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Survey: San Joaquin youth still exposed to tobacco, alcohol ads

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By Christina Cornejo/News-Sentinel Staff Writer

Youth in San Joaquin County are still being bombarded with tobacco and alcohol ads according to new research through a survey with the Healthy Stores for a Health Community campaign.

The survey is a study of marketing of tobacco products, alcohol, condoms and healthy and unhealthy food options in California corner stores and local markets that sell tobacco.

Within San Joaquin County, 85 percent of stores near schools were advertising tobacco and alcohol products. Among all storefronts, 82 percent were advertising these unhealthy products.

The findings showed that 40 percent of tobacco products or advertisements were also placed in kid-friendly locations, such as ads at the level of three feet or below or having tobacco products near candy or toys.

Exposure to alcohol or tobacco advertising may be highly influential in normalizing their use, according to Ashley Lewis, San Joaquin County Public Health Educator.

"I don't think it's intentional on behalf of the store owners, but you have to think in the mindset of marketers and advertisers," Lewis said. "The owners are constantly being approached with signs and advertising to place in stores."

There are currently few regulations on store advertising, except for a California law that only dictates that you can't cover more than 33 percent of clear windows and doors on a shopfront, she said.

Very few of these stores in the study sold fresh fruits for vegetables (40 percent) in comparison with the amount selling "little cigars" or cigarillos (91 percent). Out of the 82 percent of stores that sold condoms, only 21 percent had them available on unlocked shelves. An astounding 91 percent of stores were selling Alecops, an alcohol product which targets youth, according to the report.

What these findings show is that there is a large difference in the marketing in sale of alcohol and tobacco products than from the marketing and sale of products that promote a healthy lifestyle, which are not as easily available, according to Dr. Alvaro Garza, San Joaquin County Public Health Officer.

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"Stores play a critical role on our community's health, and this survey shows that offerings and messaging are out of balance, tipping heavily toward unhealthy options. Our goal is to help re-calibrate that balance toward health," he said.

In order to improve accessibility to more healthy choices, San Joaquin County Public Health Services has created a countywide initiative called Refresh San Joaquin.

Local health advocates getting small stores, which are not in close proximity to grocery stores connected to local farmers. The Refresh program provide baskets and building capacity for these stores to start selling fresh produce.

The initiative which has been in the works for a little more than a year is getting its start first with seven stores in Stockton before expanding to other areas in the county, Lewis said.

"We're working diligently, but there is a lot of work to be done," she said.

Community members who might want to get involved in preventing smoking and tobacco use and promoting good health can get more information from San Joaquin County Public Health Services at SJCPHS.org.

More data from the Health Stores for a Healthy Community can be found for the state and its counties at www.healthystoreshealthycommunity.com.

Contact reporter Christina Cornejo at christina@lodineWS.com.

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