



Wake County Public Health

Public Health Issue Brief: Emerging Nicotine Products and Youth Exposure in Wake County, NC

OVERVIEW

In Wake County, youth are surrounded by nicotine products. Flavored vapes and synthetic nicotine pouches are commonly found in stores near schools and neighborhoods, making them highly visible and easy to access.¹ These products are designed to appeal to young people with sweet flavors and colorful packaging. And it's working. According to the 2022 North Carolina Youth Tobacco survey, **e-cigarettes remain the most commonly used tobacco product among youth.**²

Over
90%
of Middle and
High School
**E-Cigarette Users
Choose Flavored
Products**



Sales restrictions are in place, but enforcement is inconsistent. Federal law prohibits the sale of tobacco and vape products to anyone under 21. However, North Carolina law only prohibits sales to those under 18. Since enforcement falls to state agencies such as Alcohol Law Enforcement (ALE), this gap undermines protections for youth ages 18 to 20.³

According to the 2025 Synar Survey,

14.2% of retailers sold tobacco to minors

highlighting the critical need for stronger local enforcement and clearer alignment with federal law.⁴ Without action, young people will continue to face easy access to products that put them at risk for long-term addiction.⁴

WAKE COUNTY'S RETAIL LANDSCAPE: A CLOSER LOOK

Data from the [NC Region 7 Tobacco Influence Dashboard](#) displays:

- A high density of tobacco retailers throughout Wake County, including near schools and residential areas.
- Retail clustering in both urban and suburban areas, increasing visibility.
- Tobacco advertisements are commonly found both inside and outside stores.
- A wide variety of store types, including gas stations, convenience stores, and dollar stores sell these products.

This retail environment increases youth exposure to marketing and makes it easier to access emerging nicotine products.⁵

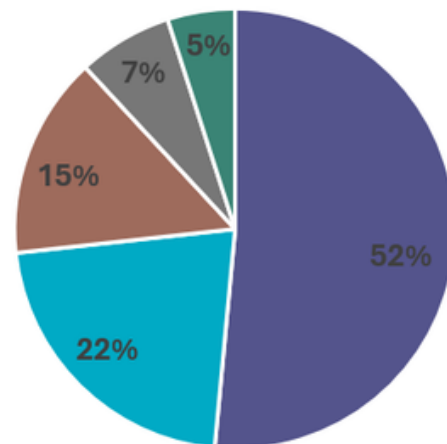
RETAILER CHARACTERISTICS

Understanding which types of stores sell tobacco products is key to addressing youth access. In Wake County, tobacco is available in a range of retailers, from convenience stores to pharmacies, many of which display tobacco advertising inside and outside their businesses. Exposure to this marketing has been linked to higher rates of youth tobacco use and earlier initiation.¹

WHY IT MATTERS¹

- Increased exposure = increased risk: Youth who see tobacco marketing are more likely to start using it.
- Retail proximity to schools normalizes product presence and undermines prevention efforts.
- Retailers with frequent advertising are often concentrated in geographic areas with poorer health outcomes, which may contribute to health disparities.
- 95% of tobacco users start before the age of 21.

Figure 1:
Type of Retailers Selling Tobacco Products, Wake County, Jan-Feb 2025



■ Convenience store ■ Grocery store ■ E-cigarette or Vape shop
■ Drug store or pharmacy ■ Mass merchandiser

RETAIL ADVERTISING

During January - February 2025 in Wake County

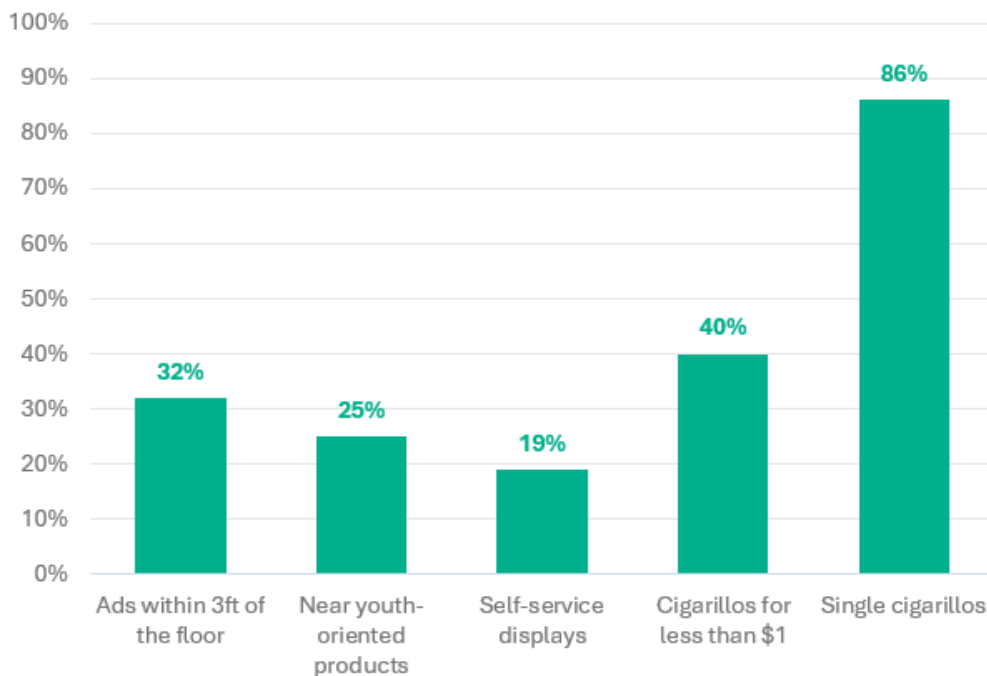
Some retail stores expose youth to tobacco marketing by placing advertisements and products at eye level and alongside popular children's items, such as candy and toys.

47%
of retailers
had exterior
tobacco
advertising

50%
of retailers
accepted
WIC

59%
of retailers
accepted
SNAP

Figure 2: Percent of Retailers with Youth Appealing Displays and Products, Wake County, Jan-Feb 2025



- **Ads within three feet of the floor:** commercial tobacco product marketing placed at what is perceived at youth/child's eye level.
- **Near youth-oriented products:** sometimes, tobacco products are placed near candy or toys that are directly marketed to children.
- **Self-service displays:** commercial tobacco product displays not located behind a counter that a customer can access products themselves.
- **Cigarillos:** a small cigar, generally flavored tobacco rolled in a dried tobacco leaf. Can be sold individually or in small multi-packs.

LICENSING AND ZONING POLICIES

Licensing and zoning policies can help reduce the number, type, and location of tobacco retailers, making it harder for youth to access these products and easier for communities to control how tobacco is sold.

Table 1 shows Wake County and the local Wake County municipalities that have passed a Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) Amendment regulating tobacco retail outlet density from schools and other entities in the corresponding jurisdiction.

Table 1: Local Tobacco Zoning: Distances from Schools and Other Entities by Municipality

Municipality	Distance from schools	Distance from other entities	Link to UDO/LDO or meeting minutes
Wake County	1000 ft	1000 ft from tobacco and hemp retail establishment, public park, greenway or residence	Wake County BOC Meeting Minutes - October 16th, 2023 Meeting
Zebulon	500 ft	500 ft from pawn shop, vape, tobacco & CBD shop, daycare, park, religious institution, adult business, nightclub or dancehall or pool hall	Zebulon UDO - Article 4: Uses - 4.3.5.UU (Page 52)
Apex	1,000 ft	None	Apex UDO - Article 4 - Use Regulations - 4.4 Supplemental Standards - 4.4.5 Commercial Uses (Page 64)
Rolesville	1,000 ft	1,000 ft from another vape and tobacco store	Rolesville LDO - Section 5
Knightdale	1,000 ft	1,000 ft from another vape/tobacco store or park	Knightdale UDO - Chapter 5 - Use Specific Standards
Fuquay-Varina	500 ft	500 ft from another tobacco and/or CBD retailer 500 ft from daycare facility	Fuquay-Varina LDO Amendment page 92-93

POLICY GAPS IN NORTH CAROLINA ¹

As of March 2025:

- North Carolina remains one of only 7 states that has not raised the minimum age of tobacco purchase to 21 under state law.
- North Carolina is one of 10 states without a tobacco retailer licensure system.

Without a licensing system, the state lacks the ability to:

- Track and monitor where tobacco is sold.
- Limit the number or type of retailers.
- Enforce location restrictions (e.g., near schools).
- Penalize repeat violators beyond federal enforcement.

These gaps weaken enforcement and make it harder to prevent youth from accessing tobacco products.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES FOR WAKE COUNTY ¹

Wake County and other counties in North Carolina can consider the following strategies:

- Advocate for the adoption of a statewide tobacco retail licensing system to track and regulate retailers.
- Use zoning authority to limit new retailers near youth-focused spaces.
- Advocate for the restoration of local control to allow for regulation of tobacco advertising, pricing, etc.
- Educate retailers and increase frequency of compliance checks.
- Advocate for statewide “Tobacco 21” enforcement with strong local support.

REFERENCES

1. Counter Tools. (n.d.). NC Region 7 Tobacco Influence Dashboard. Retrieved August 1, 2025, from <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/countertools/viz/NCRegion7/MappingTobaccoInfluence>
2. North Carolina Youth Tobacco Survey, 2022
3. North Carolina Department of Public Safety. (n.d.). Tobacco. Retrieved August 1, 2025, from <https://www.ncdps.gov/our-organization/algorithm-law-enforcement/tobacco>
4. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. (2024). North Carolina FFY 2025 Synar Survey Report. Retrieved September 15, 2025, from <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/nc-fy25-sses-output-v5-11-14-2024final/download>
5. Truth Initiative. (n.d.). The truth about the tobacco industry and the retail environment. <https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/tobacco-industry-marketing/truth-about-tobacco-industry-and-retail-environment>