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By Birkir Eglis, Customer Success Manager (CSM) at [Better Business Iceland](#)

What Happens When Age Compliance Checks Are Missing

Over the past 18 months, Better Business Iceland has conducted a series of age-compliance studies to understand how age restriction checks are applied in practice. The objective was to test whether frontline employees were requesting identification from customers who appeared too young to purchase age-restricted products. The findings provide an interesting case study for mystery shopping professionals because they demonstrate what can happen when age-compliance checks are completely absent from the retail environment.



A total of 141 purchase attempts were made using mystery shoppers aged 18 to 23 years, depending on the restricted age for each product. The overall ID-check rate was only 6.3%. The numbers were particularly concerning in relation to cigarette sales. During 40 separate purchase attempts, an 18-year-old shopper was able to purchase cigarettes without being

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asked for identification a single time. In the nicotine category, where 71 purchase attempts were conducted, the ID-check rate remained below 10%.

Thirty online alcohol purchases were also evaluated. Only two deliveries involved age verification at the point of handover. In one case, an 18-year-old customer was able to collect alcohol from a self-service pickup location without any age verification taking place. Alcohol is restricted to 20 years of age in Iceland. While each individual example may be dismissed as an isolated incident, the combined results point toward an issue rather than occasional failures.

While 141 visits may not initially sound significant to readers from larger markets, the context is important. Reykjavík and the surrounding study area have a population of approximately 140,000 people. Adjusted for population size, the 141-visit conducted in Iceland would be equivalent to roughly 9,000 visits in a city the size of London. This illustrates that the findings are not based on a handful of isolated observations.

What makes these findings particularly interesting is that Iceland is not a country lacking regulation. Age limits are clearly defined in law, retailers are generally aware of them, and there is little disagreement among stakeholders about the importance of preventing underage access. The problem therefore appears not to be the legislation itself, but rather the lack of consistent measurement and follow-up regarding whether the legislation is being applied in everyday customer interactions.

The Icelandic findings become even more significant when viewed within a wider European context. An unpublished European age-compliance study comparing several countries placed Iceland at the bottom of the participating markets in terms of age-verification performance. While the detailed results have not yet been formally published, one conclusion stood out clearly. The countries achieving the highest compliance levels were

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widely believed to share a common theme: Regular age-compliance checks are commissioned.

For MSPA members, this offers an important lesson. Age-compliance programmes are often viewed as regulatory exercises designed to identify failures or a way for our companies to only make money. The truth however is that employees are more likely to follow procedures when they know those procedures are being measured. Organisations are more likely to prioritise compliance when objective performance data is available. Retailers are more likely to improve when they receive structured feedback and have an opportunity to correct weaknesses. This is fact, not fiction.

The Icelandic experience demonstrates what can happen when this process is missing. Despite clear laws and broad public support for youth protection, the lack of compliance checks results in almost a total non-compliance.

For mystery shopping professionals, the conclusion is straightforward: Compliance cannot be assumed simply because a policy exists. It must be measured, monitored, and reinforced. Iceland provides a powerful reminder that the gap between policy and practice can be enormous, and that mystery shopping remains one of the most effective tools available for closing that gap.

The principle remains the same: organisations improve what they measure. When measurement disappears, performance often follows. What gets measured, gets managed.
