

FTC Releases ‘Mystery Shopper’ Study on Kids’ Access to Unsuitable Entertainment

A vast majority of teenagers are able to purchase movies, music and games labeled inappropriate for their age group, according to a recent undercover study by the Federal Trade Commission. A minority of children, however, were able to enter R-rated films at the theater.

“The survey was conducted to collect data on the extent to which retailers prevent children from purchasing entertainment products that have been rated or labeled by entertainment industry self-regulatory associations or entertainment producers as potentially inappropriate for children,” according to the FTC’s Oct. 14 [press release](#).

Thirty-six percent of the teens in the study were able to buy tickets for an R-rated movie. Forty-eight percent of teens were able to buy those tickets two years ago, when the last such survey was conducted.

This year’s survey also found that 81 percent of the teens were able to purchase an R-rated DVD. The 2001 survey didn’t include DVD purchases as a research category.

Eighty-three percent of the teens were able to purchase explicit-labeled music, down seven percent from 2001.

And 69 percent were allowed to purchase M-rated video games, down from 78 percent two years before.

The teens in the study were also instructed to note whether the store had information about ratings or enforcement posted, and whether the cashier

inquired about the customer's age.

Regarding the posting of ratings and enforcement, teens found signs related to theater ticket purchases at 62 percent of the venues.

The percentages were significantly worse for the other categories: only 26 percent of DVD venues, 21 percent of CD stores and 27 percent of video game outlets had ratings information posted.

And the findings regarding age inquiry were less encouraging for the effectiveness of industry self-regulation.

Forty-eight percent of theaters inquired about age, compared to 19 percent for DVD sales, 13 percent for CDs and 24 percent for video games.

The FTC will convene a workshop Oct. 29 to discuss industry efforts to limit children's access to inappropriate entertainment products. Panels will include members from the entertainment industry, ratings organizations, retailers and advocacy groups.

The FTC recruited 13- to 16-year-olds to work undercover, unaccompanied by a parent. The study, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, involved 899 stores and theaters in 39 states.