

# The New York Times

## Raise the Legal Age for Cigarette Sales to 21

By The Editorial Board  
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California could soon raise the legal age for buying cigarettes and other tobacco products to 21, from 18. That change could help prevent many young people from becoming addicted and reduce premature deaths from lung cancer and other tobacco-related diseases.

The California Assembly last week joined the State Senate in passing a package of bills that would raise the age; regulate electronic cigarettes in the same ways as conventional cigarettes, including restricting where they can be used; and allow local governments to impose taxes on tobacco products.

The bills now go back to the Senate for final passage. Gov. Jerry Brown should sign these measures, because they would significantly improve public health. In addition, residents of the state will get to vote in November on increasing the statewide tax on cigarettes by \$2 per pack.

Last year, Hawaii became the first state to pass a law to raise the legal age for purchasing tobacco to 21. More than 100 cities and counties, including Boston, New York City and Suffolk County in Long Island have also adopted the policy. Four states — Alabama, Alaska, New Jersey and Utah — set the legal age at 19, and the rest set it at 18. Unfortunately, in January, Gov. Chris Christie vetoed legislation that would have changed New Jersey's legal sale age to 21.

The biggest reason to raise the legal age to 21 is to reduce young people's access to tobacco when they are more likely to become addicted and when their brains are still developing. Studies have found that nicotine, the main addictive ingredient in cigarettes, can impair cognition among young people. About 90 percent of adult smokers first use cigarettes before turning 19, and almost all smokers start before age 26, according to an Institute of Medicine study published last year.

The study also found that raising the age to 21 nationwide would reduce access to cigarettes for people under 18, because most children get tobacco from slightly older friends and relatives. Over all, the study concluded that changing the age to 21 should prevent 223,000 premature deaths and collectively add 4.2 million years to the lives of those born between 2000 and 2019.

There is broad public support for making it harder for young people to buy tobacco. Nearly 75 percent of adults surveyed supported changing the age to 21, according to a 2015 paper by researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Big majorities of former and even active smokers support the change.

Some will surely argue that setting a higher age for cigarette sales infringes on young people's rights. California lawmakers who subscribed to such arguments put in a needless exception allowing active-duty military troops to buy cigarettes and other tobacco products at age 18. But there is a clear public interest in increasing the age for everybody, just as there was a compelling reason to make 21 the legal age to buy alcohol. That policy, adopted state by state over time, helped reduce drunken driving, saving nearly 22,000 lives between 1975 and 2002, according to the Department of Transportation.

California is often at the vanguard of important policy changes. The state's move toward raising the legal age to buy cigarettes should inspire other states to take similar steps to protect young people.

[http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/opinion/sunday/raise-the-legal-age-for-cigarette-sales-to-21.html?  
smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&referer=&r=0](http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/03/06/opinion/sunday/raise-the-legal-age-for-cigarette-sales-to-21.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&referer=&r=0)