



# News Release

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## **Illegal tobacco sales to minors at highest level since 1997**

*More than 17 percent of tobacco retailers sold to minors in 2015*

**OLYMPIA** – More than 17 percent of Washington’s tobacco retailers illegally sold tobacco to minors in 2015, according to the annual Synar Report. Washington’s 2015 retailer non-compliance level is the highest it’s been since the state began tracking in 1997, when the rate was 19.8 percent. If the rate exceeds 20 percent, the state could lose federal funding for drug, alcohol, and tobacco prevention and treatment.

“It is unacceptable that more than one in six retailers are illegally selling tobacco to minors,” said Secretary of Health John Wiesman. “When kids get their hands on tobacco, it can lead to a lifetime of addiction, poor health, and early death. In our state tobacco is the number one cause of preventable death. Tobacco retailers need to follow the law and help us grow the healthiest next generation.”

Nearly 9 out of 10 people who smoke start by age 18, and 104,000 Washington youth alive today will die prematurely from a disease caused by smoking.

“Restricting youth access to tobacco is critical to meeting federal requirements for funding that helps us provide school and community-based services to prevent and reduce alcohol, tobacco and other drug misuse, and the negative ripple effects this has on all of us,” said Carla Reyes, Assistant Secretary with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. “Communities use this funding to strengthen families and educate young people on how to be safe, healthy and successful.”

The Synar Report is the result of federal legislation that requires states to enact and enforce laws that prohibit the sale of tobacco products to minors, and to conduct annual, random, unannounced

compliance checks. The report is compiled by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Compliance checks are conducted by the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board as well as Public Health – Seattle & King County. Working with local law enforcement, underage teens try to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products at randomly selected retailers. Clerks who sell tobacco to minors can be fined up to \$100. Retail owners can be fined up to \$1,500 and may have their license revoked for up to five years.

While official youth checks determine the rate of illegal sales, anyone can report a violation on the state [Liquor and Cannabis Board website](#).

State agencies are convening to review retailer compliance issues statewide and to recommend outreach and education activities to address the problem within current budget parameters. Historically, retailer education was done in concert with other CDC best practices and was managed by local public health departments, but funding for these activities was cut in 2009.

Washington's 10<sup>th</sup> grade youth smoking rate is about 8 percent. While the youth smoking rate is nearly half of what it was in 2002, more work needs to be done. Nearly 49,000 youth in our state still smoke and an estimated 3,900 become daily smokers each year.

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for further information on tobacco use in Washington state. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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