies and investing in and partnering with others. For example, in 2012, Japan Tobacco International acquired the Egyptian waterpipe manufacturer Al Nakhla.²⁹ In 2019, a Yemeni cigarette manufacturer partly owned by British American Tobacco (BAT) opened a new factory in Jordan.³⁰ In 2022, BAT announced a partnership with the Regie, the Lebanese state-owned tobacco company, to manufacture Regie products at its factory in Jordan for export to Lebanon.³¹ In 2021, BAT inaugurated its new Islamabad office in Pakistan, and in 2023 and 2024, Philip Morris International disclosed that it had purchased stakes in Egypt's United Tobacco Co. and the Eastern Company, respectively.^{32, 33, 34} In 2024, Japan Tobacco International (JTI) announced it was breaking ground on a new factory in Morocco.³⁵

The tobacco industry is also thought to be involved in the region's illicit tobacco trade, which fuels the availability of cheap tobacco products, known to encourage youth uptake.^{36, 37} In addition to potential industry involvement, BAT, JTI and Philip Morris SA (a subsidiary of PMI) commissioned a report in 2020 that is one of the only sources of data on the scale of illicit trade in parts of the region.³⁸ Industry-funding of this report has raised concerns over the reliability of the data, as tobacco companies have an incentive to exaggerate the scale of the illicit market: By linking illicit trade to tobacco taxation, the industry uses these claims as "evidence" that tobacco taxes should decrease or not increase.

All of these industry activities have led to a concerning abundance of cheap tobacco products, particularly near schools.

Given the industry's aggressive targeting of young people in the region, researchers in Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan wanted to identify and expose the tactics the industry is using at points of sale near schools.

Methodology

Researchers followed a methodology adapted from similar studies conducted by Johns Hopkins University and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.³⁹ In summary, researchers selected a number of schools and created a map around each with a radius ranging from 100 to 150 meters, depending on the study. Trained data collectors visited points of sale within that radius. The following points of sale were visited: Egypt – grocery stores (such

as supermarkets or minimarkets), kiosks, street vendors or pop-up shops and tobacco specialty stores; Jordan – supermarkets (minimarkets), kiosks and tobacco specialty stores; Pakistan – grocery stores (supermarkets and minimarkets), street vendors and kiosks. Data collectors then documented how many of them sold tobacco or nicotine products, and what tactics they were employing to appeal to children.

Top-Level Findings

Number of schools identified

Egypt 100	Jordan 94	Pakistan 133
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Number of points of sale (POS) that sold tobacco and nicotine products

Egypt 455 (56% of surveyed retailers)	Jordan 147 (69% of surveyed retailers)	Pakistan 268
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Percentage of POS that sold flavored products (among stores that sold each product)

Egypt Flavored cigarettes: 60% Flavored HTP sticks: 11% E-liquid/e-cigarettes: 18%	Jordan Flavored cigarettes: 49.6% Flavored HTP sticks: 55.6% E-cigarettes: 86.4%	Pakistan Not comparatively assessed
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Percentage of POS with tobacco products displayed at kids' eye-level (~1 meter from floor)

Egypt 35%	Jordan 23%	Pakistan 95%
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Percentage of POS with tobacco products displayed near sweets, snacks and/or toys

Egypt 50%	Jordan 31% - Cigarettes 30% - Waterpipe molasses	Pakistan 65%
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Percentage of tobacco-selling POS that sold single sticks

Egypt 85%	Jordan 20%	Pakistan 99.5%
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Snapshot of Current Policies

Existing rules around selling tobacco near schools/playgrounds

Egypt ⁴⁰	Jordan ⁴¹	Pakistan ⁴²
None	Ban on sale of tobacco within a 250-meter radius of schools and universities, or 500 meters for “new and emerging tobacco and nicotine products”	Ban on sale of tobacco or “any other smoking substance” within 50 meters of schools

Existing bans on tobacco advertising at POS

Egypt	Jordan	Pakistan
POS advertising – Yes Retail product display – No	POS advertising – Yes Retail product displays – No	POS advertising – Yes Retail product displays – Yes

Existing flavor ban

Egypt	Jordan	Pakistan
No	No	No

Existing single stick ban

Egypt	Jordan	Pakistan
No	Yes	Yes

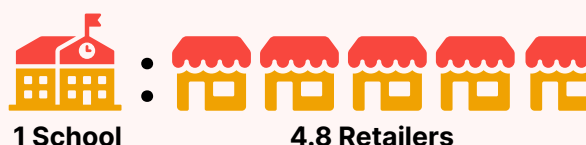
CASE STUDY

Retailer Location Density in Egypt

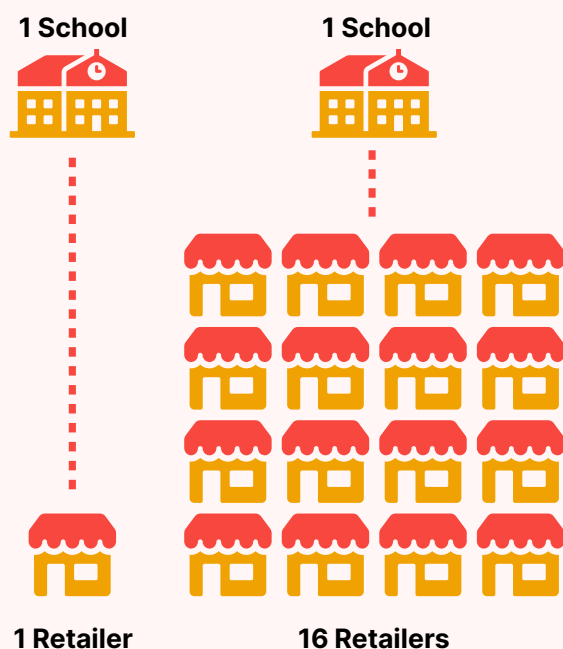
Researchers in Egypt examined 807 stores within 100 meters of 100 schools. The schools were found in urban and rural locations throughout five governorates: Cairo, Giza, Qaliubia, Sharkeya and BeniSuif. Of the three countries examined, Egypt had, by far, the highest density of retailers selling tobacco and nicotine products near schools.

Each school had an average of 4.8 retailers that sold tobacco, compared to 2.3 retailers per school in Jordan and 2 retailers per school in Pakistan. Half of the schools surveyed in Egypt had more than four points of sale that sold tobacco.

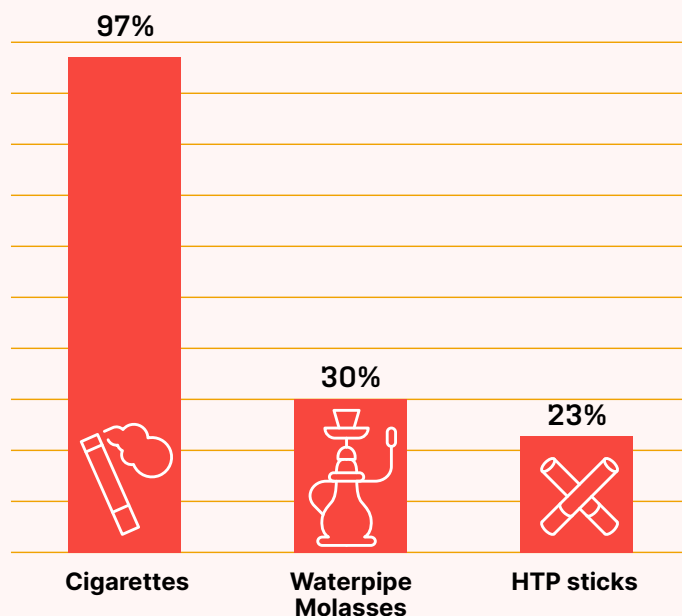
Ratio of Schools to Retailers



Range of Tobacco Retailers Recorded Per School



The Most Common Tobacco Products Sold



The most common tobacco products sold were: Cigarettes (97%); Waterpipe molasses (30%), and HTP sticks (23%).

Retailer location and density as an industry targeting tactic

The industry uses retail locations to embed itself in the communities it is trying to hook. It tries to reach children by saturating areas near schools with tobacco points of sale.

Studies have shown that a higher density of retail cigarette advertising near schools is associated with higher smoking prevalence among high-schoolers (approximately ages 14-18).⁴³ Conversely, a lower density of tobacco retailers is associated with lower rates of tobacco use.⁴⁴

According to the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) from 2014 (the most recent GYTS in Egypt), 13.6% of 13-15-year-olds used tobacco products.⁴⁵ This may be, in part, due to tobacco retailer density near schools. Nearly 85% of those who smoked cigarettes said they purchased them from a store, shop, street vendor or kiosk. Despite a policy in Egypt that prohibits people under age 18 from purchasing tobacco, 86% of 13-15-year-olds who bought their own cigarettes reported they were not prevented from doing so because of their age.

Other tactics such as offering flavored products, placing products where kids can see and reach them and the posting of prominent advertising play a role, as well. Among all young people surveyed who visited a retail store in the last 30 days, 64% reported noticing tobacco advertisements or promotion at points of sale.⁴⁶

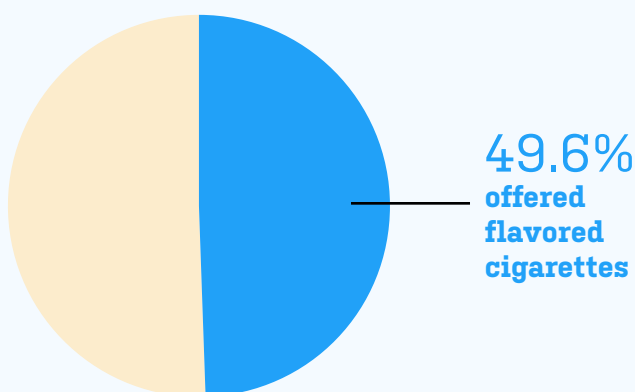
CASE STUDY

Flavored Products in Jordan

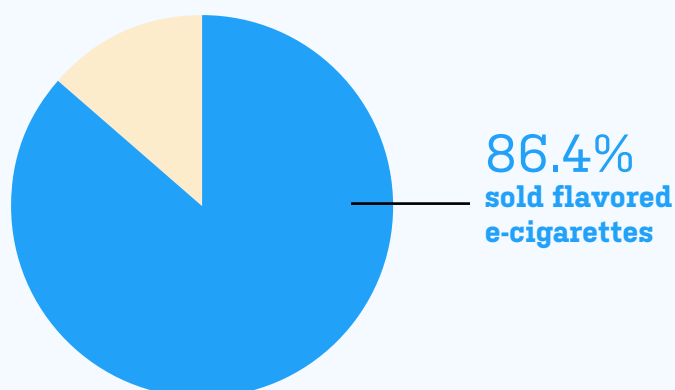
In Jordan, researchers identified 94 schools in two districts of Amman. They inspected 213 points of sale within a 150-meter radius of those schools and found that 147 sold tobacco or nicotine products. Where tobacco or nicotine products were offered, flavors were widely available.

Surveyors also documented the sale of waterpipe molasses and found that 34% of stores that sold tobacco or nicotine offered this flavored tobacco product, often in attractive packaging. At 17 of the 50 points of sale that sold molasses, the product was placed at a height within 1 meter from the floor and accessible by children without any assistance.

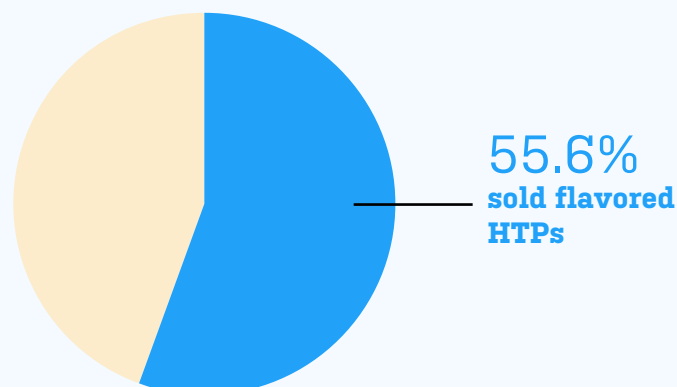
Of stores that sold cigarettes...



Of stores that sold e-cigarettes...



Of stores that sold HTPs...



Using flavored products in retail environments to hook young people

Flavors play a key role in making tobacco appealing to young people, encouraging experimentation and initiation of tobacco use.^{47, 48} The industry knows this and creates and advertises products that taste like fruit, candy and mint to appeal to youth. The prevalence of flavored products in shops near schools is an industry tactic to try to capture this key group.

Flavored products may also be helping the industry close the wide gender gap in tobacco usage among young people in Jordan, where tobacco use has historically been more prevalent among males. Cigarette and waterpipe use (in which the use of flavored tobacco has become more popular) doubled among girls ages 15-19 between 2002 and 2012. The Global Youth Tobacco Survey from 2014 (the most recent GYTS in Jordan) shows that roughly 34% of 13-15-year-old boys used tobacco, while about 14% of girls did.⁴⁹

Jordanian men have one of the highest tobacco use rates in the world, and tobacco use among women is increasing.⁵⁰ A 2024 study suggests that many Jordanian male smokers start around the age of 16.⁵¹ With tobacco consumption declining in many parts of the world, the tobacco industry is likely keen to maintain or grow rates of tobacco and nicotine use in Jordan. To do this, it needs to recruit a significant proportion of younger generations.

Offering flavored products near schools—in addition to positioning cigarettes and signage to be visible from outside the store, putting products within children's reach and more—helps the industry recruit as many young people as possible to replace these smokers and keep its profits in the region high.

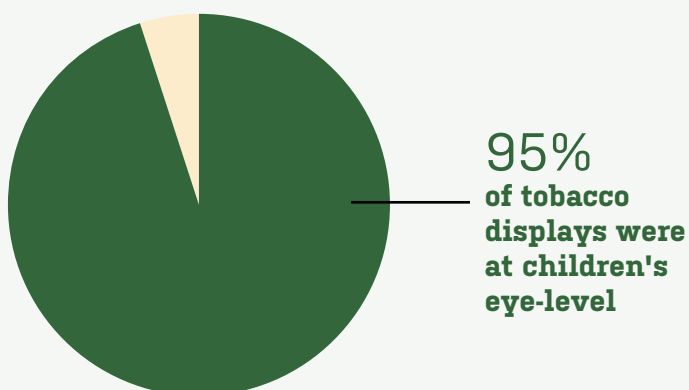
CASE STUDY

Kid-Friendly Product Placement in Pakistan

Researchers identified 133 schools across eight cities in Pakistan, including Islamabad, Murree, Larkana, Peshawar, Hafizabad, Pindi Bhattian, Jalalpur Bhattian, and Shakar Dara. Within 100 meters of these schools and their playgrounds, surveyors identified 268 retail locations, such as supermarkets, small grocers, street vendors and kiosks, that sold tobacco.

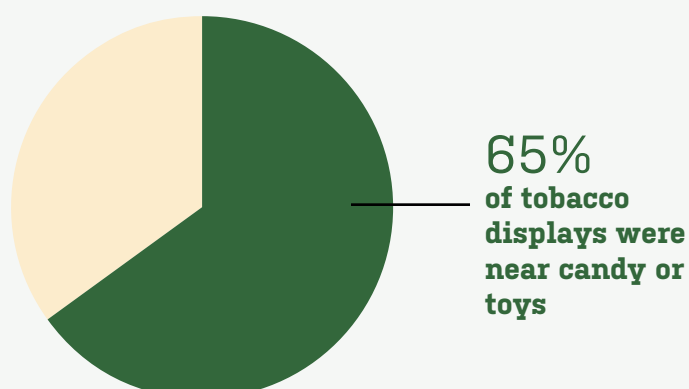
In nearly all of these locations, products were displayed in a way that makes tobacco look appealing and easily accessible.

Tobacco Displays at Children's Eye-level*

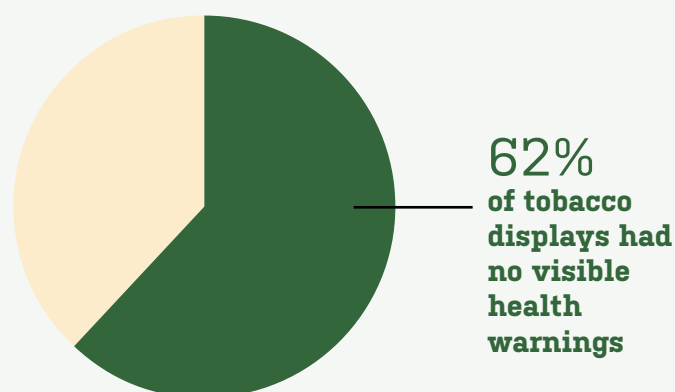


*At or below 1 meter from the floor

Tobacco Displays Near Candy or Toys



Tobacco Displays Near Candy or Toys



Strategic displays that put tobacco within young people's reach

Tobacco companies may offer incentives to retailers such as cash; expense-paid excursions; price discounts; and gifts they can use, give away or sell in exchange for preferential product placement.⁵²

As tobacco advertising in media is banned in Pakistan, point-of-sale displays and ads have become an even more important avenue for tobacco companies to reach their target customers, including young people.

Paired with the abundant availability of single sticks (99.5% of surveyed points of sale sold single sticks) and the offer of free tobacco products (documented at 8% of points of sale), young people can easily see, then access, tobacco. This easy availability may be one of the reasons nearly 40% of youth in Pakistan who have ever smoked tried their first cigarette before the age of 10.⁵³

Cigarettes, bidis and smokeless tobacco products and signage placed at 1 meter from the floor or lower is a clear attempt to capture the attention of and lure young people. These and other products are only at eye-level for children. When they are displayed among candy, snacks and school supplies, it normalizes tobacco products and places them on the same level—literally and figuratively—as everyday staples.



Conclusion and Recommendations

These findings are indicative of a global problem: **The industry uses retailers around the world to directly reach its target consumers, including children.** Flooding retailers near schools and playgrounds with tobacco ads and products, pushing flavored products, displaying tobacco and nicotine products where children can easily see and reach them, and directly or indirectly promoting the sale of single sticks all help tobacco companies hook the youngest generation.

Gaps in policy and enforcement leave millions of children vulnerable to the industry's tactics near the very place they should feel safe—their school. Without comprehensive regulations, children will continue to be subjected to the industry's insidious marketing, and the tobacco industry will achieve its goal: a new generation hooked for life.

Recommendations

Countries must implement and enforce retail regulations that would reduce youth uptake and hold stores and the industry accountable.

Policymakers must:

	Implement geographic- and density-based regulations:⁵⁴ Distance regulations: Policymakers must ban tobacco and nicotine product sales and advertising at retail locations within a specified minimum distance from places where young people congregate, such as playgrounds, schools and universities. These rules should apply to all tobacco and nicotine products. Density regulations: Policymakers should restrict tobacco retail outlets according to population density—for example, allowing one tobacco retailer per a specified number of people. They may also mandate specific distances between tobacco retailers to reduce density.
	Adopt and implement age-specific sales restrictions: Setting a minimum age to purchase tobacco, and ensuring enforcement, will prevent children from purchasing tobacco at any point of sale.
	Require tobacco-selling licenses:⁵⁵ In line with Article 15 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), governments should require those selling tobacco products to obtain a license. This not only helps prevent illicit trade of tobacco, it helps policymakers assess the density of tobacco points of sale, which can then be regulated. Licenses may also be revoked in the case of violations.
	Limit the conditions in which tobacco can be sold:⁵⁶ Limiting the number of hours in which tobacco can be sold; banning the sale of tobacco products in specific outlets, such as grocery stores; and capping the amount of tobacco allowed per purchase further reduces accessibility.
	Ban tobacco retailer incentive programs: When the industry is allowed to offer retailers incentives in exchange for influence over how their products are displayed and sold, tobacco sales can increase and tobacco may become cheaper.
	Implement and enforce comprehensive TAPS bans that include advertising and display at the point of sale:⁵⁷ In line with Article 13 of the WHO FCTC, a comprehensive ban would prevent the industry from using retailers and point-of-sale displays to circumvent existing TAPS bans. The bans should be enforced by an independent authority, with a role for monitoring by civil society, such as a complaints mechanism.
	Ban flavored products: Flavors are proven to attract young people to tobacco and nicotine products. Without flavors on the market, it is likely that fewer young people will start using tobacco. While some users of flavored products may switch to non-flavored products post-flavor-ban, many quit tobacco altogether, reducing smoking rates.⁵⁸

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“Tobacco Advertisement, Sales, Product Displays, and Purchase Incentives Around Kindergartens, Primary, and Secondary Schools” (Pakistan, 2018) was supported by the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.



About STOP (Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products)

STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog whose mission is to expose the tobacco industry strategies and tactics that undermine public health. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies and comprised of a partnership among the Tobacco Control Research Group (TCRG) at the University of Bath, The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union) and Vital Strategies. For more information, visit exposetobacco.org.

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