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Retail survey shows health trends in county

In 2016 more stores offered fresh produce than in 2013

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VAPE TRAIL—A report from the California Department of Public Health found that sales of e-cigarettes have soared across the state. The 2016 survey showed that in Ventura County nearly 70 percent of stores sold e-cigarettes last year. That was up from just over half of the county's retailers selling the product in 2013. The survey also looked at sales of tobacco products and other health-related issues.

Stores in Ventura County sold fewer tobacco products overall and offered more fruits and vegetables last year than they had three years before. But sales of e-cigarettes have soared, a health survey released this month showed.

California Department of Public Health's 2016 Healthy Stores for a Healthy Community survey, which came out March 8, looked at the percentage of stores around the state that sold tobacco, alcohol, fruits, vegetables, lowfat milk and sugary soft drinks.

Officials collected that information from more than 7,100 stores in all 58 counties in California, making it the largest survey of its kind, state health officials said.

Created by the health department's tobacco control program, the survey of retailers was first conducted in 2013, so the new set of statistics gathered in the 2016 survey provides a view of how far retailers have come in offering healthier products and curtailing tobacco sales.

"Retail stores play a critical role in our community's health, especially among youth," Ventura County Public Health Director Rigoberto Vargas said. "This survey shows offerings and messaging are out of balance, tipping heavily toward unhealthy options. Our goal is to help recalibrate the balance toward health."

Local survey results were mixed. Although more stores carried fresh fruits and vegetables and fewer offered sugar-flavored soft drinks last year than in 2013, nearly 70 percent sold e-cigarettes in 2016. That was up from just over half of the county's retailers three years ago, an increase of about 35 percent, the survey showed.

"The expanded availability of e-cigarettes is of particular concern and reflects the spike in use by teens and young adults in the last three years," Vargas said in a news release announcing the results.

About 90 percent of local stores sold menthol cigarettes, up from 83 percent three years ago.

Likewise, the number of stores that sold flavored singlepack cigarillos called Swisher Sweets and priced at $1 or less jumped, from 53 percent in 2013 to 74 percent in 2016. Threequarters of those stores were near schools, compared to just over half in 2013.

In all, 345 stores in eastern Ventura County carried e-cigs and regular tobacco products last year, the survey showed. The 2013 survey didn't provide figures on the number of tobacco retail outlets broken down by county.

The survey also looked at storefront advertisements and found that 66 percent of stores in the county carried ads for cigarettes and alcohol on their front windows, down from 68 percent in the 2013 survey. By comparison, 69 percent of stores statewide had storefront ads for unhealthy products, the survey said.

About 69 percent of the retailers in the county that advertised tobacco and alcohol products on their store windows were in low-income areas, down from 74 percent in 2013 and fewer than the average of 71 percent of retailers statewide, according to the survey.

Fifty-four percent of stores in the county carried low- or nonfat milk in 2016, compared to 48 percent in 2013. Statewide, an average of 33 percent of stores sold low- and nonfat milk, the survey showed.

"The survey found that our community's youth are inundated with unhealthy messages and choices," Vargas said.

"We need to change what information and options our kids are exposed to and work to surround them with healthy choices and messaging instead."

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