

# Test purchases of tobacco with minors in the Canton of Vaud (Switzerland) in 2023 and 2024

## INTRODUCTION

High tobacco availability among youth increases the risk of smoking initiation.<sup>1</sup> Restricting sales to minors is essential, but only effective if properly enforced and accompanied by penalties.<sup>2-4</sup> In the Canton of Vaud (1 of the 26 cantons of Switzerland), a ban on tobacco sales to minors (<18 years old) has been in place since 2006. Compliance with the law was previously assessed between 2007 and 2011, revealing a violation rate of 70%–86%.<sup>5,6</sup> Later legal amendments in the Canton of Vaud enabled authorities to conduct test purchases and impose penalties, including temporary sales bans ranging from 10 days to 6 months.

## METHODS

In 2023, a random sample of one-quarter of all shops and vending machines licensed to sell tobacco in the Canton of Vaud was selected (N=393). Trained adolescents aged 14–17, evenly distributed by age and gender, used the mystery shopper technique (pretending to be regular customers) to attempt cigarette purchases under adult supervision. They had to give their true age when asked. Legal warning sign visibility was also assessed. Businesses (points of sale) in violation were notified by the police a few weeks later that further inspections with penalties would follow. Those that violated the law in 2023 were visited again in 2024, using the same methodology. Repeat offenders faced a 1-month suspension of their sales licence.

## RESULTS

In 2023, 30% of businesses sold tobacco to minors (table 1). Age was checked verbally and/or by requesting an identity card in 68% of businesses. Legal warning signs were visible in 43% of cases. Some types of shops (eg, restaurants, cafes, bars and hotels) have a higher sales rate ( $\chi^2=23.373$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p<0.001$ ) than others (eg, gas stations). Vending machines had a higher sales rate than individuals ( $\chi^2=18.225$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p<0.001$ ).

Of the 118 businesses that violated the law in 2023, 98 were still operational and could be tested in 2024. Among these, 26% reoffended by selling to minors. In 2024, there was no statistically significant association between underage sales and type of shops ( $\chi^2=1.615$ ;  $df=3$ ;  $p=0.656$ )

**Table 1** Results from the 2023 and 2024 test purchases of tobacco with minors in the Canton of Vaud

Year	2023	2024
Businesses tested	N=393 (randomly selected)	N=98 (which sold to minors in 2023)
Sales to minors	N=118 (30%)	N=25 (26%)
Age verification	N=269 (68%)	N=66 (67%)
Legal warning sign visible	N=170 (43%)	N=77 (79%)
Sales by individuals		
Number tested	N=290 (74%)	N=63 (64%)
Age verification	N=210 (72%)	N=39 (62%)
Sales to minors (all shops)	N=70 (24%)	N=16 (25%)
Vending machines		
Number tested	N=103 (26%)	N=35 (36%)
Age verification	N=59 (57%)	N=26 (74%)
Sales to minors	N=48 (47%)	N=9 (26%)
Sales rates to minors by type of business		
Gas station	15% (N=4/27)	0% (N=0/3)
Supermarkets	18% (N=17/97)	29% (N=5/17)
Convenience stores and specialised shops	28% (N=41/144)	29% (N=10/34)
Restaurants, bars, cafes, hotels	45% (N=56/125)	23% (N=10/44)

nor between sales method (staff vs vending machine) ( $\chi^2=0.001$ ;  $df=1$ ;  $p=0.972$ ). The visibility of mandatory warning signs improved following the official reminder.

## CONCLUSIONS

Test purchases are a valuable tool to strengthen youth protection and ensure compliance with existing legislation. Official warnings, awareness-raising measures and emphasis on age verification at vending machines may have an impact relatively quickly. These findings support the continuation and expansion of law enforcement initiatives. A potential avenue for future research would be to include control groups to better assess the impact.

Of note, the ban on sales to minors and the legal basis for test purchases has been extended to the whole of Switzerland in October 2024, with the Federal Act on Tobacco Products and Electronic Cigarettes. However, compared with its neighbouring countries, Switzerland continues to lag behind in tobacco control. Additional effective measures could include a ban on vending machines and advertising,<sup>7</sup> as well as higher taxation.<sup>8</sup>

Valentine Ballmer,<sup>1</sup> Luca Notari,<sup>2</sup> Luc Lebon 

<sup>1</sup>University Center for Primary Care and Public Health (Unisanté), University of Lausanne, Lausanne, Switzerland

<sup>2</sup>Addiction Switzerland, Lausanne, Switzerland

**Correspondence to** Dr Luc Lebon; luc.lebon@unisante.ch

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#### ORCID iD

Luc Lebon <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6754-8033>

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