Project E-NUFF
Assessment of local knowledge around flavored tobacco products in San Francisco
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Introduction

Throughout the years, tobacco products have long been researched and as the understanding of the products evolved, they gained a lot of attention from scientists, psychologists, pharmacists, public health professionals, media, and advocacy groups. In the past decade, the tobacco industry introduced flavored tobacco products. Flavored tobacco products tend to have colorful packaging and candy-like flavors which makes them extremely attractive to youth.

Project E-NUFF started from a group of young health advocates, emerging community leaders (ECLs), who were concerned with the increase in consumption, media targeting, and harm caused by flavored tobacco products. Project E-NUFF is a project of Breathe California. We focused on conducting research at the local level around flavored tobacco products in San Francisco with an emphasis on how these products impact youth. ECLs strive to better understand how flavored tobacco products harm youth in San Francisco and how policy can be used and implemented to mitigate the harm and to protect vulnerable populations.

Purpose

We are passionate about conducting local research to magnify the voice of vulnerable communities that are most affected by the tobacco industry in San Francisco. The data collected and analyzed can be used to inform policy, facilitate policy implementation, and ultimately improve the health of our communities using local supporting evidence.

Methods

The research project started with a brainstorming activity of all the questions that we were interested in answering and picked a few to focus on. Then, we prepared material for each research method, collected data, analyzed data and finally compiled all the research into one
document (Figure 1). To conduct the research, we used surveys, focus groups, and key informant interviews. All data were collected during February and March of 2018. All surveys were anonymous.

*Figure 1: Project E-NUFF research process*

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**Surveys**

In total, we collected exactly 215\(^1\) surveys. These surveys were collected from schools:

- Raoul Wallenberg High School
- June Jordan High School
- Balboa High School
- Gateway High School

The survey was ten questions and took less than five minutes to complete. All surveys were anonymous and voluntary. Some examples of questions asked in the survey are:

**Q1)** Flavored tobacco products are sold within two blocks of my home.
- Agree □ Disagree

**Q2)** Menthol (mint) flavored cigarettes are just as harmful as non-flavored cigarettes.
- Agree □ Disagree

**Q3)** Using e-cigarettes or vaping is harmful to your health.
- Agree □ Disagree

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\(^1\) We collected a total of 216 surveys. However, we excluded one outlier from analysis since they were not from a high school. The excluded survey was from an older student in a GED program.
The data collected from the surveys are from communities in San Francisco that are most susceptible to the harms of Big Tobacco, specifically the Excelsior and Western Addition.

**Focus Groups**

We held three focus groups with high school students over the course of two weeks. Participants were enrolled at Balboa High School and Raoul Wallenberg High School. Each focus group was held among 6-12 teenagers and a teacher or counselor who worked at the school. During these sessions, the group talked about the use of, access to and opinions about flavored tobacco among focus group participants and their peers. Some examples of the questions asked during the focus groups are:

1. What does everyone know about flavored tobacco?
2. We know lots of young people use flavored tobacco, like candy flavored vapes. How true do you think this is about people your age?
3. How often do you see flavored tobacco products being sold in your community/neighborhood?

**Key Informant Interviews**

We interviewed three tobacco control subject matter experts. All interviewees served or worked with LGBTQI, youth, or vulnerable populations. The interviews consisted of six questions about flavored tobacco products and related policy. Some examples of questions that we asked during the key informant interviews are:

1. What are three strategies/activities/aspects that cities and counties should use to successfully implement a policy that limits sales of flavored tobacco? Why do you think these three strategies/activities are important for the success of policy?
2. As Project E-NUFF moves forward, is there any advice you would like to provide us in regard to conducting research around flavored tobacco products in San Francisco?
3. We often hear about the importance of asking the right questions. What questions do you think we should be asking other professionals in the field?

Detailed notes were taken during interviews. After completing the interviews, three researchers identified common themes for each question. Then we created a thematic framework including themes and key quotes.
Results

Focus Groups

Two main themes emerged during the three focus groups. The first theme was that the youth knew flavored tobacco products by brand names and didn’t necessarily associate those brands with the tobacco products that were previously popular (that is, cigarettes). For example, students were outspokenly opposed to cigarette use, but spoke about using Backwoods - a form of flavored tobacco. Secondly, during the focus groups, almost all participants spoke about negative attitudes toward tobacco. For instance, one participant shared that “no one really likes tobacco, it’s trash, it’s out of style”.

However, the anonymous survey findings showed a broader range of opinions toward tobacco. This implies that there might have been a bias in the responses expressed during the focus group.

Interviews

There were two main findings that emerged from the key informant interviews. The first one was that flavored tobacco experts agree that education of retailers is key. One interviewee shared that it is important to “develop documents/materials to support retailers making the transition to selling other products that don’t kill people”. The other main finding that emerged was that there should be a focused message about the flavored tobacco policy so that the community can understand how the policy impacts them. For instance, one interviewee shared that it should be made clear that “flavored tobacco products are not going to be criminalized. The focus on the policy is on the retailers and not the consumers.”

“No one really likes tobacco, it’s trash, it’s out of style”
- Anonymous

“Flavored tobacco products are not going to be criminalized. The focus on the policy is on the retailers and not the consumers.” – Anonymous
Surveys

For the surveys, an interesting finding was the accessibility youth had to flavored tobacco products. More than half (61%) of youth reported the sale of flavored tobacco to be within a two-block radius from where they lived. In addition to this, approximately 80 percent of the surveyed reported that they obtain these products through a family member. These findings prove most significant because it displays the prevalent exposure of flavored tobacco not only in the external environments of youth but also within the home.

Figure 2: Survey response

Flavored tobacco products are sold within two blocks of my home.

Also, most surveyed youth said that menthol-flavored cigarettes are just as harmful as non-flavored cigarettes. However, almost half also mentioned that flavored tobacco relieves stress (Figure 2).
Discussion

The main results of this research project were that most young people in San Francisco have close access to flavored tobacco products. Yet, youth’s opinions and understanding about flavored tobacco products varied widely. Another main finding was that the tobacco industry has been successful in marketing and branding their flavored products towards youth. Additionally, we found that some important next steps following the San Francisco tobacco policy are to help and educate former flavored tobacco retailers and to adequately inform the public about what the policy entails.

The limitations of this study are that the data was collected using convenience (targeted locations in San Francisco, targeted communities) sampling and the results obtained are specific to the population focused on. Both the neighborhoods and population were not randomly selected. In other words, the results of this study are not generalizable. Another possible limitation is the research project’s definition of youth as it did not include all age ranges. For instance, middle school students were not included in the study.

More research is needed is to better understand the perspective and attitudes of the former flavored tobacco retailers and how they plan to mitigate the implementation of the policy. The results from this research project call for an assessment of retailers’ perspectives of the policy.
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