

Smokes on the streets: findings from Australia's first street intercept study investigating illicit tobacco product use

Cheneal Puljević¹, Isabel Meciar¹, Kiernan Thompson¹, Ariel McLay¹, Coral E. Gartner¹

¹*NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence on Achieving the Tobacco Endgame, School of Public Health, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia*

Presenter's email: c.puljevic@uq.edu.au

Introduction: Illicitly traded tobacco (ITT) products are those sold without required taxes paid. Australian tobacco tax gap and seizure data suggest notable recent increases in ITT product use. Queensland's tobacco licensing scheme, implemented in September 2024, aims to curb the State's ITT market through seizures, fines, and store closures. This study examined tobacco use among people publicly smoking in Brisbane, Australia, through street intercept surveys, including visual inspection and photography of participants' tobacco products.

Methods: We recruited a convenience sample of people observed smoking in public areas across 13 suburbs of varying socio-economic status in July 2025. Participants completed a 5-10 minute survey on demographic characteristics and patterns of tobacco use and were asked to show their tobacco product. Research assistants assessed if products were illicit based on packaging, brand and/or cost. Those with ITT products were asked about the product's price, brand, source, use frequency and reasons for use. Participants received a \$5 supermarket voucher. Ten of 12 days of data collection have been completed as of 28 July 2025, with the remainder planned for September 2025.

Results: The sample (N=188) was 66% male, 63% employed and 11.7% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, with a mean age of 41 years. 87% of products were deemed to be illicit. Those using ITT were most likely to purchase it from a tobacconist (77%) at least 2-3 times a week (41%) and paid a mean of \$21 per pack. Most purchased ITT products due to cheaper price (73%) or perceived better taste (14%) compared to taxed products.

Discussions and Conclusions: The high proportion of people smoking ITT products (87%) in Brisbane's public areas suggests that current enforcement measures may be insufficient.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These findings suggest an urgent need for enhanced measures aimed at curbing ITT supply and demand.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: This study was funded by an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellowship awarded to Cheneal Puljević (DE230101131). Prof Coral Gartner is supported by a Future Fellowship from the Australian Research Council (FT220100186). The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.