

Montreal, April 17, 2023

Why are Quebec's convenience stores convenient scapegoats on vaping?

In the coming weeks, the Quebec government is planning to change regulations that will prohibit the sale of flavored vape in convenience stores.

Quebec is trying to deal with youth vaping, which is the right thing to do, but they are going about in the wrong way. They are assuming that youth are primarily accessing vape products through convenience stores. This is not correct. Health Canada data shows that 88% of youth who vape are accessing these products through friends, relatives, vape shops and online sales – not our retail stores.

This data isn't surprising to us because we know that we are the most responsible retailers of age-restricted products. Quebec's own data shows a 91% compliance rate. The idea that we can be trusted to sell tobacco, lottery, and alcohol responsibly, but not trusted to sell vape products is nonsensical.

When's the last time a "seller" of illegal age-restricted products checked for ID?

So, while convenience stores are not a meaningful part of the youth vaping problem, they can be part of the adult solution. There is growing evidence that vaping is a less harmful alternative to smoking and a potentially helpful tool in achieving the public health goal of smoking cessation. If governments are serious about helping adult smokers quit smoking, convenience stores are on the front lines. Smokers are already accustomed to buying their legal cigarettes at convenience stores. It follows that, to encourage more adult smokers to try vaping, vapes and a small selection of appropriate, federally approved flavors should be available at the same places where cigarettes are sold.

By excluding convenience stores from the market, the government is simply transferring sales to the entire parallel network of illegal sales. Bans of any kind never work, they simply fuel the illegal market.

We already know the "Plaza de la route 132" in Chateauguay where a broad range of illicit products including tobacco, cannabis, alcohol, and gasoline are sold at a discounted tax-free price. With the recent major increase in tobacco taxes, a pack of cigarettes in convenience stores costs about \$15 vs. \$3 for a contraband pack, encouraging even more illegal sales, especially in the current inflationary environment.

Undoubtedly illegal flavored vape products will quickly become available at a smoke shack near you. They will be sold tax-free where resellers of these newly banned flavors will come to stock up.

The government is also unable to control online sales, which are large part of the problem in terms of youth access. A mandatory third-party age verification and signature on delivery for all online sales of vape products should be obligatory.

Premier Legault and Minister Dubé should speak with their colleagues in BC and Ontario, who also unfairly targeted convenience stores, and find out whether youth have stopped vaping. They may not give you a clear answer, but you need look no further than school yards in those provinces. Ask young people where they got the vapes from, and they will tell you that it's easy to buy at a vape shop or online.

We need a vaping plan that puts public health first and limits access by youth through increased penalties and enforcement in both physical and online channels. The scapegoating of convenience stores is a deeply flawed idea that will do far more harm than good.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'MG' with a stylized flourish.

Michel Gadbois
Vice-President, Convenience Industry Council of Canada