

Tobacco Control News

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How the tobacco and nicotine industry deliberately targets young people



Hi TIS Teams!

This month, I wanted to look at something we know matters for prevention: why are young people still taking up tobacco and other nicotine products – and what can we do about it?

A recent paper ([Availability, appeal, and addictiveness by design: Tobacco and nicotine industry deliberate targeting of youth](#)) focuses on the deliberate targeting of young people by the tobacco and nicotine industry. Young people make choices. But those choices don't happen in a vacuum. Young people are not accidentally becoming addicted to vapes and nicotine – it's by design. This paper presents evidence that the industry designs products, marketing and environments specifically to attract young people, get them using nicotine, and keep them using it. For an industry that depends on new and continuing customers, that's good business.

The global numbers tell the story

- Adolescents aged 13–15 are nine times more likely to vape than adults.
- Nicotine dependence among young people is going up, not down.
- Between 2017 and 2022, e-cigarettes (vapes) with nicotine strength of 5% or higher jumped by 1,486% in sales share – products are getting stronger, not weaker.

How the industry talks about vaping (and why it's a problem)

- Industry messaging has changed. Earlier messaging focused on vaping as a way to help individuals who smoke quit. More recently, the industry has promoted the idea that vaping can provide a wider population health benefit by helping people move away from smoking.
- At the same time, vaping among young people is framed as "incidental," "unavoidable," or even protective against future smoking.
- This shifts attention away from Industry practices – including designing addictive products – and places the blame onto young people – "they chose to vape".
- The commercial reality tells a different story: investor and industry communications openly describe young people as essential to the long-term future of the nicotine market.
- This reflects colonial thinking – turning structural, industry-caused harm into a story about personal responsibility. This matters directly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, where this kind of reframing has a long, damaging history.



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Why uptake among young people is predictable, not accidental

Three things work together to make vaping appealing and addictive for young people:

Product design

- Flavours and sleek devices make products attractive to young people.
- Nicotine salts make it possible to inhale higher levels of nicotine more smoothly, which can accelerate dependence – especially for people who've never used nicotine before.
- Devices increasingly include digital/social features built to fit vaping into daily life, making it visible and normal among peers.
- Products are marketed as long-lasting and available for continuous use, encouraging "grazing" – puffing repeatedly throughout the day.
- Misleading labels like "tobacco-free" make products seem safer than they are.
- Affordability, widespread availability and the way products are presented can make trying them seem normal and encourage continued use.

Market environment

- Heavy promotion through social media and influencer partnerships can reach young people in ways that existing regulations struggle to control.
- Products often reach the market without strong evidence of their effects

Regulatory gaps

- Regulations are inconsistent and often poorly enforced, contributing to unregulated and illicit markets.

Together, these three factors make uptake among young people a completely predictable outcome of the system – not a failure of individual willpower.

What actually needs to change (policy priorities)

The authors emphasise that policy needs to target the product and the system, not just advertising. Priorities including:

- Pre-market safety standards – industry should have to prove products are safe before they're sold.
- Restricting or banning flavours and appealing design features.
- Tighter control of retail and digital sales – stricter licensing, fewer retailers, real enforcement, real penalties.
- Full implementation of the [WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#), including:
 - high taxes
 - full advertising/sponsorship bans
 - 100% smoke-free public spaces
 - large graphic warnings
 - youth access restrictions
 - action against illicit trade
- Protecting policymaking from industry interference – limiting industry contact with government, rejecting partnerships or voluntary deals with tobacco or nicotine companies.
- A precautionary approach: the burden of proof for safety should sit with industry, not with the communities exposed to the harm.

What about Australia?

Australia has taken steps to change the environment around vaping and other nicotine products. Vapes are restricted to pharmacy supply for therapeutic purposes, advertising and promotion are banned, flavours are restricted, and product standards have been strengthened. More recently, Australia closed the remaining lawful pathways for consumers to obtain nicotine pouches.

Young people make choices, but those choices don't happen in a vacuum. Changing the environment around them – as Australia has done – can help reduce exposure to nicotine and make being smoke- and vape-free easier.

So how do we protect young people?

Recent evidence from the Next Generation – Aboriginal Youth Wellbeing Study, led by Indigenous tobacco control expert Prof Sandra Eades AO, has found several protective factors for never smoking and vaping among youth. The key findings are summarised below.

To read more about Generation smoke-free: [Protective factors for never smoking among young First Nations peoples aged 10–15 years in the Next Generation Youth Wellbeing Study](#) and the [Protective Factors Against E-Cigarette Use Among First Nations People Aged 16–24 in the Next Generation Youth Wellbeing Study](#) and other research and evidence updates, visit the [Tobacco Control News](#) page on the TIS website.

Who's targeted the most?

Exposure to this marketing and product design isn't even across the population. Indigenous peoples, racialised communities, LGBTQIA+ communities, and people facing socioeconomic disadvantage are targeted more and protected less by current regulation.

The authors caution against calling these groups "vulnerable" – that language can hide the real issue: it's not that these communities are inherently susceptible, it's that systems have failed to protect them, leaving them more exposed to industry targeting.

This is a difference worth carrying into community messaging in your TIS program; it shifts the story from "the community is at risk" to "the community deserves better protection."



Next Generation –
Aboriginal Youth Wellbeing Study

This study follows a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 10 to 24 years of age from urban, rural and remote communities in Central Australia, New South Wales and Western Australia, tracking their health and wellbeing – including tobacco use – through interviews, focus groups and surveys. To find out more about this study, visit their website [here](#).

Protective Factors	Never Smoking	Never Vaping
Smoke-free friends	✓	✓
Smoke-free home	✓	-
No alcohol use	✓	-
No cannabis use / never smoked	-	✓
School engagement / daily attendance	✓	-
Employed, or expecting full-time work within 5 years	-	✓
Higher income (if working)	-	✓
Good mental health	✓	✓
Good physical health	✓	-
Participation in sport, recreation, social activities	✓	-
No negative contact with criminal justice system	✓	
No personal or indirect experience of racism/discrimination	-	✓
Clear smoke-free expectations at home, school, community	✓	-

What this tells us: Several factors protect against nicotine use – having smoke-free friends, good mental health, and no contact with the criminal justice system. Others are more specific: smoke-free homes, school engagement, and sport/recreation are associated with never smoking, while employment and a higher income are associated with never vaping. What’s different for never vaping specifically is that freedom from racism, discrimination, and unfair police or justice contact was itself protective.

That’s a direct, local echo of what the authors above are emphasising at the global level: this isn’t about individual “vulnerability” or willpower. The Next Gen findings point to the importance of the social environments young people are part of – their families, friends, schools and communities – and the experiences they have within them. Strengthening these protective environments, and the relationships within them, can help support young people to remain smoke- and vape-free.

Take Home Message for TIS

Vaping and smoking uptake among young people isn’t a failure of individual choice - it’s a predictable outcome of an industry that designs products, marketing, and market conditions to create young, lifelong customers. The Next Generation – Aboriginal Youth Wellbeing study provides Australian evidence about the factors associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth not using nicotine products: connection, culture, smoke-free norms, and the absence of racism and unfair justice contact appear to protect youth. For TIS teams, this means prevention is about strengthening those protective factors in practical ways. This could mean:

Strengthening smoke-free norms

By supporting families, peer groups, schools and community settings to make being nicotine-free visible and normal.

Building connection and cultural strength

By creating opportunities for young people to connect with culture, community, family and positive role models.

Supporting wellbeing and belonging

By linking tobacco and vaping prevention with activities that strengthen mental wellbeing and connection rather than treating nicotine use in isolation.

Creating positive alternative

By using sport, recreation, education and other activities that give young people opportunities to participate, connect and build confidence.

Creating safe and supportive spaces

Recognising the importance of racism, discrimination and experiences with justice systems when working with young people, and making trust, safety and connection part of prevention.

Keep advocating for change beyond the community level

By support policies and regulation that reduce young people’s exposure to appealing nicotine products, marketing and other industry influences.

Protection, not blame, is the message to carry forward.

