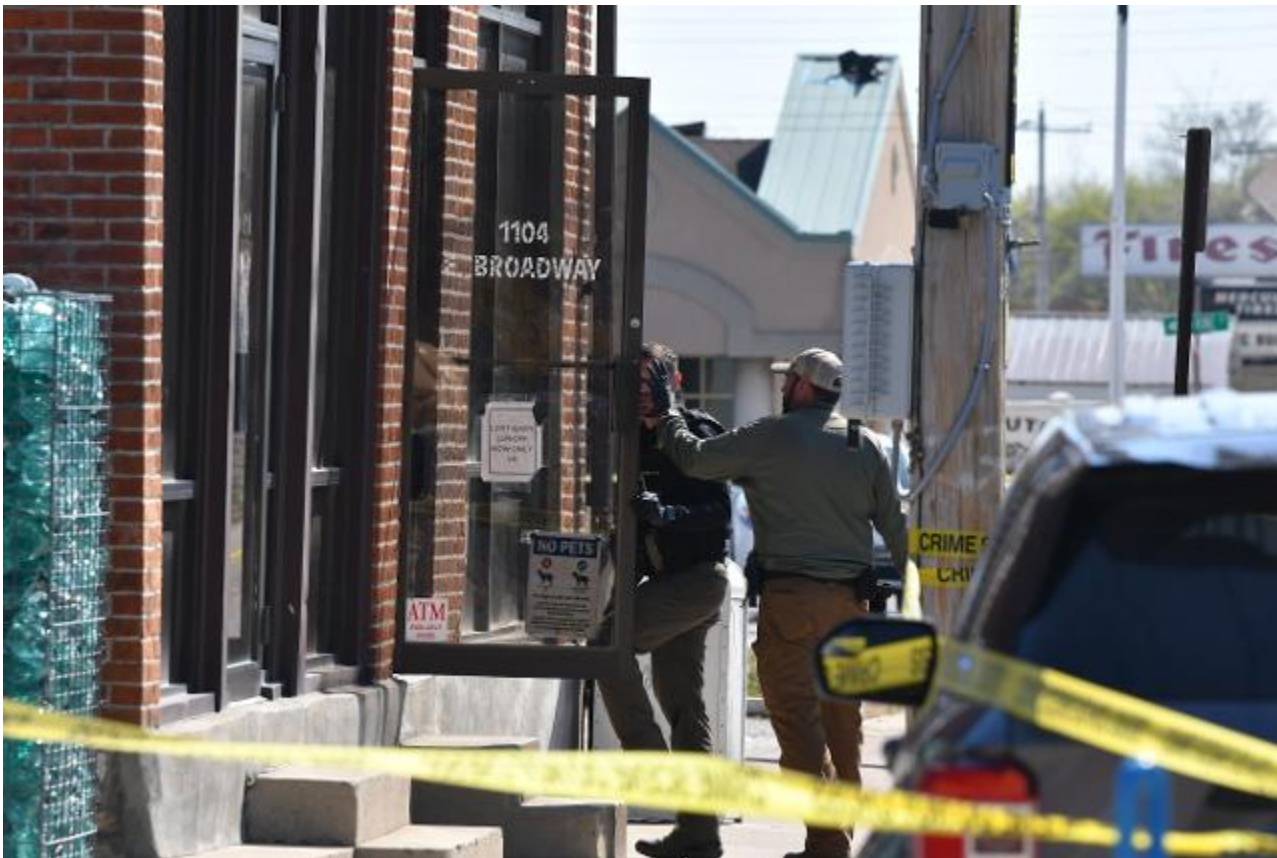


# Studio 420 Sales To Minors, More Detailed In Alton Police Memo

by Dalton Brown, News Reporter  
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ALTON - A five-page Alton Police Department memo was released on Friday detailing two years worth of nicotine sales to minors and several other crimes which reportedly occurred at Studio 420, located at 1104 E. Broadway in Alton and owned by Zach Yinger.

The memo, dated July 19, 2023 and addressed to Alton Police Chief Jarrett Ford, was written by Lt. Dustin Christner, Chief of Detectives with the Alton Police Department.

Christner begins the memo by stating the issue of Studio 420 selling nicotine products to minors “has become so blatant and prevalent” that Alton School District Superintendent Kristie Baumgartner requested a meeting with him to address her concerns.

“Parents have been complaining about Studio 420, and the schools are being inundated with vaping products being brought to schools by students,” Christner states in the memo. “In addition, our department has had countless phone calls from concerned parents asking for our assistance in preventing Studio 420 from continuing their illegal operations.”

Christner goes on to describe “numerous information reports on file regarding the sale of nicotine products to minors at Studio 420,” which include several tobacco compliance check violations and other “ongoing issues regarding Studio 420.”

In the memo’s conclusion, Christner said Studio 420 has failed every tobacco compliance check conducted from 2021 to 2023, including one conducted by the FDA Tobacco Inspection Program in April of 2023.

### **Minors Assist Alton Police Investigations**

The memo lists several Alton Police Department cases which detail various crimes committed at Studio 420. In two cases that occurred on Oct. 20, 2021, minors assisting officers with an investigation walked into Studio 420 and were both able to purchase “Hyde-N-Bar brand vape pens” containing nicotine.

Both minors provided officers receipts of their transactions; it was determined that two different Studio 420 employees “did not ask for identification prior to selling the minor the aforementioned tobacco product.” City ordinance citations were issued.

In three similar cases on August 10, 2022, three minors assisting officers were able to purchase multiple brands of vape pens containing nicotine, including brands such as “Hyde,” “HYDE Edge Rave,” and “AIR.” In all three cases, an employee failed to ask any of the minors for identification prior to selling them the nicotine products. City ordinance citations were issued in all three cases.

On June 16, 2023, another minor assisting the Alton Police purchased “Lost Mary” and “Elf Bar” vape pens sold to them by a cashier. Reporting officers “did not observe any signage inside the business notifying patrons of the legal age to purchase nicotine products,” and a citation was issued for those violations.

### **Reports From Parents, Students, Anonymous Sources**

In another case, an individual reported that his daughter and nephew, both of whom were under 21 years of age at the time, were “sold vape products from Studio 420.” Staff members of Studio 420 “claimed they do ask for ID cards to purchase any product they sell.”

Another individual reported hearing from students at Jerseyville High School that “minors are purchasing vapes from Studio 420.” Christner advised them the department had “received previous reports of this activity” and that “action will be taken.”

After one parent found “a half-used bottle of ‘vape juice’” in his residence - which he said three minors, including his son and nephew, had purchased from Studio 420 - he said he wanted the Alton Police to be aware of Studio 420 selling such products to minors. One of the minors was also willing to be “a decoy in a sting operation.”

Another parent anonymously reported to Alton Police that she followed her 17-year-old daughter to Studio 420, where she “observed a large number of high school age subjects in the business.” This information was reportedly forwarded to “all patrol officers, the criminal investigation division, and school resource officers for possible follow up and compliance checks.”

One parent called Studio 420 to question their ID verification procedures after she discovered a vape in her son’s possession which he admitted to purchasing from the business. An unknown Studio 420 employee told the parent that they check IDs and “do not sell to juveniles” - he then requested her son’s name and claimed he would be added to a “no sell list.” Her son later received “odd messages and phone calls from people he does not know” following the incident.

### **Other Incidents: Mob Action, Firearm**

Apart from several documented instances of selling nicotine products to minors, Studio 420 has also seen a wide range of other crimes committed on the premises, including mob action and more, according to the memo.

In the case of mob action, officers responded to an employee’s report of a female being “struck” by a male inside Studio 420. She reportedly didn’t see who punched her, but claimed the only thing she remembered hearing was a male asking her “What’s up?” before punching her in the face.

Another individual reported that he and three of his friends were inside the store when four to 10 individuals entered and began hitting him several times in the torso. The individual added that “he was knocked to the ground and one of the males stole his black ‘Nike’ brand fanny pack that contained \$250 in U.S. currency.” He claimed not to

know any of the males involved, but video surveillance confirmed the attack; four total suspects were identified, with two charged as adults and two charged as juveniles.

In one case, Yinger told officers he believed the suspect of an “aggravated discharge of a firearm case” was inside Studio 420 earlier that night with a handgun. An employee allegedly saw one of the suspects pull a black handgun out of their waistband and show it to him. The person did not notify police the suspect was in the business with a handgun.

Shortly after the suspect left, the employee reported hearing gunshots. According to the memo, “an Investigation revealed that a house was struck by gunfire. adult was charged with aggravated discharge of a firearm. Video available of suspect inside business with handgun prior to shooting.”

### **Former Partner Alleges Possible Tax Crimes, More**

An individual who the memo states “used to be in a relationship with Zachariah Yinger,” claimed Yinger lied about his income when applying for a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan when he purchased a residence in Godfrey, Illinois.

“ could not remember the specific details but believed he reported to the program that his businesses, being nine (9) store fronts in total, do not generate any net income,” the memo states. “ also included the businesses are all ‘cash only,’ or do not accept credit cards or debit cards to complete purchases, so that Yinger can also lie about any income made by the businesses.

“As a result, she believes Yinger was lying to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) about his income as well. Additionally, in regards to his employees' tax forms, or ‘W-2s,’ the business names on their ‘W-2s’ do not match that of the business where they are employed which she believed was also suspicious.”

She also said Yinger’s employees “are instructed to ‘serve’ to suspected minors,” adding Yinger “frequently warns them when he observes officers in the area of his business as he is able to view the surrounding area from his apartment above the business on East Broadway.”

### **Fines Not Deterring Studio 420**

Amy Devine, Program Coordinator for the FDA Tobacco Inspection program through the Illinois Department of Human Services, said the program has investigated Studio

420 and found them continuously selling tobacco products to minors. Studio 420 has reportedly entered the “Civil Money Penalty phase, where they are assessed a fine by the FDA,” according to Christner based on Devine’s explanation.

“The latest decision against Studio 420 was on April 5, 2023, and future violations will increase the fines that are levied,” Christner wrote. “They will continue to go back until Studio 420 complies by not selling tobacco products to minors. Eventually, the FDA may issue a No Sale Tobacco Order but that takes a long time and they are not yet close to that level at this time.”

Christner wrote in his memo that “fines alone” have failed to stop Studio 420 from selling to minors.

“Numerous parents from the community in addition to the Alton School District Superintendent have voiced concern over the illegal actions of Studio 420 and the harmful/addictive products they are putting in the hands of area youth,” Christner stated. “While fines have been levied, it does not appear that fines alone are deterring Studio 420 from continuing to sell tobacco products to minors.”

While Christner deferred to Chief Ford’s judgment, he recommended that “actions beyond fines should be considered to help keep the youth of our community safe from the predatory and harmful tactics of Studio 420.”

Alton City Treasurer Cameo Holland currently has the authority to begin the process of suspending a business license. Holland can be reached at 618-463-3450 or at [cholland@cityofaltonil.gov](mailto:cholland@cityofaltonil.gov).