

PROJECT SUMMARY REPORT

Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities

Assessing Tobacco Retailer Proximity to K–12 Schools in a Health Equity vs. Non-Health Equity Zone

A Community Health Equity Research Initiative

Initiated Summer 2024 • Completed March 2026

Executive Summary

This report summarizes findings from a research initiative examining the proximity of tobacco retailers to K-12 schools in Pontiac and Troy, Michigan, representing a designated health equity zone and a non-health equity zone, respectively, within Oakland County. The study was conducted by the Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities (the Alliance) in partnership with Prevention Pontiac, the Troy Community Coalition, IBH Analytics, and Oakland University.

Results reveal significant disparities in tobacco retailer density and proximity to schools between the two communities. Pontiac, which carries a greater burden of socioeconomic disadvantage, has nearly twice as many tobacco retailers within close proximity to its schools compared to Troy. These findings underscore the relationship between structural inequity and environmental health risk for youth, and point to the urgent need for local policy action and retail regulation reform in Michigan.

Building on this foundational research, the Alliance has since developed an interactive tobacco retailer map that extends coverage across all of Oakland County, providing a broader community resource for residents, coalition partners, and policymakers. The map offers two views: one that clusters retailers by area to illustrate overall density, and one that displays the precise location of each individual tobacco retailer as a small blue filled-in circle.

The full interactive tobacco retailer map, now covering all of Oakland County, along with the complete research report and supporting materials, are available at: alliancemi.org/resources/tobacco-retailer-map

Project Background & Leadership

This project began in the summer of 2024 and reflects a long-term professional vision of Justen Daniels, MPH CHES®, Prevention Manager at the Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities. For several years, Justen had envisioned a rigorous, community-centered study that would document how the geographic distribution of tobacco retailers

reflects and reinforces health inequity, particularly for youth. That vision took its first concrete form in the work of Shravya Yasarapu, who served as an Alliance Prevention and Wellness Project Assistant from May 20, 2024 through July 31, 2024. Shravya's foundational density study, conducted the year prior, served as the direct catalyst for this project. The initial research focused on two Oakland County communities: Pontiac, a designated health equity zone and the only medically underserved area (MUA) in the county, and Troy, selected as a non-health equity comparison community. This research informed every phase of its design and execution and empowered a multidisciplinary team to bring it to fruition.

The work has since grown beyond its original scope: the findings now anchor an interactive mapping resource spanning all of Oakland County. The map features two views: a density cluster view that groups retailers by area to reveal concentration patterns, and a retailer location view that pinpoints each individual tobacco retailer with a small blue filled-in circle which extends the project's reach and utility well beyond the two communities originally studied.

The project brought together coalitions, academic partners, and data analysts to produce a study that is both methodologically sound and deeply relevant to the communities it serves. The Alliance is proud to recognize this multi-year initiative as a meaningful milestone in its ongoing commitment to health equity and evidence-based prevention.

Project Team & Acknowledgments

The Alliance extends its sincere appreciation to the following individuals whose contributions made this research possible:

Justen Daniels, MPH CHES® | Prevention Manager, Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities

Project lead and primary architect of the research initiative. Justen coordinated coalition partnerships, oversaw project design and implementation, and ensured the work remained anchored in health equity principles throughout.

Mary Ann Vergith | Grants & Impact Senior Manager, Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities

Provided evaluation support that strengthened the rigor and integrity of the research methodology.

Shravya Yasarapu | Prevention and Wellness Project Assistant, , Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities (May–July 2024)

Shravya's tobacco retailer density study, completed in the summer of 2024, served as the direct catalyst for this project.

Kaneisha McCray, MPH(c) | Prevention Project Assistant & Co-Author, Oakland University Master of Public Health Program

Served as co-author and intern on this project, contributing substantially to research development and report writing. Kaneisha's involvement reflects the Alliance's commitment to training the next generation of public health professionals.

IBH Analytics contributed the statistical analysis and geospatial modeling that underpins the study's core findings. Contributing staff included:

- Darren Lubbers, PhD - CEO/Research Director
- Jaimie Davis, MS - Vice President/Director of Analytics
- Jordan Ooms, MS - Statistical Analyst

The Alliance also acknowledges the vital partnership of Prevention Pontiac and the Troy Community Coalition, whose community knowledge, trust, and engagement were essential to this work.

Key Findings

The **initial study** compared tobacco retailer density and proximity to schools across Pontiac (health equity zone) and Troy (non-health equity zone), alongside socioeconomic and demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau. These two communities served as the analytical foundation for what has since become an Oakland County-wide mapping resource. Key findings from the Pontiac-Troy comparison include:

- **Retailer Density:** Pontiac has one tobacco retailer for every 871 residents, compared to one for every 1,711 residents in Troy - nearly twice the concentration.
 - **Proximity: 1-Mile Radius:** Pontiac schools had an average of 9.9 tobacco retailers within one square mile, compared to 5 in Troy.
 - **Proximity: 2-Mile Radius:** The gap widened further at two miles, with Pontiac averaging 32.2 retailers compared to 17.4 in Troy.
 - **Socioeconomic Disparities:** Pontiac's median household income (\$42,791) is approximately 60% lower than Troy's (\$106,965). Pontiac also has a significantly higher poverty rate (26.7% vs. 5.3%) and lower rates of college degree attainment.
 - **Demographic Context:** Pontiac has a predominantly Black or African American population (49%) and a significant Hispanic or Latino population (20.6%), compared to Troy's predominantly White (63.3%) and Asian (26.2%) population - consistent with national research showing tobacco retailers disproportionately cluster in communities of color.
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Policy Implications & Recommendations

Michigan currently does not have a statewide tobacco retail licensing (TRL) system, which limits the ability of communities to regulate where tobacco retailers operate relative to schools and other youth-serving locations. This regulatory gap contributes to the disparities documented in this study.

The Alliance recommends the following actions based on study findings:

- Advocate for statewide tobacco retail licensing legislation that enables communities to regulate retailer proximity to schools.
- Pursue local zoning ordinances that establish buffer zones between tobacco retailers and K-12 schools.
- Expand future research to include retailers in neighboring communities and assess proximity by zip code or census tract for a more granular understanding of disparity.
- Engage community members, coalitions, and local officials in ongoing dialogue about the public health impact of tobacco retail density in health equity zones.

About the Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities

The Alliance of Coalitions for Healthy Communities empowers healthy communities through innovative prevention, wellness, and recovery support. With a mission rooted in collaboration, equity, and impact, the Alliance works across Oakland County to address the root causes of substance use and advance community well-being. This project was funded through the Oakland Community Health Network Substance Use Disorder Services.

Contact

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