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“I'm gonna get me a loosie” Understanding single cigarette purchases by adult smokers in a disadvantaged section of New York City

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to update and expand our understanding of the perceptions and purchasing patterns of smokers of single cigarettes ('loosies') in disadvantaged urban areas. Semi-structured guides were used in thirteen focus groups with 67 self-identified adult smokers from the South Bronx section of New York City in summer 2013.

There is wide availability of single cigarettes in the South Bronx, with legitimate stores overwhelmingly being the preferred venue for purchases. Single cigarettes are sold at higher per-unit prices than illicit packs. However, buyers of single cigarettes can achieve cost savings compared to legal, fully taxed cigarette packs. Apart from cost-savings, smokers opt for single cigarettes to reduce their personal cigarette consumption. There is a general perception of market resilience despite law enforcement intervention. However, law enforcement has a limiting effect on access to single cigarettes outside of an individual smoker's immediate neighborhood.

The findings suggest that single cigarette sales are an important element of the illicit cigarette market in disadvantaged communities which should not be ignored in future research on the nature and extent of cigarette tax avoidance and evasion.

1. Introduction

Raising taxes to increase cigarette retail prices is widely considered a viable strategy to curb smoking by encouraging reduced consumption or cessation among current smokers and by discouraging smoking initiation among potential smokers (Chaloupka, 2014; Chaloupka and Warner, 1999; Licht et al., 2011). However, there may also be unintended consequences that potentially limit the public health benefits of higher tobacco taxation. One unintended effect that has received some attention by public health scholars, criminologists and economists is the emergence of an illegal cigarette market. This involves cigarettes that have been diverted to illegal distribution at various stages in the legal supply chain (Reuter and Majmundar, 2015). A second observed response to tax-induced increases in cigarette prices has so far not been studied extensively—the sale of single cigarettes, also called loosies, which makes cigarettes available to those who are unwilling or unable to pay the price of a whole pack. For example, in a study investigating how smokers in New York City responded to a tax increase of \$1.25 per pack in 2008 it was found that 15% bought more single cigarettes (Coady et al., 2013).

The selling of single cigarettes has been identified as a threat to

public health because it makes cigarettes more accessible and more affordable for individuals with little disposable income, including minors and socio-economically disadvantaged adults (Gemson et al., 1998; Hall et al., 2015; Landrine et al., 1998). A further concern is that in the case of single cigarettes consumers are less exposed to health warning labels on cigarette packs (Hall et al., 2015; Landrine et al., 1998; Latkin et al., 2013; Thrasher et al., 2011). Finally, there is an assumption that sellers of individual cigarettes serve as smoking prompts and symbols of normalcy of smoking, especially among youth and casual, nondaily smokers (Smith et al., 2007; Stillman et al., 2014). At the same time, it has been argued that the public health impact of single cigarettes is not entirely clear given that their per-unit cost may be substantially higher than that of cigarettes sold in packs; and given that the transaction costs of single cigarettes will tend to be higher because of greater search costs per cigarette (Thrasher et al., 2009). Against this backdrop the purchase of single cigarettes has been interpreted as a strategy pursued by smokers not primarily to avoid costs but to limit the consumption of cigarettes (Thrasher et al., 2011; Guillery et al., 2015).

The sale of single cigarettes has been reported in a number of countries where this practice is prohibited, including the United States.

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Under federal law it is illegal to sell cigarettes in packages containing fewer than 20 cigarettes, and retailers are forbidden to break or otherwise open a cigarette package to sell individual cigarettes (21 Code of Federal Regulations §§ 1140.14, 1140.16.). Similar regulations exist on state and local levels. For example, the New York City Tobacco Product Regulation Act of 1993 prohibits out-of-package sales of cigarettes (§ 17–618).

In the United States, the sale of single cigarettes has primarily been observed in disadvantaged inner-city areas (Gemson et al., 1998; Latkin et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2007; Stillman et al., 2014). This is in line with research elsewhere that has associated single cigarettes with lower-income and less educated smokers (Hall et al., 2015; Thrasher et al., 2011; Stead et al., 2013; Thrasher et al., 2009). However, one study on youth access to smoking in California also found single cigarettes being available in middle-class communities, although with a much higher prevalence in minority neighborhoods compared to those with a predominantly white population; (Landrine et al., 1998) and a survey of bar-going young adults in New York City concluded that purchasing single cigarettes is a common behavior across all types of smokers and burroughs of residence (Guillory et al., 2015).

The research that has focused on minority and low-income neighborhoods suggests that the sale of single cigarettes is a pervasive and socially accepted behavior. Several of these studies have been carried out in Baltimore, Maryland, where the selling of single cigarettes has been described as highly visible and widespread (Latkin et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2007; Stillman et al., 2014). From this research it seems that the most common venue for purchasing single cigarettes is the street, but sales by friends and in regular retail stores have also been reported (Landrine et al., 1998; Stillman et al., 2014; Wackowski et al., 2017). For example, a study using under-age test buyers found in 1993 that 70% of stores in Central Harlem, New York, sold single cigarettes (Gemson et al., 1998).

From existing research little is known about the pricing structure for single cigarettes in the US. According to one focus group study in Baltimore, Maryland, the prices mentioned by participants varied and were “potentially higher than the price at which a pack of cigarettes could be bought in a local store” (Smith et al., 2007). Research in Guatemala (de Ojeda et al., 2011) and Mexico (Thrasher et al., 2009), in contrast, found clear and drastic price differentials with single cigarettes reportedly being sold at almost double the unit cost of a pack of cigarettes.

Three main reasons why smokers opt for buying single cigarettes have been identified by existing studies in the U.S.: convenience because of easy access to street vendors, affordability resulting from lower immediate costs of buying cigarettes, and to limit consumption (Stillman et al., 2014). In this light some smokers may choose to buy packs whenever they have sufficient funds and opt for singles when they do not have enough money (Smith et al., 2007). Others may choose to only buy single cigarettes in order to control their habit and keep consumption at a lower level, or to eventually stop smoking entirely. One study found that smokers who intend to quit or had made a quit attempt were more likely to purchase and smoke single cigarettes (Guillory et al., 2015). It has also been pointed out that the prevalence of single cigarettes in disadvantaged and minority neighborhoods fits with differential smoking patterns by SES and race (Stillman et al., 2014). For example, it has been shown that African Americans are more likely to be light smokers and nondaily smokers than the majority population (Sacks et al., 2012; Tong et al., 2006).

In this paper we seek to shed more light on the sale of single cigarettes in the United States and to update previous findings on single cigarette sales in inner city areas in the US (Baltimore and Harlem), given continuous changes in tobacco control policies and enforcement (Reuter and Majmundar, 2015; Gemson et al., 1998). We examine the perspectives of primarily Hispanic and African American adult smokers in a disadvantaged urban setting in New York City with a view to the availability and attractiveness of single cigarettes, pricing, the

connection to other forms of illegal selling of cigarettes, and the effect law enforcement has on availability and purchasing patterns.

2. Methods

Data were obtained from focus groups with a purposive sample of self-identified smokers who reside in the South Bronx, which is a geographic area within a borough of New York City (the Bronx) with a high prevalence of illicit cigarettes, typically bootlegged from low-tax states like Virginia (Chernick and Merriman, 2013; Kurti et al., 2015; Lovenheim, 2008; Shelley et al., 2007; von Lampe and Kurti, 2016; John and Ross, 2017).

In summer 2013, smokers who were residents of the South Bronx were solicited on the street at three popular shopping districts. Prospective participants who expressed an interest in participating in the study were instructed to call the research team at an unlisted number and were screened for eligibility based on the following criteria: 18 years of age or older; had smoked at least one cigarette in the previous week; had resided in the South Bronx for at least 12 months. Out of 112 respondents who were screened and initially enrolled in the study, 67 (59.8%) participated in the focus groups. In order to foster some level of homogeneity among the participants so that they might freely discuss their smoking patterns and purchase of illicit cigarettes, participants were sorted by age and gender with 2–9 participants in each of the 13 focus groups (see Table 1). Each author operated as a solo moderator for at least two of the groups. When possible, the gender of the moderators was matched with the focus group in order to increase the level of comfort and candor among the participants. Respondents were informed of the risks and rewards associated with the study and asked to provide oral consent before the beginning of each focus group session. The names of participants were not collected during this research. Instead, before each focus group session, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym nametag to be used as their name during the session. Each participant was given a \$5.00 MetroCard for mass transit and a \$25.00 debit card at the completion of the focus group. All of the focus groups were facilitated by an interview guide that included questions pertaining to participants' smoking habits, cigarette purchasing patterns, and perceptions of the illicit marketplace.

The focus groups were conducted in English, audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. After checking the transcripts for accuracy, the authors used a grounded theory technique to independently code and analyze each line of the transcripts. Through discussion and a re-examination of the transcripts, the authors agreed upon the key themes and concepts that relate to the participants' experiences with the single cigarette market in their neighborhoods.

Table 1
Age, gender, and racial composition of focus groups ($N = 13$).

Group ID (n)	Age	Gender	Race/ethnicity
M1 (3)	18–24	Males	2 African American; 1 Hispanic
M2 (2)	18–24	Males	1 Hispanic; 1 Other
M3 (6)	25–44	Males	3 African American; 2 Hispanic; 1 White
M4 (9)	25–44	Males	3 African American; 4 Hispanic
M5 (5)	45–64	Males	3 African American; 2 Hispanic
M6 (8)	45–64	Males	7 African American; 1 Hispanic
M7 (6)	65+	Males	2 African American; 4 Hispanic
F1 (2)	18–24	Females	1 African American; 1 Hispanic
F2 (7)	25–44	Females	3 African American; 2 Hispanic; 1 White; 1 Other
F3 (4)	25–44	Females	4 African American
F4 (8)	45–64	Females	4 African American; 2 Hispanic; 2 White
F5 (4)	45–64	Females	3 Hispanic; 1 Other
F6 (3)	65+	Females	3 African American

3. Results

We held 13 focus groups with 67 participants: 58% male, and 42% female. The majority of our respondents self-identified as Black (55.2%), followed by Hispanic (34.3%), White (6%) and other (4.5%). Ages ranged from 18 to 24 (10.4%), 25–44 (38.85%), 45–64 (37.3%), and 65 and older (13.4%).

3.1. Purchasing patterns among study participants

With one exception, a Caucasian woman, focus group participants regularly purchased illicit cigarettes. 53 out of the 67 (80%) participants made explicit statements about their purchasing behavior with respect to single cigarettes. Of these, 60% ($n = 32$) reported buying packs, typically bearing a tax stamp from a low-tax state such as Virginia, while 23% ($n = 12$) reported buying packs as well as single cigarettes and 17% ($n = 9$) indicated that they only bought single cigarettes.

The highest shares of those who purchased single cigarettes at least some of the time were among females (57.1%) compared to 33.3% of male study participants, and in the category of 18–24 years old (85.7%), while the lowest share (13.3%) was found among study participants between the ages of 45–64 years. Most study participants reported buying their cigarettes (packs or single cigarettes) in licensed retail stores in their neighborhood, although street vendors and in a few cases friends and relatives were mentioned as alternative sources.

3.2. Availability of single cigarettes

Single cigarettes were described as widely available. Most participants indicated that they could choose among several retail outlets within their neighborhoods to purchase single cigarettes, despite the fact that many of these stores were routinely subject to law enforcement measures including undercover investigations, raids and store closures. When asked where he buys his 'loosies', one participant stated: *Anywhere. At the corner store, the bodega - anywhere, you know?* (Stanley, M25–44).

When asked when they noticed the emergence of untaxed cigarette sales in their neighborhoods, younger participants stated that they had always been available, while several older participants (aged 45+) linked the emergence of single cigarette sales to the crack epidemic of the 1980s when local grocery stores reportedly started selling 'loosies' for as little as 25 cents apiece.

The current prices most often reported among participants were 50 cents and 75 cents per cigarette. Three participants reported buying three cigarettes for a dollar. Prices per illegal pack of 20 cigarettes were reported as typically \$7 or \$8. Comparatively, legal packs sell for around \$10.50–\$12.50, depending on the brand (New York City Local Law 97 of 2013). A few participants who recounted purchases in other boroughs of New York City reported paying as little as \$1 for three or \$2 for six cigarettes in Brooklyn and as much as \$1 per cigarette in Manhattan. Overall, 50 cents per cigarette was widely viewed as the standard, while higher prices were met with resistance and only paid when other options were not available. One respondent reported that a store was forced to go back to a price of 50 cents because at 75 cents a lot of people don't buy it (M45–64).

A major theme that emerged in the focus group discussions was that despite the high prevalence of stores that sell single cigarettes, access is limited for smokers who venture outside of their own neighborhood. One challenge is to identify a licensed retailer where 'loosies' are sold. Another challenge is to convince store clerks to sell to individuals with whom they are unfamiliar. Participants reported looking for various cues outside or inside a store to determine if single cigarettes are being sold there, for example *people walking out with a loosie, and it's lit* (Cynthia, F18–24) or *a lighter hanging from a string inside the store* (Sasha, F25–44).

From the various experiences related by our study participants it is evident that many stores are reluctant to sell single cigarettes to persons they do not know, apparently out of fear of undercover law enforcement activity. As one participant explained, *they'll either think you're working for the cops or you are a cop* (Don, M18–24). Sometimes customers have to find out the right code word (e.g., *spoon* or *napkin*) in order to obtain single cigarettes in a particular store.

In contrast to legitimate licensed retail stores, street vendors were not described as being selective about their customers. Correspondingly, participants for the most part did not refer to specific street vendors that they maintained as a source for single cigarettes but to street vending of illicit cigarettes as a common occurrence in the South Bronx in general. However, participants expressed a preference for stores over street vendors and saw street vendors as a second choice at best. One main reason for avoiding street vendors is fear that cigarette transactions might be confused for drug transactions by the police: *You know, streets is really not so safe in doing anything like - in low income neighborhoods (...)* *You're going to go through the system and get out the next day for fifty cents* (Ken, M45–64). Another reason that participants preferred retailers to street vendors is reflected in their concerns over product quality. Several study participants reported encountering poor quality (stale or counterfeit) cigarettes, either sold individually or in packs, that differed from normal cigarettes in taste and burn characteristics. This phenomenon was associated more with street vendors than with stores, and street vendors were believed to be much less responsive to customer complaints. As one participant explained: *I'd rather get them at the store because nine times out of 10, the guy walking by you selling loosies, you never know - you may not see him again, so you get your cigarettes, and you walk off, and then you crack it open and it's stale and nasty, when you go back, you ain't going to find him* (Jim, M25–44).

From the focus group discussions no clear picture emerges of what types of cigarettes are sold as 'loosies'. With respect to brand, a large majority of participants reported only smoking Newports. This brand preference appears to apply to packs as well as single cigarettes. One participant observed: *Loosies - they're always one brand. Either the loosies are Newports or they're no brand at all* (Don, M18–24).

Participants speculated about whether single cigarettes were commonly sold from genuine or bootlegged packs. Some reported sales from packs with a New York stamp while others said they observed single cigarettes being taken out of packs with a Virginia stamp.

3.3. Motivations for buying single cigarettes

Study participants provided two main reasons for purchasing single cigarettes as opposed to illicit packs. One reason is a lack of sufficient funds to buy packs: *If I have ten dollars, I'm only going to buy five dollars worth of loosies because I need something to eat* (Sasha, F25–44).

Another reason study participants provided for buying single cigarettes is to maintain cigarette consumption at a low level or to quit: *I won't buy a pack because I'm trying to cut down* (Marlena, F45–64). However, this strategy was often impeded by the abundance of cigarette retailers in the neighborhood and the availability of single cigarettes: *Like, every time I pass a bodega, I say - I'm gonna get me a loosie, you know? It's like an addiction* (Barbie, F45–64).

4. Discussion

Our study confirms previous research that documents single cigarette sales as a pervasive phenomenon in disadvantaged urban areas (Gemson et al., 1998; Latkin et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2007; Stillman et al., 2014; Guillory et al., 2015). The situation in the South Bronx may differ from other places like Baltimore, Maryland, in that the main and preferred venue for purchasing single cigarettes are legitimate stores rather than street vendors. In fact, older study participants indicated that the sale of single cigarettes has traditionally been the domain of neighborhood stores going back to the 1980s, which corresponds to

research from the early 1990s that found wide availability of single cigarettes in New York City stores.

For the most part, the selling of single cigarettes appears to be an integral part of the illegal cigarette trade in the South Bronx. Irrespective of the type of venue (street or store), customers seem to have a choice between buying illicit packs or loose cigarettes. Similar observations have been made in Central Harlem in the early 2000s (Shelley et al., 2007). Stores that sell single cigarettes out of legal packs and otherwise do not sell illicit cigarettes only seem to play a limited role. In a typical scenario study participants saw themselves presented with the option of either buying between one and six single cigarettes for 50 cents each or a pack of bootlegged cigarettes for \$7 or \$8. This means that those who purchase single cigarettes pay less per transaction but at substantially higher per-unit costs even when compared to packs of illicit cigarettes. The price of 50 cents per single cigarette is 25% higher than the 40 cents per cigarette in an \$8-pack and 42.9% higher than the 35 cents per cigarette in a \$7-pack. In addition, those who reported buying single cigarettes several times a day incurred additional transaction costs. Still, when compared to a legal pack at a minimum legal price of \$10.50, buying single cigarettes at a price of 50 cents each has a nominal cost-saving effect of at least 2.5 cents per cigarette. In other words, a basic decision is made against high-priced legal packs of cigarettes, but those who buy single cigarettes accept higher unit costs relative to illicit packs either because they do not have the immediate funds necessary to buy illicit packs or because they see the purchase of single cigarettes as a means to manage their nicotine addiction. However, as has been found in other research (Stead et al., 2013), the success of efforts to reduce smoking by avoiding the purchase of packs is undermined by the pervasiveness of outlets for illicit cigarettes, at least within familiar neighborhoods. Within larger, less familiar geographical areas, smokers find it more difficult to access single cigarettes, apparently as a result of law enforcement pressure on the illegal cigarette trade. This finding suggests that efforts to crack down on illicit cigarettes show some effect even if the number of places where illicit cigarettes are sold may not have diminished.

4.1. Limitations

Our study faces two main limitations. First, our sampling procedure is purposive, involves self-selection, and the number of participants is small which does not allow us to make generalizations, especially not to populations outside of the South Bronx. Second, focus groups differ from individual interviews in that the resulting data are influenced by group processes. While participants spoke freely of their participation in the illegal market, responses about single cigarette purchases may have been affected by social desirability bias.

5. Conclusion

Our finding that single cigarettes may make up a substantial share of tax avoidant cigarette purchases has potential implications for research on the illicit cigarette market. Studies that solely rely on the collection and analysis of cigarette packs (littered pack, pack return and pack swap surveys) may not be able to capture an important segment of the market and thereby may, for example, underestimate the prevalence of illicit cigarettes. Research in countries where single cigarettes dominate the illicit market have addressed these methodological shortcomings by collecting data from retailers (John and Ross, 2017). Our findings also have implications for public health. For example, tobacco control policies that increase the price of cigarettes through excise taxes are undermined when cigarettes are sold as singles and at reduced prices.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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