

Searchlight on Smokeshops

Presence of Psychoactive Products at 86 California Retailers in 2026

86 retailer visits	23 cities / localities	Apr 28 – Jul 20 2026 field period
-----------------------	---------------------------	--------------------------------------

DATA COLLECTION

Goal. Nineteen months after California prohibited the sale of intoxicating hemp products, we sought to assess to what extent these products were still being sold by California tobacco retailers, with particular emphasis on smoke shops or vape shops. We also sought to identify what other psychoactive products were being openly stocked and sold.

What was done. After receiving a brief training by **Getting it Right from the Start** and the **San Fernando Valley Partnership**, **volunteer** field observers conducted in-person retailer visits using a standardized data collection tool at a convenience sample of smokeshops. They recorded the store address and type; proximity to the nearest school or college; whether intoxicating hemp, kratom/7-OH, nitrous oxide, and mushroom products were seen; whether any products were clearly hidden from view; and photographs or comments when available. Product classifications in the summary are based on field observation and packaging information, with “unable to verify” retained where observers could not confidently observe the presence or absence of an item. These were not official inspections, so hidden products could not be viewed unless retailers voluntarily brought them forth.

Where and what kinds of stores. Observers visited a convenience sample of 86 stores spanning 23 California cities/localities.

Who collected the data. Field submissions came from public health agencies and community prevention partners concerned about cannabis and hemp policy issues: Ventura County Public Health; Youth Forward; Public Health Institute / Prevention Policy Group; San Fernando Valley Partnership; San Dieguito Alliance for Drug Free Youth; Coalition for Drug Free Escondido; San Marcos Prevention Coalition; Santa Cruz County Public Health; MHYP; West County Alcohol Policy Coalition; MYDAC; Marin for Public Health Cannabis Policies; Marin County Public Health; SAY San Diego; and Youth Transforming Justice.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Kratom / 7-OH:** Observed in 42 of 86 stores (49%), making it the most frequently documented product category.
- **Nitrous oxide:** Observed in 21 stores (24%).
- **Mushroom products:** Observed in 16 stores (19%).
- **Intoxicating hemp:** Observed in 8 stores (9%)

STORE MIX AND GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Store mix. Retailers visited included smoke/vape shops (54) alcohol-and-tobacco retailers (9), hybrid smoke/other retail stores (8), tobacco retailers in gas-station or corner-store settings (7), other unique type descriptions which also sold tobacco, (7), and a non-tobacco hemp retailer (1).

Locations. Aptos (unincorporated), Berkeley, Castro Valley (including unincorporated locations), Concord, Corte Madera, Del Mar, El Cerrito, Emeryville, Encinitas, Escondido, Novato, Oakland, Pasadena, Pinole, Port Hueneme, Richmond, Sacramento, San Diego, San Marcos, San Rafael, Santa Cruz, Solana Beach, and Watsonville.

Interpretation and limitations

These findings describe the stores that were visited and should not be interpreted as a statewide prevalence estimate. This was a convenience sample collected by volunteers in their neighborhoods and does not document a

probability-based sampling design. Observations were made in retail settings; some products could not be viewed for safety or store design reasons, and some responses were missing. Results are best used as a field snapshot to identify issues for follow-up, education, compliance work, or more systematic surveillance.

HEALTH CONCERNS

Why are these products reasons for concern?

Intoxicating hemp products contain THC, the psychoactive ingredient from cannabis, often in a variety of chemically synthesized look-alikes. Some, like THC-P are many times more potent than THC in cannabis. These products are available to teens and youth, who are particularly vulnerable to adverse effects like psychosis and addiction. They share the adverse effects and addiction potential of cannabis yet are often sold in higher doses and with packaging blatantly imitating food products typically marketed to youth. Sale is illegal since 2024 in California.

Kratom is an Asian plant which affects opioid receptors, its actions vary by dose from stimulant to depressing breathing. Like the hemp industry, the kratom industry is now synthesizing more potent look-alikes, notably 7-hydroxymitragynine (**7-OH**), which causes more adverse effects. Kratom is a growing source of addiction, although less potent than opioids. 7-OH can also cause liver damage. Sale of kratom and 7-OH are illegal in California.

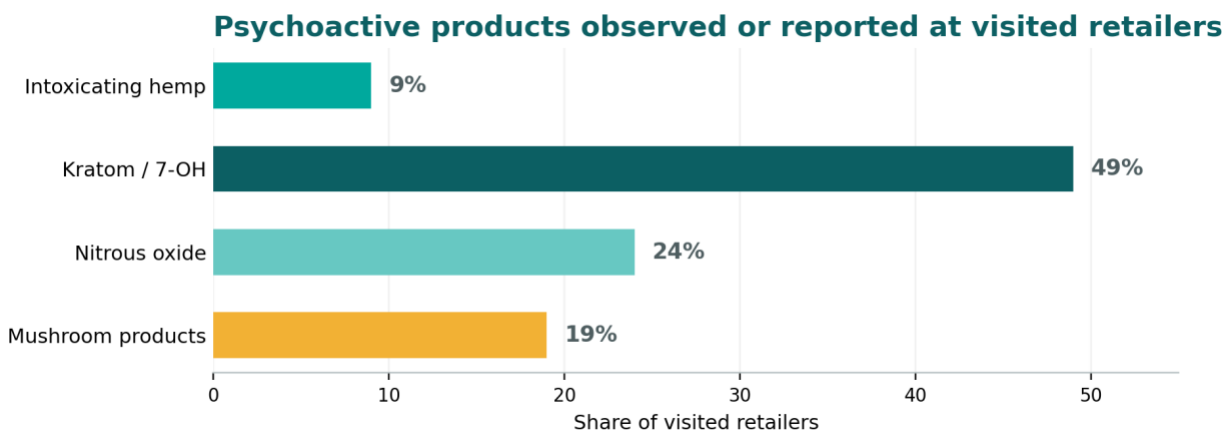
Nitrous Oxide (laughing gas) is used legally in medicine, dentistry, and the food industry. But it is a rapidly growing source of abuse by teens and youth. It is causing an increasing number of deaths, severe burns, and serious neurologic disease from its effect on Vitamin B12 metabolism. SB936 just passed the California legislature prohibiting its sale by tobacco retailers and awaits signature. Currently, sale to minors or for purposes of getting high is illegal.

Psychedelic mushrooms (shrooms or magic mushrooms). These products can be real psychedelic mushrooms, but testing by state laboratories has also found several chemically synthesized psilocybin-like compounds. They cause people to experience distorted sights and sounds, lose sense of time and space, and intense emotions ranging from bliss to terror. The greatest hazard is dangerous behavior such as walking or driving while unable to think or perceive clearly. Psilocybin also raises blood pressure and heart rate which can be dangerous and can cause severe agitation, nausea and vomiting.

Whatever one's opinions on legalization of these products, their sale in smokeshops and other retailers, freely available to youth, is dangerous.

SPECIFIC PRODUCT FINDINGS

The charts below summarize what was found in the 86 businesses visited. Percentages reflect store-level observations. Missing answers or unable to verify does not mean that a product was unavailable, it just means that the observer was unable to assess the presence of that product for a variety of reasons such as safety.



Source: Searchlight on Smokeshops field data collection, 2026 (n=86). Percentages are rounded.

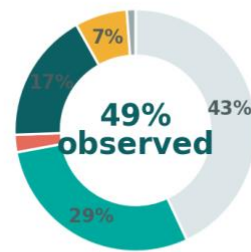
Intoxicating hemp products



■ Observed ■ Unable to verify
■ Not observed ■ Other / unclear

8 stores (9%) were classified as observed; 11 (13%) were unable to verify.

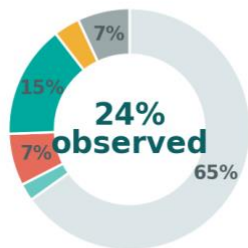
Kratom / 7-OH products



■ Not observed ■ Kratom + 7-OH
■ Kratom only ■ Unable to verify
■ 7-OH only ■ No response

42 stores (49%) had kratom and/or 7-OH observed: 25 kratom only, 2 7-OH only, and 15 both.

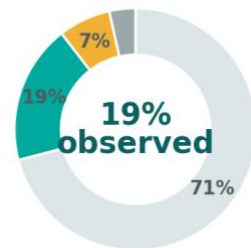
Nitrous oxide products



■ Not observed ■ Small + large
■ Small only ■ Unable to verify
■ Large only ■ No response

21 stores (24%) had nitrous oxide observed, including small canisters, large canisters, or both.

Mushroom products



■ Not observed ■ Unable to verify
■ Observed / possible ■ No response

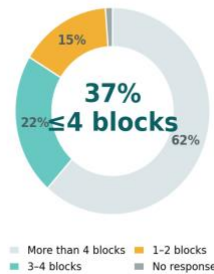
16 stores (19%) were classified as observed/possible for mushroom products.

Reading the charts: Percent labels are rounded to whole numbers; detailed category counts sum to 86 visits.

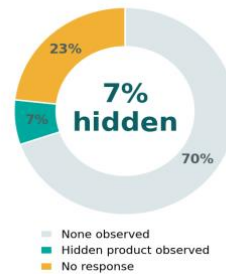
RETAIL CONTEXT

Two contextual findings may be especially relevant to local prevention and enforcement planning. About 37% of visited stores were within four blocks of a school or college, including 15% within one to two blocks. Observers documented hidden products at 6 stores (7%), but because they were not inspectors, they could only detect these when offered.

Distance to nearest school or college



Products hidden from view



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This “snapshot from the first” demonstrates that sale of psychoactive products by tobacco retailers is a widespread problem. An encouraging observation is that the 9% presence of intoxicating hemp in smokeshops and other tobacco retailers 19-22 months after its prohibition, while still imperfect, may represent a notable decline in the presence of these products compared to previous years. This data had not been formally collected outside of LA County but data collectors had been visiting smokeshops to document the problem for years and found hemp more widespread.

However, we saw the clear proliferation of 3 other groups of highly psychoactive products in the smokeshop space, potentially substituting declining tobacco or hemp sales. This included: plant kratom and more potent, synthetic kratom alkaloid products, large and small nitrous oxide cannisters including ones with packaging blatantly attractive to kids, and psychoactive mushroom products. The kratom and mushroom products appear to be following the hemp industry model, with packaging or marketing often attractive to youth and increasing presence of synthetic psychoactive ingredients. In many cases the synthetic compound was declared, as in the case of 7-OH products.

Even without the ability to detect hidden backroom products, the widespread sale of these products, often in close proximity to middle schools, high schools, and colleges should be viewed as alarming for public health and protection of youth.

We strongly recommend that:

- The State of California and local governments maintain active enforcement against the illegal sale of intoxicating and inhalable hemp products, Kratom and 7-OH, and psychoactive mushroom products which are already considered illegal.
- Efforts to legalize the sale of plant and synthetic kratom be rejected.
- Sale of these products be made a violation of state and local tobacco retailer licenses with significant penalties.
- Community partners and governments support the Federal prohibition of intoxicating hemp scheduled to go into effect November 12, 2026 (Public Law 119-37).
- Community partners and governments oppose efforts now before the US Congress to reverse the 2025 prohibition, such as the “Lawful Hemp Protection Act” and the “Beverage Parity Act.”
- Governor Newsom sign SB936 prohibiting the sale of nitrous oxide by tobacco retailers in California.
- That local governments consider using their local regulatory authority to make sale of these products illegal and a violation of local tobacco retailer and other business licenses and rigorously enforce state and local law against sellers.
- The focus of enforcement should be on sellers, not users.