

Los Angeles Regional Tobacco Control Community Linkage Project (L.A. LINK)

CITIZEN CITATIONS ISSUED TO MERCHANTS PROVE TO BE AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY INTERVENTION TO REDUCE TOBACCO SALES TO MINORS

Patricia Spratlen Etem, MPH, and Nora D. Manzanilla, BS

ABSTRACT

In order to increase voluntary compliance with the California state law, Stop Tobacco Access to Kids Enforcement (S.T.A.K.E.) Act - enabling legislation to comply with the federal Synar Amendment, California communities have implemented unique approaches to reduce the rate of illegal sales of tobacco to minors.

L.A. LINK's Citizen Citation project is the community action "brainchild" of 15 youth and adult tobacco prevention advocates residing in the region of L.A. County. Eighty youth were trained as investigators, merchant compliance surveyors, community leader educators, and media spokespersons during this five-month, two-phased project. Citizen Citations proved to be an effective, hard-hitting tool to provoke merchants to reduce the rate of illegal sales of cigarettes to minors, and to take additional steps to comply with other mandates of the S.T.A.K.E. Act.

Citizen Citations resembled parking tickets, however, the stated "infractions" were consistent with S.T.A.K.E. Act requirements (i.e., are single cigarettes sold, is required signage not posted, were cigarette sales to minors reported, etc.). The following project components were critical to project outcomes and success, and enabled L.A. LINK to document the effectiveness of citizen citations in reducing the rate of illegal sales of cigarettes to minors:

- ❑ Components of the project were designed, in part, by stakeholder-advocates from the target communities;
- ❑ Training protocol was sensitive to and varied according to community needs and norms, yet had enough similarity to maintain the reliability and validity of data collection and evaluation findings;
- ❑ Intervention materials (data collection forms) attracted youth, generated a response/action by the target population, and were easily used by the evaluators;

- ❑ Youth and adults with previous experience conducting community surveys formed the advocate "critical mass" to obtain a statistically significant number of surveys; and
- ❑ The facilitating agency (L.A. LINK) responded to complaints from merchants, protected the anonymity of advocates, ensured evaluation protocols were followed, worked with an independent evaluator to obtain unbiased analyses of findings, and compared findings to ongoing local and statewide "sales to minors" tracking data and S.T.A.K.E. Act compliance efforts.

Background

In 1994, L.A. LINK conducted its first regional survey to document the illegal sales rate of tobacco to minors. The survey found that over 64% of merchants in Los Angeles County were willing to sell tobacco to minors. In some communities 80% of merchants were willing to sell tobacco to minors.

Though it has been illegal in California to sell tobacco to minors for more than 100 years (Penal Code 308), the law was largely unenforced. In a 1995 community opinion survey of over 4,300 youth in L.A. County, L.A. LINK convened a small group of youth and adult advocates expressly to arrive at a community intervention that would 1) empower youth to play a vital role in holding merchants accountable for illegal sales to minors, 2) alert merchants that their communities were concerned, knowledgeable, and willing to take action regarding illegal sales of tobacco to minors, 3) provide merchants with materials about the recently enacted S.T.A.K.E. Act, and 4) implement a media activity that would reach, involve, and attract the attention of community leaders and law enforcement to encourage continued enforcement efforts.

The Citizen Citation project arose from this informal focus group session. Subsequently, the project was funded by the California Department of Health Services, Tobacco Control Section (CDHS-TCS), and was shaped by the following parameters.

Project Design and Implementation

Citizen Citation project treatment and control groups were stores/merchants known to have recently sold tobacco to minors in 16 communities within L.A. County. In phase one, 14-16 year old teens were recruited, trained and practiced the steps necessary to truthfully document merchants who

were known to sell to minors. The information was recorded by the teens onto the official Citizen Citation, which was collected by L.A. LINK staff. Of the 324 merchants identified through this process, merchants were randomized into treatment and control groups. 50% of the 324 stores (treatment group) received the citation via certified mail. Citizen Citation packets contained a citizen citation, a [state of California] "No I.D., no sale" warning sign, a CDHS-TCS produced S.T.A.K.E. Act brochure, and a brief description of L.A. LINK. The youth and adult advocates were unaware of the separation of stores into treatment and control groups, and did not know that (for evaluation purposes) only 50% of the stores received a citation.

The second youth and adult training session required a slide presentation and role play covering procedures to follow as youth/adult teams visited stores attempting to purchase tobacco to document merchant willingness to sell to minors. It was absolutely necessary to vary the training process. Communities with experienced advocates were not intimidated by the process or concept of step one (investigating which merchants to "cite"), nor of step two (conducting an attempted buy). Groups new to this type of advocacy effort required intensive training, not only on the protocol, but on the community norm change; the "appropriateness" of "subjecting" merchants to this type of public humiliation, and the "ability" of youth to commit to a code of ethics prompting them only to report merchants who were honestly known to sell tobacco to minors. In all, data from three agencies embracing skeptical opinions of either the methods of data collection, or of the of youth holding merchants accountable, was either not collected by the participants, or had to be thrown out due to specious trends in the data that prompted the evaluator to consider the data invalid.

In communities where advocates or their agencies had existing ties to advocacy projects, law enforcement, community leaders, or key decision makers, the training protocol included meeting with key individuals to garner support, gauge community readiness, plan for emergency response strategies, and maintain the integrity and similarity of project implementation from community to community within the target areas.

Buy-in from participants (excluding the three agencies "dropped") was intensely high because materials, including the citation, were designed and approved by a work group of individuals representing most of the participating communities. Citizen Citations were (carbonless duplicates) printed with sequential numbers for tracking and evaluation purposes. Additionally, parent/guardian consent forms, teen code of ethics forms, data collection forms, and safety procedures were all components of the planning process and training sessions. Again, agencies that were not a part of the early planning and work group, had more challenging training sessions and struggles with the "norm change" of youth actively holding merchants accountable for engaging in illegal practices.

During phase I, youth investigators identified stores known to sell tobacco to minors by soliciting information from teen smokers about where they purchase tobacco. Youth investigators signed a code of ethics so that merchants were not wrongfully included and to ensure that store names, once recorded on the citation, were kept confidential. Teen advocates were thrilled to assume the role of investigators and took very seriously the tasks of entering store names onto the citations, not duplicating stores within communities, and keeping information confidential.

Three weeks from the date that merchants in the treatment group received their citations (mailed from the L.A. LINK office), youth and adult participants were trained on an "attempted purchase" of tobacco protocol. Critical elements of the training were how to: a) ask a merchant for a cigarette and then refuse to purchase it once offered for sale by the merchant, b) complete the survey form including recording whether single cigarettes are sold, and if S.T.A.K.E. Act signage is posted, c) take safety precautions when entering and exiting a store. Role-playing was the tool of choice for L.A. LINK trainers.

During this phase II training, the L.A. LINK office was deluged with calls from concerned, often incensed and irate merchants who received a Citizen Citation. Over 30 calls were received by the office, some denying their store sells to minors, many wanting to know who was "accusing them" of this violation, others wanting to take L.A. LINK to court for false accusations, others contacting the Alcohol and Beverage Control for additional information on the law and the project, most wanting to know if there was a fine involved with this, some requesting information and training material to assist employees with

proper compliance with state law, and others detailing accounts of the vandalism and property damage to their stores if they did not sell to minors asking to buy cigarettes.

One to two weeks following the phase II training, youth and adult advocates cautiously, amidst this outcry from merchants, went into these stores (and into the stores that did not receive a citation) and attempted to purchase cigarettes and record all information on the data collection form. Immediately, participants noticed that some stores had S.T.A.K.E. Act signage posted (sent with the citations), and some did not. They could not believe, and were quite disappointed, when merchants were willing to sell, or when they did not see the signage. Remember, they assumed that all stores had received the citation and material.

Results and Lessons Learned

Merchants who received the Citizen Citation and information were three times as likely to have the mandatory S.T.A.K.E. Act signage posted than were merchants who did not receive the Citation and information. They were also less likely to sell to minors. Of the 324 stores surveyed, 24.7% of the merchants who received the intervention were willing to sell to minors, compared to 32.8% of the merchants who did not receive the intervention. The control group was also higher than the 1995 statewide sales rate of 29.0% (N=519). The results proved to be a dramatic illustration of a community based intervention that worked. Following the press conference announcing the data, L.A. LINK sent a citation to the "control" group of merchants who in fact were willing to sell to minors (as documented by the attempted buy segment of this project). A smaller number of calls were received from merchants compared with the citations sent the first time, none denying the allegations. Most requested information on how to comply with the law. Because the press event received coverage of L.A. area T.V. and radio, this could account for the relatively small number of merchants calling in denial or irate about the allegations.

The expressions of shock from stakeholders and merchants in this study were intense. When all of the data was collected, L.A. LINK staff told participants that due to evaluation protocol, not all of the stores had received the citation. And, that this was done in order to measure the success/failure of the

citation. Staff had to explain this many times to the participants who were dismayed that L.A. LINK would not reveal the entire process of the investigation to them at the onset. Their feelings were only assuaged by the fact that the study did prove the effectiveness of the citation and had controlled for bias in data collection. Participants were overjoyed with the results. Youth were exceptionally proud of their significant roles in the process.

Agencies and advocates interested in replicating the Citizen Citation project should be critically aware that:

- ❑ It is advisable not to replicate this project in communities with a population less than 100,000. The minimum number of retail outlets to survey is 40-60.
- ❑ Ensuring the anonymity of youth and agencies must be a priority. The majority of merchants responding to the citation wanted to know who in their community was reporting them.
- ❑ Training coordinating agency staff on fielding and recording incoming calls from merchants is mandatory. And, adopting a strategic "damage control" process to mitigate merchant ire and allow merchants to understand the meaning of complying with existing law and/or making responsible contributions to the lives of their patrons is critical.
- ❑ Expect merchants outcry, and frame the descriptive language on the citation such that legally it is understood that this is a warning with no official municipal ramifications.
- ❑ Send the citations to merchants via certified mail. L.A. LINK has conducted merchant education activities in the past, however, none with such response from the merchants; many of whom are not the individuals who actually open their mail. The certified envelope definitely reached the decision maker of the retail site.
- ❑ Keep the evaluation procedures confidential. Though this requires effort by the coordinating agency to smooth somewhat hurt feelings on the part of participants, it assures unbiased treatment of test and control merchants on the part of investigators and surveyors throughout the investigation and surveying activities.

- ❑ Provide stipends or small incentive for participants, as this project is conducted over a 5-6 month period and is very time consuming (two 3-4 hour trainings per group, 10-20 hours from each youth investigator researching culpable merchants and finding exact mailing addresses of each merchant, 3-5 hours per team completing the citations and returning them to the L.A. LINK office, 8-10 hours per team conducting attempted buy surveys, 3-5 hours cleaning and duplicating data sheets, and 6-10 hours preparing for and participating in follow-up media activities).
- ❑ Conduct a press conference or media event to announce findings, recognize the community collaborations integral to the project's success, and that involves merchants, law enforcement, and key community leaders. L.A. LINK's press conference included outstanding comments from concerned merchants, committed law enforcement officers, the mayor and city council members from target communities. One community coalition of leaders and law enforcement was committed to and has indeed, continued to conduct independent assessments to lower their rate of sales of tobacco to minors; a true testament to the power of collaborative action and a relevant community intervention, the Citizen Citation, to change cultural norms.

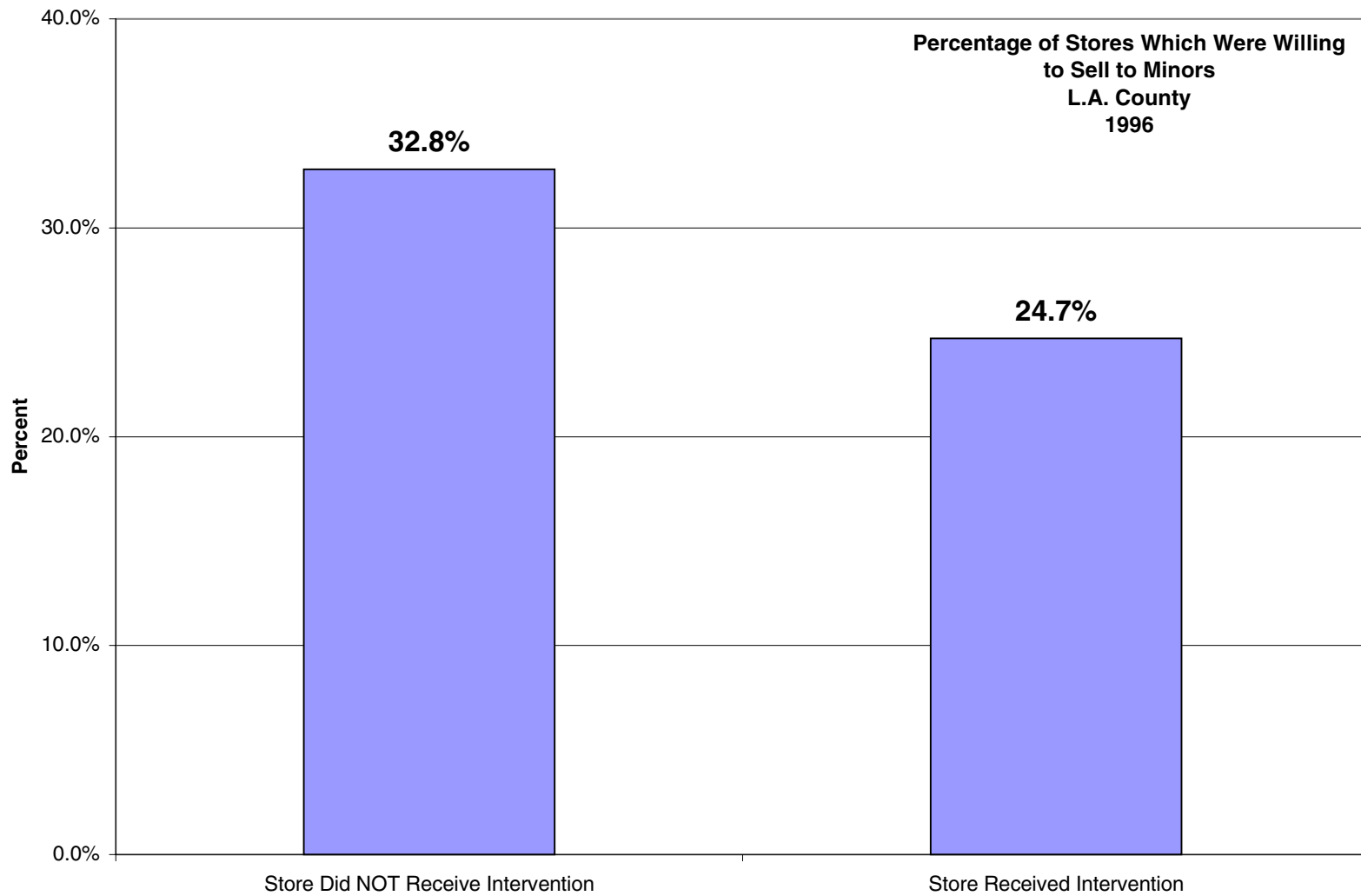
AUTHORS

**Patricia Spratlen Etem, MPH
Executive Director**

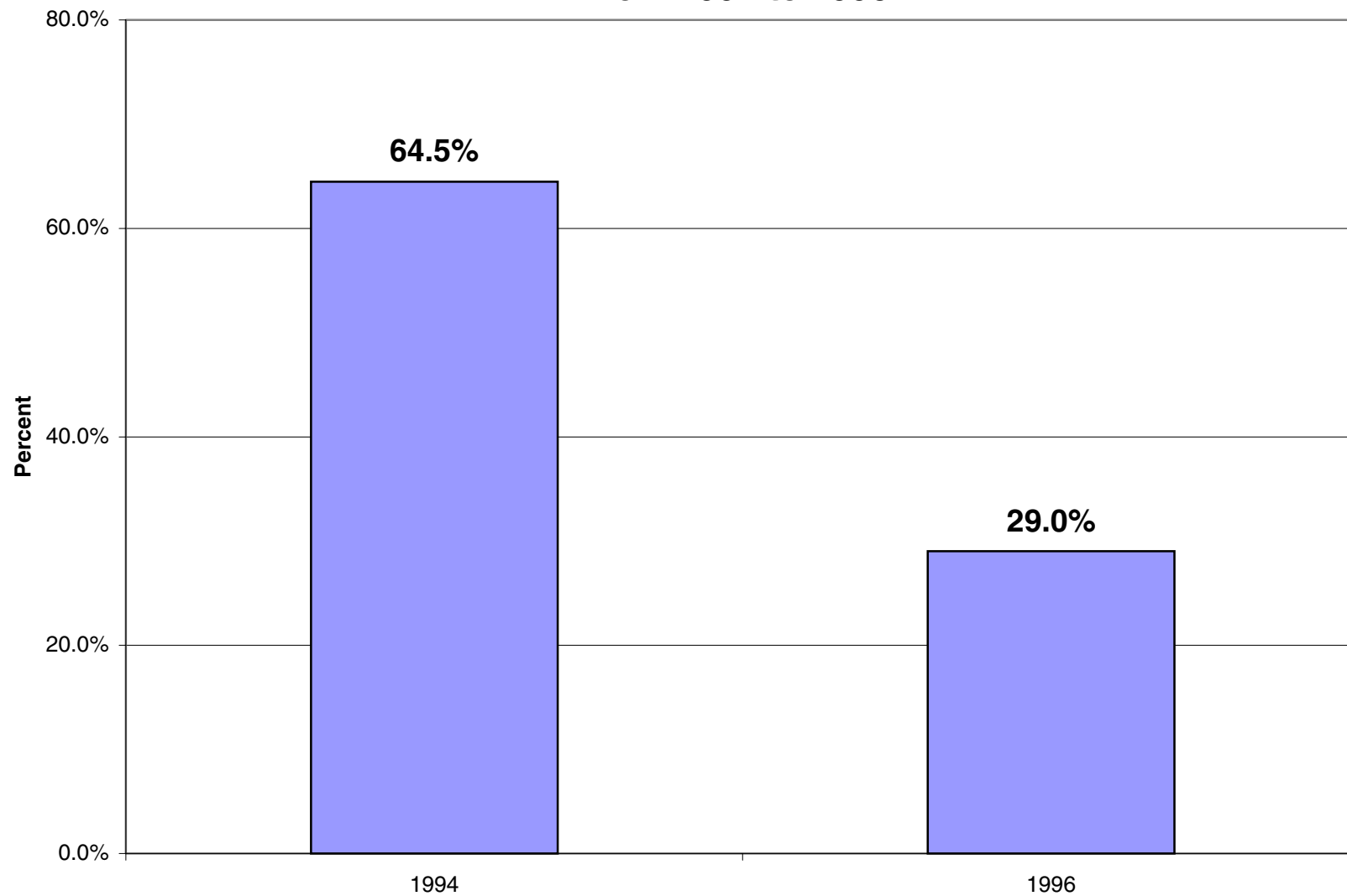
**Nora D. Manzanilla, BS
Assistant Program Director**

**L.A. LINK
Lakewood, CA**

Stores Which Received Intervention Had a Lower Incidence of Illegal Cigarettes to Minors



Illegal Sales of Cigarettes to Minors Fell Significantly in L.A. County from 1994 to 1996



Stores Which Received an Intervention During the Study Were Much More Likely to Post the S.T.A.K.E. Act Sticker

