

An Exploratory Landscape Analysis of Tobacco Patterns, Prevention, and Policy in Essex County, NY

Executive Summary

September, 2024

Commissioned by Tobacco-Free Clinton, Franklin, and Essex Counties and developed by Compass North Consulting, LLC.



Background

The **New York State Tobacco Control Program**, managed by the Department of Health's Bureau of Tobacco Control, aims to reduce tobacco-related illnesses and promote health equity. The program uses a comprehensive, evidence-based, policy-driven and population level approach. This includes supporting local initiatives to combat tobacco use and secondhand smoke through the **Advancing Tobacco-Free Communities (ATFC)** and **Health Systems for a Tobacco-Free New York (HSTFNY)** grants.

ATFC takes a double pronged approach of strategic community engagement and youth action, branded as Reality Check, while HSTFNY focuses on improving tobacco dependence treatment via healthcare systems.



The **Champlain Valley Family Center (CVFC)**, a community-based organization dedicated to providing behavioral health treatment, prevention, education and support, has operated tobacco control programming in Clinton, Franklin and/or Essex Counties since

Purpose

Essex County, New York has unique strengths and challenges due to its large size, low population density, and rural nature, which requires a tailored and at times hyper-localized approach to community change.

TFCFE commissioned Compass North Consulting LLC to gather and analyze community data to identify key themes and corresponding strategic recommendations for future programming, partnerships, and resource allocation to enhance and accelerate tobacco control efforts in Essex County across three focus areas:

1. Tobacco Marketing

Tobacco companies recruit young smokers and retain current ones by manipulating the Four P's of marketing: Product, Price, Promotion, and Place. These efforts center making tobacco products less affordable, accessible and appealing.

2. Tobacco-Free Outdoors, including Workplaces


In shared outdoor areas such as parks, beaches, college campuses, and workplace entryways, tobacco litter and secondhand smoke pose significant hazards. Tobacco-free policies protect all of us, including employees, visitors, clients, kids, and community members, while also protecting the environment and local wildlife from the harmful effects of tobacco litter and fostering environments that promote tobacco-free living.

3. Smoke-Free Housing

Ensuring clean, safe air in multi-unit housing is crucial as secondhand smoke from neighboring units poses health risks for all residents. Smoke-free

2000. They have held the ATFC grant for the tri-county catchment area for the past decade, operating under the umbrella of **Tobacco-Free Clinton, Franklin and Essex County (TFCFE)**.

policies in housing not only safeguard residents from secondhand smoke but also increase property values and reduce fire risks and maintenance costs from smoke residue.

 *For the purposes of this report, “tobacco” refers to commercial tobacco that is mass-produced, sold for profit, and contains added chemicals, not sacred/traditional tobacco uses in Indigenous communities.*

Methodology

Data was collected through a literature review, key informant interviews, retail observations, and a community survey and policy scan.

Literature Review	The literature review aimed to contextualize findings with local, state, and federal data on health factors, population health outcomes, and health disparities. Key data sources were selected for accuracy, relevance and comprehensiveness, and the data was aggregated to identify key themes and correlations.
Key Informant Interviews (n=12)	Twelve thirty-minute Zoom interviews were conducted with stakeholders from nonprofit and government sectors. The interviews sought to understand community perceptions and identify needs related to commercial tobacco use. A total of 11 key organizations, agencies and municipalities were represented.
Community Survey (n=107)	A short survey with gathered resident opinions on commercial tobacco use and TFCFE focus areas. Conducted online and on paper, it received 107 responses from 15 out of 18 towns in Essex County. The survey data was analyzed for trends in tobacco use perceptions and policy support, with responses weighted for demographic representativeness.
Policy Scan	The policy scan reviewed existing tobacco policies in Essex County to identify past successes and gaps in current policies for future opportunities. Policies were identified through public databases, key informant interviews, TFCFE grantee reports, municipality websites.
Retail Observations (n=38)	Observations were completed for 38 out of 49 active tobacco retailers in Essex County to evaluate product availability, accessibility, and visibility using Counter Tobacco's Standardized Tobacco Assessment for the Retail Environment (STARS) tool. Data was analyzed to inform local tobacco control policies and examine compliance with new regulations.

Analysis & Findings Summary

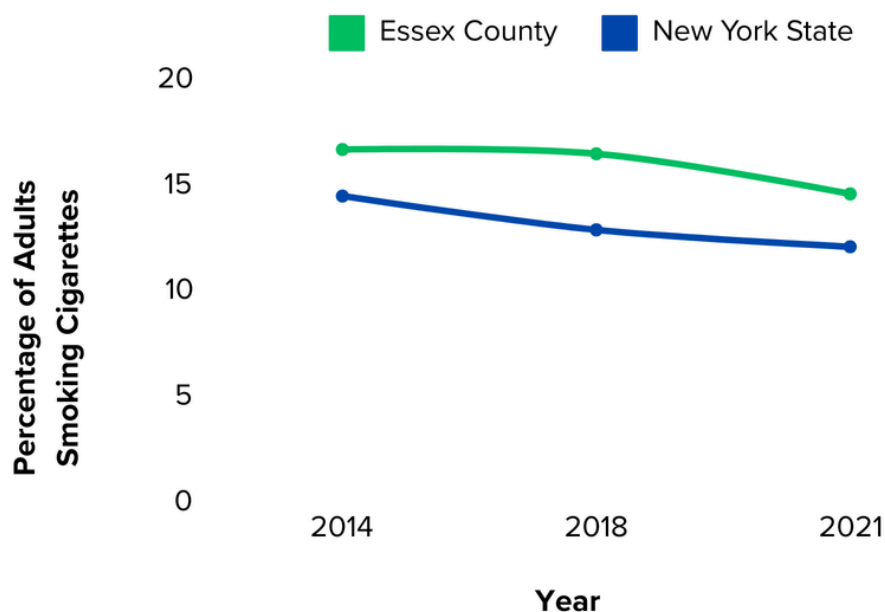
Literature Review

A literature review was completed to compile data regarding health factors, including social determinants of health (SDOH) as well as relevant population health outcomes, disparities and inequities.

The following key themes emerged:

Essex County still has higher rates of adult cigarette smoking and correspondingly higher rates of chronic lower respiratory diseases (CLRD), lung and bronchus cancer deaths, and asthma.

Smoking is the greatest risk factor for these diseases. While trending down, the most recent adult cigarette smoking rate data (2021) shows Essex County continues to have a higher adult smoking rates (14.5%) compared to the state average (12%).

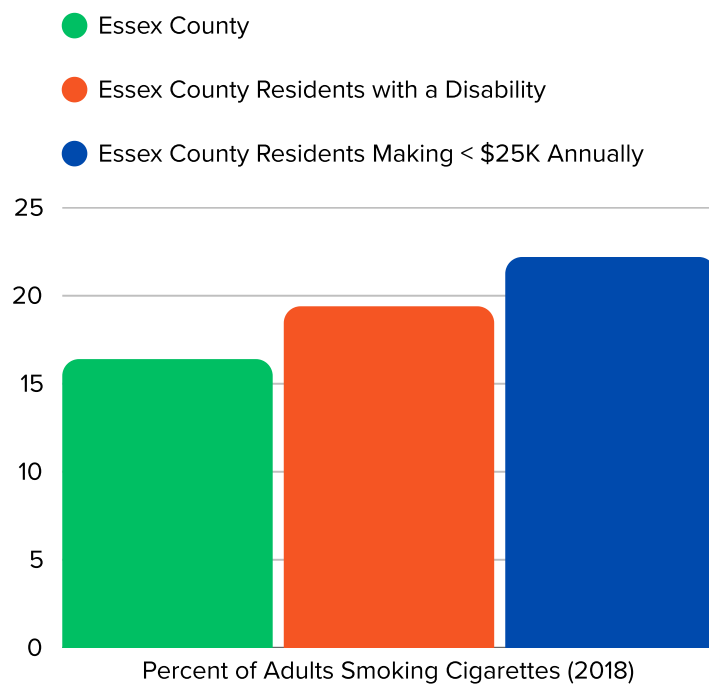


Many Essex County residents are struggling to make ends meet; there is a documented direct correlation between lower economic stability and increased tobacco use rates, burden of disease and rates of mortality.

When accounting for both families below the poverty level and ALICE (Asset-Limited-Income-Constrained) households, **nearly 40% of Essex County residents struggle to make ends meet**. This, coupled with the rural nature of the county, affects their ability to access vital resources like nutritious food, healthcare, and affordable housing, which are known social determinants of health.

This is a major health disparity in Essex County, with residents with lower incomes struggling with tobacco addiction at higher rates. The most recent data available (2018) showed that **22.2%** of Essex County adults making < \$25K annually smoke compared to **16%** at the county level.

Adult smoking rates are higher among people living with a disability and/or behavioral health conditions*



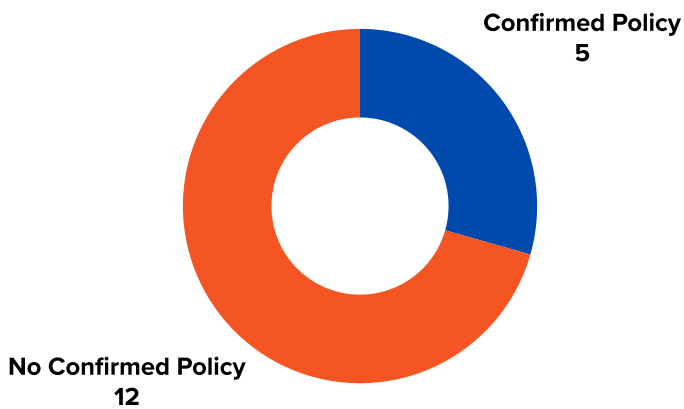
According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, persons with a disability are nearly twice as likely to smoke than those without. The most recent data available (2018) showed showed that **19.4%** of adults living with a disability smoked compared to **16.0%** at the county level.

While county level smoking rates are not available for adults experiencing frequent mental distress, statewide data shows that **19.7%** of adults reporting frequent mental distress smoked compared to **13%** at the state level.

Policy Scan

Smoke-Free Housing

Out of 17 multi-unit dwellings (apartments, condos) identified across Essex County, only 5 have **confirmed** smoke-free policies in place.



As housing efforts ramp up across Essex County, there is ample opportunity to expand smoke-free policies in both existing and future multi-unit dwellings.

Tobacco-Free Outdoors

Significant progress has been made with state and local tobacco-free policies covering beaches, parks, all county-owned property, and all major Essex County health systems. Additionally, one municipality (the Village of Lake Placid) passed a village-wide tobacco-free policy in 2022.

Retail Observations

Retail observations were also completed for 38 of the 52 active licensed tobacco retailers across the county using Counter Tobacco's Standardized Tobacco Assessment for the Retail Environment (STARS) to explore tobacco products, pricing, promotion and place and found the following:

Density and Type

The most common tobacco retailers were convenience stores with or without gas, followed by mass merchandisers or discount stores like Dollar General or Family Dollar. The only grocery stores continuing tobacco sales in Essex County are Tops; however, due to the low number of grocery stores in the county, discount stores and convenience stores like Family Dollar or Stewarts often fill this role.

For every 1 grocery store in Essex County, there are 6 tobacco retailers.

Current gaps include coverage of the North Country Community College Ticonderoga Campus, and ecotourism hotspots and regional events that attract thousands of visitors to the area. Additionally, there are continued opportunities to ensure existing policies include vape products and enforce existing policies.

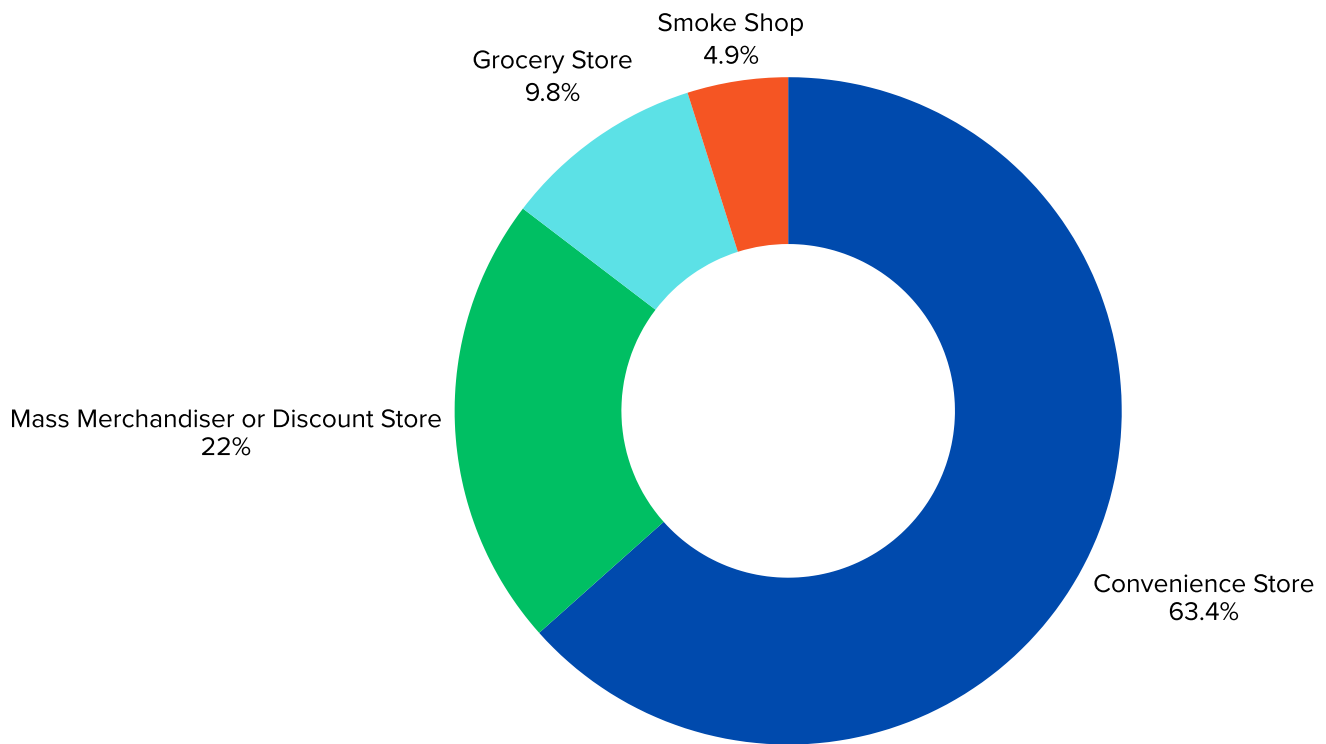
Tobacco Marketing

In 2018, Essex County became the first county in the North Country to pass legislation **increasing the minimum age to purchase tobacco products to 21**, paving the way for statewide legislation in 2019.

Outside of this policy, the only tobacco related retail policy identified in the county was passed in the Village of Lake Placid in 2024 restricting tobacco shops from being within 500' of a school and from displaying tobacco products or product ads on the store exterior.

Notably, multiple key informants identified addressing the affordability, accessibility and appeal of tobacco products as a priority.

Licensed Tobacco Retailers by Type



As of the 2022 Essex County Community Health Assessment, Essex County also has **significantly more tobacco vendors** and **significantly more tobacco sales violations** per 100,000 population than regional or NYS averages.

Products

Retail observations also observed which products were sold, including if singles and/or flavored products were available.



- **More than half** of surveyed retailers sold both cigarettes and e-cigarettes, including **2 retailers selling flavored e-cigarettes, which are illegal.**
- **34%** of surveyed tobacco retailers selling cigarillos **sold singles, which are also illegal.**
- **100%** of surveyed tobacco retailers sold Menthol cigarettes and **86%** sold flavored products, including cigarillos, cigars and e-cigarettes.

Advertising & Promotion

Retail observations also observed tobacco advertising and promotion, including advertisements, product placement and price promotions.



- **More than half** of surveyed tobacco retailers had a tobacco **ad displayed below 3 ft.**
- **Almost 40%** of surveyed tobacco retailers surveyed had **tobacco or nicotine product ads on the exterior** of their establishment.
- **Nearly half** of surveyed tobacco retailers displayed products within a foot of **candy, toys, slushy machines** etc.
- **78%** of surveyed tobacco retailers surveyed were running some sort of **price promotion.**

Key Informant Interviews

The following themes were identified across 12 key informant interviews:

Essex County Strengths and Challenges

- **Strengths:** Strong community ties, collaborative efforts, and respect for the natural environment.
- **Challenges:** Geographic isolation, lack of community infrastructure, lack of diversity, and resistance to change.
- **Creating Change:** Build broad support and a collective voice, engage trusted community messengers, and leverage social media and word of mouth to reach residents.

Tobacco Use Perceptions, Priorities and Prevalence

- **Prevalence:** Tobacco use remains an issue, particularly among youth and those experiencing financial hardship. Vaping among youth is increasing, and tobacco use persists in public spaces despite existing policies.
- **Prioritization:** Although most key informants recognized tobacco use as a problem, many noted that progress in reducing its use, along with competing priorities, lowers its urgency. One interviewee highlighted that the slower, cumulative effects of tobacco often make it less of a priority compared to more immediate issues.
- **Interventions:** Top recommendations include increasing cessation support and education, reducing access and marketing, and addressing root causes of tobacco use (stress, mental health challenges, trauma) and increase protective factors.
- **Challenges:** Top challenges to reducing tobacco use in Essex County included the power of nicotine addiction, knowledge gaps regarding tobacco use and newer tobacco products, and a lack of political will.

Community Survey

Tobacco Use Prioritization

A community survey of 107 Essex County residents found that most residents view reducing tobacco use as equally important as other health issues.

More than half of respondents also saw **youth tobacco use**, **secondhand smoke exposure**, and the **influence of tobacco advertising on youth** as “serious” or “very serious.”

Tobacco Control Policies

All policy interventions had a weighted median score of greater than 4, meaning that **more than half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with all of them**. The **most popular** policy interventions were restricting smoking and vaping in entryways, and the **least popular** was restricting vaping in public spaces like beaches and parks.

Overall, the findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to address the specific challenges faced by Essex County, leveraging community strengths, and addressing barriers to improve public health outcomes related to tobacco use.

Limitations

It is important to keep in mind the limitations of this report. While efforts were made to minimize limitations in how data was selected, collected and analyzed across key informant interviews and the community survey, small convenience samples limit the generalizability of the conclusions from both data sources. Additionally, retail observations were unable to be completed for all tobacco retailers in the county due to limitations in both time and access.

Data Generalizability

- **Key Informant Interviews:** The selection of key informants may have led to bias, as those more supportive of tobacco prevention were more likely to participate. This could skew findings.
- **Community Survey:** With only 107 responses instead of the needed 381 for a 95% confidence level, the survey sample may not fully represent the county's demographics. The sample was skewed towards White respondents, women, higher education levels, non-tobacco users, and residents from Jay and Keene. Efforts were made through weighted analysis to adjust for these biases, but representativeness remains an issue.

Data Collection and Access:

- **Retail Observations:** Incomplete observations due to time constraints and access issues, including closed stores and roads, limit the comprehensiveness of the findings. Retail observations skewed towards chains which may have more standardized parameters around tobacco advertising and marketing.
- **Limited Data:** Limited local level data regarding tobacco use outside of adult cigarette smoking, including youth use, use of other tobacco products, and tobacco use rates among various subpopulations limits the ability to identify disparities and develop a comprehensive picture of tobacco use in Essex County.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- Extend data collection periods and use multiple outreach channels to improve response rates and representativeness.
- Consider incentives for key informant participation to capture a broader range of views.
- Incorporate retail observations into regular program activities and explore new tools to gather comprehensive retail environment data.

Conclusions & Recommendations

The following strategic recommendations were developed based on the aggregate analysis of the findings across data and take into consideration where there is both an identified need or gap and an opportunity to advance tobacco reduction and prevention efforts in Essex County, New York. The recommendations are not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive but offer a data-driven list of focused recommendations for further exploration.

Integrate tobacco prevention strategies into existing community efforts

Embed tobacco prevention and treatment within existing collective impact initiatives rather than treating it as a standalone issue. Many stakeholders are stretched thin with competing priorities and may be more inclined to support tobacco initiatives if integrated with broader efforts.

Examples: BRIEF (Building Resilient Essex County Families) coalition, affordable housing initiatives, and healthy retailer campaigns offer potential platforms for incorporating tobacco prevention strategies.

Leverage the Tobacco Use Reduction Network (TURN) coalition to deepen coordination, collaboration & engagement

Utilize the existing TURN coalition, to foster new partnerships and streamline tobacco prevention and cessation efforts across Essex County. Key informant interviews and report findings can be used to catalyze and organize shared strategic planning efforts.

Explore opportunities to expand tobacco-free outdoors policies to ecotourism hotspots and events.

Explore expanding tobacco-free policies in ecotourism areas and events, building on shared values of protecting the environment and public health.

Example: Engage the Olympic Regional Development Authority (ORDA) to explore expanding their current policy for the Olympic Center to their other properties and events.

Explore deeper programmatic work with a focus community to build trust and establish proof of concept.

Deepen engagement in specific communities like the Town of North Elba to build trust, test interventions, and expand successful strategies county-wide. North Elba has significant influence, opportunities across focus areas and various enabling factors like existing youth infrastructure and a history of tobacco-free policies at the Village level.

Explore feasibility of coordinated education and cessation strategies through school districts and/or community centers.

Develop comprehensive strategies for youth tobacco prevention and cessation with a focus on

vaping by leveraging existing networks and upcoming funding opportunities. Youth tobacco use was a unifying concern across community members and key informants per the community survey and key informant interviews; this, coupled with anticipated funding from the JUUL settlement to county and Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) is an opportunity that should be seized.

To Learn More

If you are interested in receiving a copy of the full report or learning more about tobacco prevention efforts across Clinton, Franklin and Essex Counties, please contact Dana Bushey Isabella at tfcfe@cvfamilycenter.org.

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