Legal and illegal supply of tobacco and nicotine products in the context of harm minimisation and the tobacco endgame

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Historically tobacco cigarette companies could be considered the ultimate corporate success story. By 1964, 42% of the US population and about 43% of the Australian population smoked. This widespread use was a result of mass production and aggressive mass marketing. Cigarette companies have been very successful at avoiding the type of heavy regulation that is typically enforced on addictive substances that cause harm, with their widespread use and addictiveness likely a key factor in reliance on an incremental approach that relied on demand reduction strategies such as health education, packaging and labelling requirements and regular tax increases, particularly since 2010. Nearly 70 years after the NHMRC issued its first warnings about the health impacts of tobacco smoking, only a minority of the Australian population now smoke; in 2025, 7.8% currently smoked and 5.6% smoked daily. Australia is now on the cusp of achieving what many consider to be a tobacco endgame goal of <5% smoking prevalence. This record low smoking prevalence has occurred despite a rapidly increasing illicit market in both tobacco and vaping products, with the use of untaxed products that don’t comply with required standards becoming normalized through their widespread (and overt) availability through tobacconists and convenience stores, which expanded rapidly due to under-regulation of the whole tobacco supply chain and slow regulatory responses. Both the overall decline in tobacco smoking and the role of bricks-and-mortar retail shops in growing the illegal market suggests an urgent need to reform the tobacco supply system to one that is better aligned with a harm minimisation framework.