



## “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

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