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## Short Communication

## Point-of-sale marketing and context of marijuana retailers: Assessing reliability and generalizability of the marijuana retail surveillance tool

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## ABSTRACT

As recreational marijuana expands, standardized surveillance measures examining the retail environment are critical for informing policy and enforcement. We conducted a reliability and generalizability study using a previously developed tool involving assessment of a sample of 25 randomly selected Seattle recreational marijuana retailers (20 recreational; 5 recreational/medical) in 2017. The tool assessed: 1) contextual/neighborhood features (i.e., facilities nearby); 2) compliance/security (e.g., age-of-sale signage, age verification); and 3) marketing (i.e., promotions, product availability, price). We found that retailers were commonly within two blocks of restaurants ( $n = 23$ ), grocery stores ( $n = 17$ ), liquor stores ( $n = 13$ ), and bars/clubs ( $n = 11$ ). Additionally, two were within two blocks of schools, and four were within two blocks of parks. Almost all ( $n = 23$ ) had exterior signage indicating the minimum age requirement, and 23 verified age. Two retailers had exterior ads for marijuana, and 24 had interior ads. Overall, there were 76 interior ads ( $M = 3.04$ ;  $SD = 1.84$ ), most commonly for edibles ( $n = 28$ ). At least one price promotion/discount was recorded in 17 retailers, most commonly in the form of loyalty membership programs ( $n = 10$ ) or daily/weekly deals ( $n = 10$ ). One retailer displayed potential health harms/warnings, while three posted some health claim. Products available across product categories were similar; we also noted instances of selling retailer-branded apparel/paraphernalia (which is prohibited). Lowest price/unit across product categories demonstrated low variability across retailers. This study documented high inter-rater reliability of the surveillance tool ( $Kappas = 0.73$  to  $1.00$ ). In conclusion, this tool can be used in future research and practice aimed at examining retailers marketing practices and regulatory compliance.

## 1. Introduction

The most commonly used federally illicit drug is marijuana; 8.4% of US adults report past-month use (a 35% increase since 2002) (Azofeifa et al., 2016). As of 2016, eight states and the District of Columbia have legalized recreational marijuana. An additional 29 states have legalized medical marijuana use and/or decriminalization laws. With a majority of US adults favoring legalization (Pew Research Center, 2013), further legalization is likely to occur. Moreover, marijuana is among the fastest growing industries in the US, with the legal market projected to be worth \$22 billion by 2020 (Sola & Legal, 2016).

Standardized measures to monitor retail marketing of tobacco and alcohol have been critical to inform federal, state, and local policy and

enforcement (Henriksen et al., 2016; Monteiro et al., 2017; Babor et al., 2017). To fill an important gap in research on marijuana retail marketing, this study builds on the development and pilot testing of the Marijuana Retail Surveillance Tool (MRST), conducted in a convenience sample of 20 Denver retailers (Berg et al., 2017). The MRST was based on relevant and reliable measures, specifically a premise survey used to characterize medical marijuana dispensaries in California (Thomas & Freisthler, 2016) and the vape shop module of the Standardized Tobacco Assessment for Retail Settings (V-STARS) (Kong et al., 2017). Reviews of the literature were conducted to inform assessments of product offerings (e.g., (Bierut et al., 2017)), as well as promotional strategies used on marijuana retailer websites (e.g., (Bierut et al., 2017)). We also assessed the community context (e.g., proximity to

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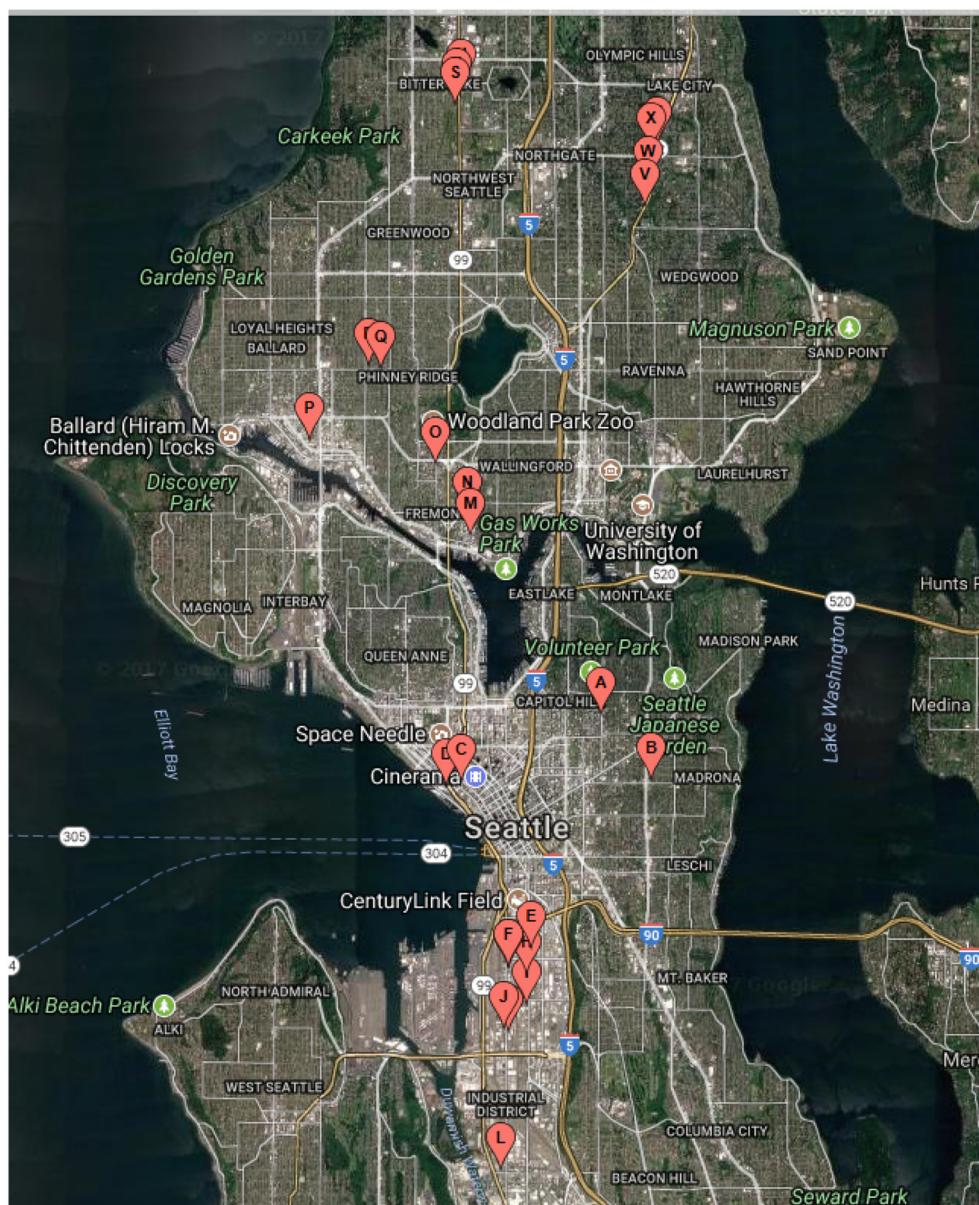


Fig. 1. Map of sampled marijuana retailers in Seattle, N = 25.

Source: [www.geobatch.com](http://www.geobatch.com)

other retailer types) in order to contextualize marijuana retailer location (Glanz et al., 2005). Regarding regulatory issues, we documented high compliance with age verification, but nearly half of the shops posted health claims. In terms of marketing, price promotions and promotions for novel products (e.g., edibles) were prevalent (Berg et al., 2017).

Building on this pilot study (Berg et al., 2017), this study examined the inter-rater reliability of the MRST and its applicability to a context with different marijuana-related policies.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study site

Seattle was chosen as the study site because Washington was the second state to legalize recreational marijuana and open a non-medical retail marijuana marketplace and now includes a large market (> 1000 recreational retailers) (Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board, 2017). Washington laws require: 1) licensing (e.g., retailers must

possess a recreational license and can apply for an added license for medical marijuana endorsement); 2) mandatory age verification and prohibition of sales to customers < 21 unless medicinal; 3) limits on amount purchased (e.g., one ounce of useable marijuana, 16 oz of solid edibles); 4) restrictions on advertising (e.g., limits on outdoor advertising, prohibiting coupons/giveaways, prohibiting health claims); 5) prohibiting sales of merchandise beyond marijuana and paraphernalia; 6) mandatory packaging (e.g., child-resistant, warning statements); and 7) prohibiting retailers within 1000 ft of youth-serving facilities (e.g., schools, parks), among other requirements. State law allows further local regulation (Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board, 2016).

### 2.2. Data collection

In July 2017, two independent observers, the first author and a MPH-level research assistant, visited a sample of 25 Seattle-metro area retailers, randomly selected from a list of retailers derived from [Weedmaps.com](http://Weedmaps.com) (Bierut et al., 2017), a user-driven website for locating retail sources that includes forums for discussing products/dispensaries (Fig. 1). Each

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