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Scorecards Highlight Gaps in California Local Cannabis Policies Amid Rising Public Health Concerns

Cities and Counties Urged to Pay Attention to the Science and Step Up for Public Health

(Oakland, CA) — Today, [Getting it Right from the Start](#), a project of the Public Health Institute (PHI), released its [2025 Annual State of Cannabis Policy in California Scorecards](#), a first-of-its-kind statewide framework to evaluate how well California cities and counties protect youth, public health, and communities in the era of cannabis legalization. The scorecards show that while a handful of communities are leading, most jurisdictions across California are still leaving critical public-health protections on the table — even as cannabis use and related harms continue to rise.

“California built the largest legal cannabis market in the world, but we still lack the public-health guardrails required for a legal but addictive product,” **said Dr. Lynn Silver, senior advisor at the Public Health Institute and director of Getting it Right from the Start.** “As cannabis products grow more potent and marketing more aggressive, the evidence of harm is mounting. Local leaders must respond to what the science tells us — not to industry narratives.”

[The 2025 scorecards assess](#) jurisdictions on a 100-point scale, with higher scores representing stronger public-health protections enacted as of January 1, 2025. Evaluations are based on six policy areas: Retailer requirements; Local taxation; Product regulations; Marketing restrictions; Smoke-free air protections; and Equity measures.

The City of Pomona topped this year’s scorecard with 60 points, reflecting a comprehensive approach to public health and equity. Pomona caps the number of retail licenses, bans temporary cannabis events and on-site consumption, requires a 1,000-foot buffer from schools and other youth-sensitive sites, mandates in-store health warnings, prioritizes equity in hiring with fee deferrals, and dedicates local cannabis tax revenue to youth programs and prevention. **San Benito County**, which allows delivery-only sales from outside jurisdictions, earned the highest score among delivery-only jurisdictions for the sixth consecutive year (2020–2025), **with 39 points**.

Despite these examples of leadership, the statewide picture remains troubling. The average score across jurisdictions that allow storefront sales is 23 out of 100, and 15 for those permitting delivery only. Meanwhile, 70% of Californians now live in areas where legal cannabis can be sold, up from 55% in 2019 — meaning millions more residents are affected by local policy decisions.

“As more Californians live in communities that allow cannabis sales, local policy decisions increasingly shape who is exposed to risk and who is protected,” **said Alisa Padon, PhD, Getting it Right from the Start.** “These scorecards show how uneven protections remain across the state, and the science shows how much those choices matter.”

Alarming public health trends illustrate the real-world consequences of these policy choices. In California, teens living closer to cannabis retailers have higher rates of [cannabis use and dependence](#), while national data show daily

use among young adults has quadrupled, with one in ten using daily. [A recent State Auditor report](#) documented widespread failures to enforce rules prohibiting youth-appealing products and marketing, even as ultra-high potency products are aggressively promoted, and child poisonings have surged. New [research](#) links retail availability to increased psychosis and mental-health harms among teens, while older adults face rising [cannabis-related emergency visits](#) and a doubling of [cardiovascular death risk](#), often without knowing the danger.

“Too often, policymakers are misled by industry claims that over-regulation—rather than overproduction and aggressive marketing—is what drives the illegal market,” **said Silver**. “These scorecards bring accountability back into focus, and provide a clear, evidence-based way to compare local policies and identify where stronger protections are urgently needed.”

Only 14 of California’s 539 localities have enacted any cannabis product restrictions despite strong evidence supporting action on issues like potency and youth-appealing flavors. Regulation of products known to appeal to youth, such as fruit-flavored vapes, remains limited to just four jurisdictions (Contra Costa County, Watsonville, Chico, and Mammoth Lakes), while only one jurisdiction has taken action to regulate ultra-high-potency products.

Key Findings from the Scorecards

Beyond product regulation, the scorecards reveal uneven progress across other key areas of cannabis policy.

- **Retail Location Limits:** Most jurisdictions permitting storefront retailers now cap the number of licenses (81% in 2025, up from 76% in 2020), and more have adopted larger buffers from schools. Despite these measures, retail density continues to rise statewide, from one retailer per 20,000 residents in 2020 to one per 17,000 in 2025 — exceeding recommended public-health thresholds.
- **Local Cannabis Taxes:** Six in ten jurisdictions allowing cannabis sales now levy a local cannabis tax, up from 52% in 2020. However, taxation remains uneven: only 15% of jurisdictions that allow delivery-only sales from outside jurisdictions impose a local tax, and just 43% require those outside deliverers to get a local license.
- **Smoke-Free Policies:** The number of jurisdictions allowing on-site cannabis consumption increased only marginally in 2025, rising by one percent to 52 jurisdictions, though still up substantially from 32 in 2020. Eight jurisdictions explicitly permit cannabis cafés with on-site food preparation, and three allow service of ready-made food. The limited impact of the 2024 Cannabis Café bill likely reflects its January 1, 2025 effective date, which coincided with the end of the scorecard data collection period.
- **Equity and Consumer Protections:** Adoption of equity measures and in-store health warnings has increased modestly but remains limited overall. Costa Mesa emerged as a leader in youth access prevention by requiring independent, third-party ID verification for cannabis delivery — a key safeguard against fake IDs used by minors.

The 2025 Cannabis Policy Scorecards show modest progress alongside persistent gaps in protections — particularly in product potency, youth appeal, and smoke-free air. The results provide local governments with a clear, evidence-based framework for strengthening public health safeguards where state policy has not yet done so.