

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Friday 5 June 2026****New ABS estimates on illicit nicotine show urgent enforcement crackdown and scale-up of demand reduction measures is needed – not tobacco tax cuts**

Cancer Council Australia is calling for stronger enforcement to combat illicit tobacco alongside greater investment in demand reduction measures after new ABS estimates indicates nicotine use is increasingly being driven by illegal, unregulated products.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics' latest experimental estimates suggest a dramatic shift in Australia since 2017, with illicit tobacco and illegally sold nicotine products now accounting for around 80% of total consumption of products containing nicotine.

Cancer Council Australia CEO Jacinta Reddan said the findings demonstrate that urgent action is needed by all governments to clamp down on the illicit market to make these harmful products less readily available. She also called for an immediate scale up of demand reduction measures, in particular hard-hitting national tobacco campaigns with broad reach across the whole population and cessation support, to continue to motivate and support people who smoke to quit.

“The experimental estimates from ABS indicate that licensing and enforcement must be urgently strengthened by all governments if we are to tackle illicit tobacco and nicotine products,” she said.

“We’ve had concerns for some time that illicit tobacco risks driving up smoking, undoing decades of progress in Australia. Urgent action is needed to address this – but cutting tobacco tax is not the solution.

“Cutting tobacco excise would simply make legal tobacco more affordable, increase consumption, and boost tobacco industry profits, while the illicit market continues to operate.”

The ABS data estimates show that legal tobacco consumption and spending has almost halved since 2020, while total nicotine consumption has increased by almost 40% since 2017, with most of that growth occurring after 2021.

The ABS estimates are experimental, meaning the methodology is new, data sources are still being refined, and results may evolve over time. The data also reflects testing conducted from August to October 2024, during a period when illegal vaping products were widely available prior to strengthened national laws and enforcement from July 2024.

The wastewater data used in this ABS report captures total nicotine consumption, but cannot distinguish between product types, including cigarettes, vapes, nicotine pouches or nicotine replacement therapies such as gum and patches.

Cancer Council warns that Australia is in a critical window, with a real risk the data estimates will be misrepresented and utilised by big tobacco and industry front groups to justify weakening effective tobacco control policies.

“There is no overnight fix to this challenge, but there are demand and supply reduction measures all governments can enact immediately,” Ms Reddan said. “We will not reduce the availability of illicit tobacco by making all tobacco cheaper. That would only serve to increase smoking rates, harms caused by nicotine products, and benefit the tobacco industry.

“Sixty-six people still die every day from smoking, and there are well-documented harms from using e-cigarettes – we don’t want to see those figures rise by making all tobacco and nicotine products even cheaper and more accessible.”

Cancer Council Australia said government response must focus on both reducing demand and disrupting supply, with urgent national coordination. Priority actions include:

- Establishing a comprehensive national licensing scheme for all tobacco and nicotine retailers and wholesalers
- Significantly increasing enforcement resources to target illicit supply chains
- Strengthening penalties and new offences to disrupt organised criminal networks
- Maintaining proven tobacco control measures, including taxation
- Scaling up investment in national public education campaigns that remind adults and young people of the health harms of tobacco use
- Continued support for people who smoke or use nicotine products to quit

“We must not surrender Australia’s health policy to organised crime,” Ms Reddan said. “Enforcement is starting to have an impact, and this is not the time for a ‘quick fix’. All levels of government need to work together to go harder and faster to clamp down on illicit sales and to motivate and support people who smoke to quit.”

The warning builds on [Cancer Council Australia’s recent open letter](#), which highlighted growing tobacco industry efforts to exploit concerns about illicit trade to weaken effective public health measures.

“The tobacco industry is already trying to frame this as a tax problem,” Ms Reddan said. “We cannot let that narrative take hold. The solution is stronger enforcement and sustained public health action - not undoing decades of hard-won progress to reduce the impact of smoking and nicotine addiction on our nation.”

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About Cancer Council Australia

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- Undertake and fund cancer research
- Prevent and control cancer
- Provide information and support for people affected by cancer
- Shape and influence policy and practice

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