

Cigarettes and Little Cigars: Similar Products, Different Statutory Provisions

“Little cigars” are the same size and shape as cigarettes.¹ As defined in Oklahoma state law, the only characteristic that distinguishes little cigars from cigarettes is that cigar wrappers must be made “chiefly of tobacco.”² Little cigars are manufactured with tobacco pulp in their wrapping. When presented with photographs of various tobacco products without packages or labels, large proportions of smokers are unable to differentiate between cigarettes and little cigars.³ R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company developed the first “cigarettelike cigar” with “cigarette taste” and “cigarette mildness” in 1968 to avoid cigarette advertising restrictions in their efforts to target young smokers.^{4,5}



Despite their similar composition, there are differences in how these products are addressed in Oklahoma state law. These differences provide substantive price and marketing advantages to little cigars over cigarettes.

PROVISIONS OF OKLAHOMA LAW	CIGARETTES	LITTLE CIGARS
State Excise Tax	5.15 cents / stick	3.6 cents / stick
Sales of Single Sticks	Prohibited	Permitted

State Excise Tax

The Oklahoma state excise tax for little cigars is 3.6 cents per stick, or about 30 percent lower than the state excise tax for cigarettes. Differential taxing of these similar products undermines the public health benefit of cigarette excise taxes by encouraging smokers to switch to little cigars rather than to quit smoking.⁶ Higher tobacco excise taxes encourage tobacco users to quit, discourage children from starting tobacco use, and reduce the level of consumption among those who continue to use tobacco.^{7,8} The young and the poor see the greatest positive public health impacts from higher prices on tobacco products because youth and low-income populations are particularly price sensitive.⁹⁻¹¹

Sales of Single Sticks

The sale of unpackaged single cigarettes, also called “loosies,” was prohibited by Oklahoma state law in 1994.¹² There is no restriction in Oklahoma state law against selling single little cigars. Offered at a fraction of the full pack price, the availability of loosies promotes smoking and encourages relapse among those who have quit or are trying to quit.¹³ Lower priced tobacco products increase the risk of experimentation among price-sensitive youth.⁹⁻¹¹ Marketing of single little cigars is especially frequent in disadvantaged, African American communities.^{14,15} Historically, retailers have been more likely to sell loosies to minors than to adults.¹⁶ Loosies also lack required health warning labels.

References

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