

Raising age required to buy cigarettes will protect long-term health of New Jerseyans | Opinion



A bill that would raise the age required to buy cigarettes in New Jersey to 21 years old has stalled in the state Assembly. (Star-Ledger file photo)

on July 23, 2015 at 6:00 PM

By Douglas Singleterry

On June 19, 2015, Hawaii became the first state in the nation to approve raising the tobacco purchasing age to 21 years old. This follows the lead of NYC and dozens of municipalities across the country, including approximately eight in New Jersey, that have raised the tobacco age to 21. While last year the New Jersey Senate passed a bill to raise the tobacco age, the companion bill still languishes in the Assembly. Two studies released this year demonstrate why the legislature needs to act.

In March, [the Institute of Medicine released a report](#) which found that raising the tobacco age to 21 would reduce smoking by 12 percent. This is a conservative estimate. For those born between 2000 and 2019 this would result in 249,000 fewer premature deaths and 45,000 fewer lung cancer deaths. It would also result in fewer premature births and reduce exposure to second hand smoke. Significantly, the result found a much smaller public health benefit for an age limit of 19, which is currently the law in New Jersey.

In June, the health journal Tobacco Control released a study documenting [the impact of a local ordinance in Needham, Massachusetts](#), that raised the tobacco age to twenty-one in 2005. The study surveyed 16,000 high school students in Needham and the surrounding municipalities

between 2006 and 2012. It found that during this timeframe underage smoking declined by nearly 50% in Needham. There was no comparable decline found in the surrounding communities.

The results of this study correspond with the conclusion reached by the Institute of Medicine that raising the tobacco age prevents or delays underage smoking experimentation since "those who can legally obtain tobacco are less likely to be in the same social networks as high school students." The study also demonstrates that raising the tobacco age is effective in reducing underage smoking even when implemented at the local level.

There is an additional factor to consider. 86% of regular adult smokers [started before age 21](#). Young adulthood is often the dispositive period when tobacco experimentation develops into regular use. The Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids notes that while a majority of adult smokers started tobacco experimentation prior to age 18, most of those who became regular smokers did so by the time they turned 21. Likewise, Tobacco Control has found that that the transition from experimental to regular smoking typically occurs around age 20. Raising the tobacco age reduces the chances that underage experimentation will morph into regular use.

There is also a need to address the alarming increase in the underage use of e-cigarettes, which the proposed legislation covers. The problem with e-cigarettes is that they also contain nicotine and other chemicals. The New England Journal of Medicine has reported levels of the carcinogen formaldehyde to be found in e-cigarette emissions. The long-term health effects from this unregulated product are still largely unknown.

As I learned when proposing a tobacco age ordinance in North Plainfield, there are vested interests that oppose measures to reduce smoking. The New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association has been lobbying against raising the tobacco age at every turn. Without foundation, they posit that such local measures are ineffective and "hurt" businesses.

But that's just a red herring, as this lobbying group also opposes raising the smoking age on a statewide level. Moreover, as the Needham experience shows, raising the tobacco age even at the local level could help reduce underage smoking. Furthermore, the pro-smoking lobby implies that the profit margin of convenience stores is dependent upon the selling of tobacco products to 19- and 20-year-olds.

As an acquired behavior, smoking related health problems are entirely preventable. But according to the American Lung Association, smoking is the number one cause of preventable death. Smoking significantly contributes to cancer, heart disease, pulmonary disease and pregnancy complications. The N.J. Legislature has the opportunity to establish New Jersey as a public health leader by raising the tobacco purchasing age to 21.

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