

Abstract
Background: Minimum legal age (MLA) restrictions are a core policy to reduce youth use of tobacco, e-cigarettes, and other substances. We examined trends in perceived ease of access to tobacco and other substances across three countries with differing MLA policies, including the United States (US), which increased the federal MLA for tobacco products from 18 to 21 in 2019.

Methods: Repeat cross-sectional data were analyzed from seven waves of the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Youth Tobacco and Vaping Survey conducted between 2017 and 2021. Online surveys were conducted with non-probability samples of 91,647 youth aged 16-19 in Canada, England, and the US. Regression models were used to examine differences in perceived ease of accessing each of 7 substances (analyzed as “very easy” or “fairly easy” versus else), and differences between countries and over time (including before and after any MLA changes) for cigarettes, e-cigarettes, cannabis, and alcohol; additional models examined sub-national variation in MLA.

Results: Perceived access varied by substance and across countries: in August/September 2021, perceived ease of accessing cigarettes and e-cigarettes was greater in Canada where MLA was 18-19 (61.7% cigarettes, 66.4% e-cigarettes) and England where MLA was 18 (66.9%, 69.6%), compared to the US where MLA was 21 (48.0%, 60.9%; p < 0.001 for all). Perceived ease of accessing cannabis was greatest in Canada (53.3%), followed by the US (44.1%) and England (34.0%; p < 0.001 for all). Following the federal MLA increase for tobacco products in the US, perceived ease of access decreased significantly for cigarettes (65.1% in 2019Aug to 59.7% in 2020Feb; aOR=0.80 (95%CI=0.71-0.89)) and e-cigarettes (72.4% in 2019Aug to 69.4% in 2020Feb; aOR=0.87 (95%CI=0.77-0.98)).

Conclusions: Higher MLA was strongly associated with fewer youth perceiving easy access to substances: perceived access varied between countries with differing MLA, as well as within-country before and after changes to MLA.

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