

~~PROHIBITION~~  
DOES NOT WORK

TOWARDS A  
~~SMOKE-FREE~~  
BANGLADESH  
2040

# HOW TO CURB SMOKING, BLACK MARKETS AND PROTECT YOUTH.

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In January 2025 Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh introduced a ban on the importation of reduced risk cigarette alternatives such as vapour and heated tobacco products through an import policy order<sup>1</sup>. Currently, the national interim government is considering an outright prohibition on all less harmful nicotine products, banning the manufacturing, marketing, sale and even use of all these categories. Were such a ban to be implemented, the evidence clearly demonstrates that it would prove disastrous for public health, the Bangladeshi economy, and society as a whole.

There is little academic or scientific dispute that devices such as vapourised and heated tobacco products are considerably less harmful than deadly combustible cigarettes,<sup>2</sup> with proven capabilities to help adults quit or reduce their smoking. While not without absolute risk and without doubt should not be used by underaged persons, most meta-analyses show these products to be up to 95% less harmful than conventional tobacco products. Furthermore, multiple randomised control trials demonstrate that vaping is more effective in helping smokers quit than conventional nicotine replacement therapies.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, evidence from countries such as the United Kingdom,<sup>4</sup> New Zealand<sup>5</sup> and Sweden<sup>6</sup> shows that where such products are incorporated into regulated tobacco control strategies – and are thus allowed to compete with and displace cigarettes – smoking rates fall dramatically, greatly benefitting public health.

**Prohibition Does Not Work** (PDNW) fully shares the Government’s concerns regarding the negative consequences arising from these products’ unregulated status. However, evidence shows that instituting a formal prohibition will only entrench and worsen the situation, thereby harming adult smokers’ prospects to improve their health, fostering black markets, facilitating underage access - ultimately undermining public health goals.

Bangladesh, a country where nearly half the male population smokes regularly and tobacco-related diseases are responsible for 21.9% of all deaths,<sup>7,8</sup> is uniquely placed to benefit from adopting an evidenced based approach to public health. A [modelling study](#) by a consortium of harm reduction experts showed the very significant potential public health gains that are achievable, should the country regulate – rather than prohibit – reduced-risk nicotine products. Using conservative projections from the World Health Organisation and evidence-based assumptions about the reduced exposure to toxins arising from the use of safer alternatives together with improved access to tobacco cessation diagnosis and treatment, the analysis found that **up to 920,000 premature tobacco-related deaths could be averted over the next four decades**. Most of these deaths are projected to occur among today’s adult smokers, underlining the need to provide them with legal access to safer alternatives to accelerate the country’s projected decline in smoking.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/govt-bans-import-e-cigarettes-3793901>

<sup>2</sup> Nicotine vaping in England: an evidence update including health risks and perceptions, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022

<sup>3</sup> Can electronic cigarettes help people stop smoking, and do they have any unwanted effects when used for this purpose? Cochrane Network, 2025

<sup>4</sup> Adult smoking habits in the UK, Office for National Statistics, 2023

<sup>5</sup> New Zealand Health Survey, Ministry of Health, 2024

<sup>6</sup> Use of Tobacco and Nicotine Products (self-reported) by Age, Sex and Year, Swedish Statistical Authority, 2024

<sup>7</sup> State of Smoking and Health in Bangladesh, Global Action to End Smoking, 2024

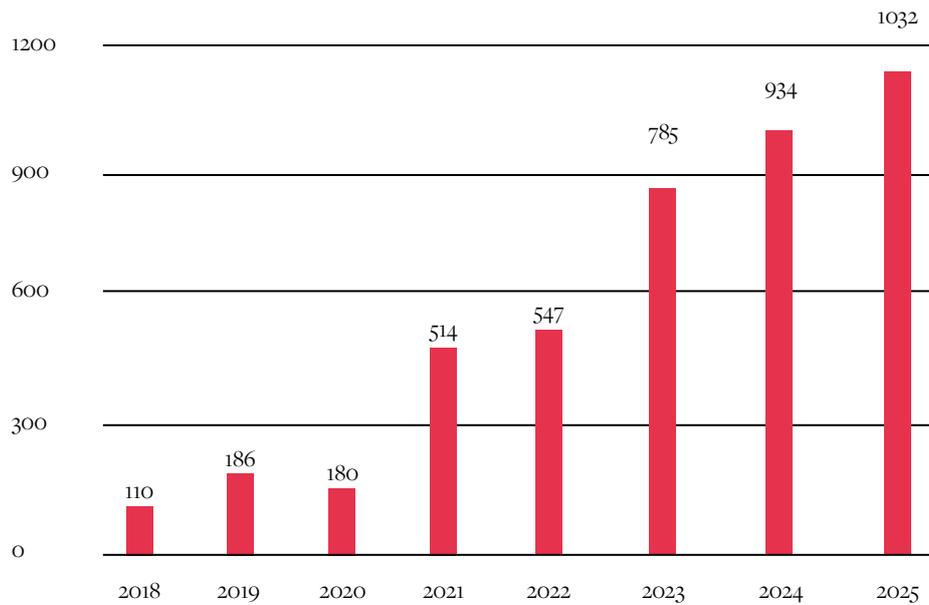
<sup>8.1</sup> Tobacco kills 1.61 lakh annually in Bangladesh: experts

<sup>8.2</sup> The Daily Star, 2025 RDC Resolution No. 46. Brazilian National Health Surveillance Agency, 2009

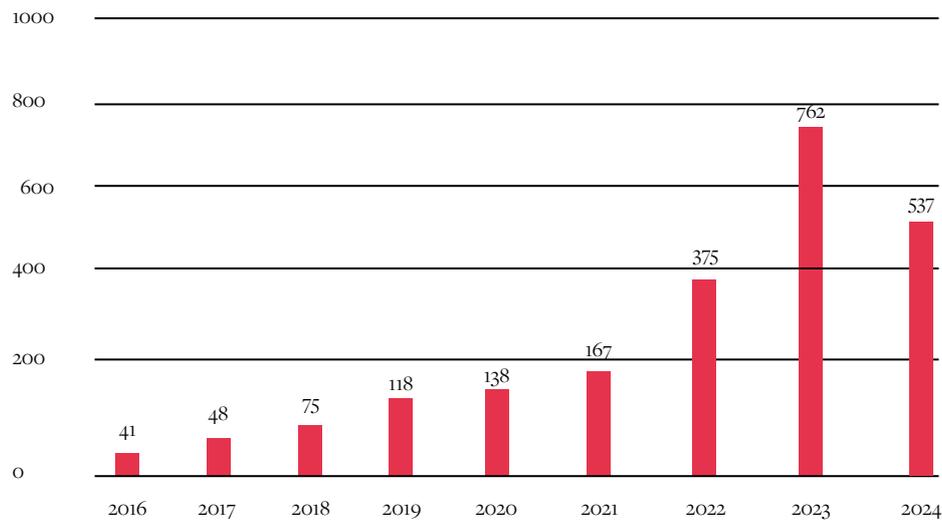
<sup>8.3</sup> Record of Reasons – 54th Meeting, 14-15 October, National Drugs and Poisons Schedule Committee, 2008

The potential public health gains from regulation are both overwhelmingly positive and significant. By contrast, the consequences of regulatory ambiguity or prohibition are proven, and as seen from other countries where tried, universally catastrophic. Repeated experience shows that when legal supply is restricted, demand does not disappear – it is instead met by unregulated, illicit channels, bringing about a host of unwelcome consequences.

ECigIntelligence estimates on the size of the Brazilian vapour product market, in USD millions.



ECigIntelligence estimates on the size of the Australian vapour product market, including both legal and illicit sales (min. USD, ECI)



# THE COST AND CONSEQUENCES OF PROHIBITION

One of the case studies that the ‘Prohibition Does Not Work’ network examined is Brazil – a country where sales of vapour products have been formally prohibited since 2009,<sup>9</sup> and where several subsequent reviews by health authorities have opted to maintain the prohibition. Another case study analysed by the network is Australia, where vapour products were effectively prohibited by their classification as poisons,<sup>10</sup> the subsequent implementation of onerous prescription requirements for legal access,<sup>11</sup> and finally, by regulations allowing sales<sup>12</sup> only under the strictest product and retailing restrictions.<sup>13</sup>

These cases show that prohibitions – regardless of whether they are official or the de facto result of excessive regulation – do not achieve their goal of suppressing demand. Instead, they create the ideal conditions for a booming black market: In Australia, a 2024 parliamentary inquiry estimated the value of the black market to be between USD 750 million and 1.3 billion,<sup>14</sup> while in Brazil, nicotine market data provider E-CigIntelligence estimated the size of the illicit market at USD 1.03 billion in 2025.

These sums represent foregone tax revenues that, under a regulated framework, could be directed toward public health initiatives, enforcement against youth access, and smoking cessation efforts. Instead, prohibition ensures that the consumption by an

estimated 3.4% of Brazilian adults<sup>15</sup> and 6.8% of Australian adults<sup>16</sup> who regularly vape is serviced almost entirely through illicit supply chains, enriching organised criminal networks and incentivising smuggling, bribery, and the corruption of public officials.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, the profit incentive is so significant that both Australia<sup>18</sup> and Brazil<sup>19</sup> have seen a marked rise in organised criminal violence resulting from rival syndicates vying for dominance over local sales channels. In the case of the former, the violence has become so serious that bystanders have begun to be caught in the crossfire – from retailers being coerced into selling criminal groups’ illicit products,<sup>20</sup> to frequent arson attacks on rival retailers<sup>21 22</sup> and even targeted killings of alleged ringleaders.<sup>23</sup>

Worse, by abandoning control of the market to unscrupulous illegal vendors and criminal groups who do not follow any ingredient or product standards, Bangladesh is effectively allowing the exposure of hundreds of thousands of local vapers<sup>24</sup> to untested and potentially dangerous products. In the two example countries – where years of prohibition have seen the market completely taken over by organised crime – seized products have been found to contain poorly-formulated e-liquids containing highly toxic substances such as arsenic, zinc, heavy metals and – in a few isolated cases – even narcotics such as amphetamines and synthetic opioids.<sup>25 26</sup>

<sup>9</sup> RDC Resolution No. 46, Brazilian National Health Surveillance Agency, 2009

<sup>10</sup> Record of Reasons – 54th Meeting, 14-15 October, National Drugs and Poisons Schedule Committee, 2008

<sup>11</sup> Notice of final decision to amend the current Poisons Standard – nicotine, Therapeutic Goods Administration, 2020

<sup>12</sup> Therapeutic Goods and Other Legislation Amendment (Vaping Reforms) Bill 2024, Australian Parliament, 2024

<sup>13</sup> These include, among others, restricting sales to the small proportion of pharmacies that choose to stock the products, stringent restrictions on flavours and ingredients, plain packaging requirements, and device standardisation requirements.

<sup>14</sup> E-Cigarette use in Victoria, Victoria Parliamentary Budget Office, 2024 <sup>15</sup> Vigitel Brazil: Smoking and Alcohol Abuse, Brazilian Ministry of Health, 2023

<sup>16</sup> Prevalence of e-cigarette use, Tobacco in Australia – Facts & Issues, 2025

<sup>17</sup> Brazil could lose R\$7.7 billion to e-cigarette smuggling in 2025, UOL, 2024

<sup>18</sup> Earn or burn: the firebombings and underworld conflicts exposing Australia’s illicit tobacco trade, The Guardian, 2023

<sup>19</sup> Brazil Police Dismantles Gang Accused of Illegal Cigarette and Arms Trade, OCCRP, 2022

<sup>20</sup> Terrified tobacconist in the crosshairs of feared vape gangs who demand small business owners sell them their shops - as cops admit they’re powerless to stop the intimidation, Daily Mail, 2023

<sup>21</sup> Vape shops at war in Australia: Why so many are going up in flames, Daily Mail, 2024

<sup>22</sup> Police link dozen Queensland arson attacks to illegal tobacco trade, ABC News, 2025

<sup>23</sup> Craigieburn drive-by shooting linked to Melbourne’s tobacco war, Daily Mail, 2023

<sup>24</sup> E-Cigarette Vaping in Bangladesh, Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction, 2025

<sup>25</sup> Vapour Product Regulation in Australia: A Case Study in Failure, Prohibition Does Not Work, 2025

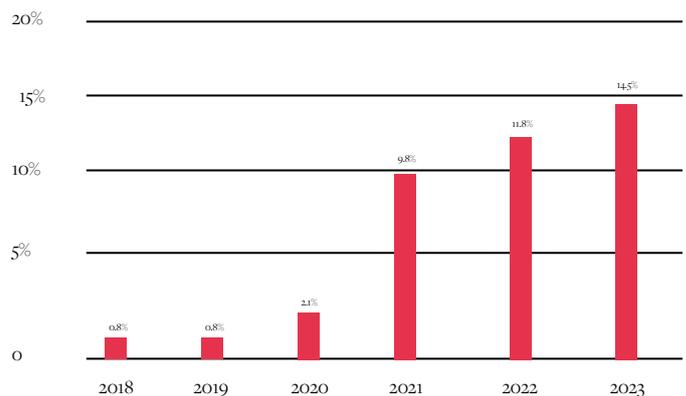
<sup>26</sup> Vapour Regulation in Brazil, Prohibition Does Not Work, 2025

Very seriously, by prohibiting the category, Bangladesh is effectively shifting sales from regulated channels to illegal vendors who – already being in breach of the law by selling the products illicitly – have no qualms about selling to the underage. Evidence shows that paradoxically, bans have actually made vapour products more accessible to the underage, with usage rates among 14-17-year-old Australians increasing over 18-fold between 2018 and 2023.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in Brazil, data from a 2024 survey showed that one in every eleven 14-17-year-olds used vapour products<sup>28</sup> – amounting to approximately 1.1 million teens, a prevalence figure that is markedly higher than that observed among adults.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the lack of legal access to less harmful alternatives to cigarettes in Australia and Brazil has also caused smoking rates in both countries to remain stubbornly high, having even seen an increase in 2024 in Brazil, from 9.3% to 11.6%,<sup>29</sup> and falling only slightly from 12.3% in 2018 to 11.8% in 2023<sup>30</sup> in Australia. Those most likely to benefit from switching, or from avoiding smoking entirely, are often law-abiding, health-conscious individuals. For such consumers, the products’ illegal status acts as a major disincentive.

A similar lesson can be learned from India, which shares boarder with Bangladesh. Despite the entry into force of the Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes Act in 2019, evidence shows that the products remained easily accessible from both hundreds of online sources<sup>31</sup> and as many as 18.6% of in-person retailers.<sup>32</sup>

Current (i.e. at least once monthly) vaping rates among Australian 14- to 17-year-olds. (MoH)



The pervasiveness of a local black market is demonstrated by the difficulties authorities encounter when trying to enforce the ban<sup>33</sup> as well as the frequency with which they report large-scale seizures, one of which recovered products worth INR 680 million (7.5 million USD) in a single operation.<sup>34</sup> These represent only a fraction of a dispersed market sustained by courier networks, informal retailers and social-media-based sellers that operate entirely outside regulatory oversight, and have been found to frequently target youths and the underage with influencer-driven marketing<sup>35</sup> while bypassing all age-verification mechanisms.

<sup>27</sup> [Current vaping and smoking in the Australian population aged 14 years or older – February 2018 to March 2023](#), Global Centre for Good Governance in Tobacco Control, 2023

<sup>28</sup> [Thematic notebook LENAD III - Tobacco and Electronic Smoking Devices in the Brazilian Population: Results in 2023](#), 2025

<sup>29</sup> [Brazil records increase in smokers for the first time since 2007](#), UOL, 2025

<sup>30</sup> [Current vaping and current smoking in the Australian population aged 14+ years](#), Department of Health and Aged Care, 2023

<sup>31</sup> [Online sales compliance with the electronic cigarettes ban in India: a content analysis](#), National Library of Medicine, 2020

<sup>32</sup> [E-cigarette retailer storefront availability following a nationwide prohibition of e-cigarettes in India: A multicentric compliance assessment](#), National Library of Medicine, 2020

<sup>33</sup> [Implementation of the E-cigarette Ban in India: Findings from Key Informant Interviews](#), Global Tobacco Control, 2024

<sup>34</sup> [India's Vape Ban: A Case Study in Unintended Consequences](#), 2 Firsts, 2025

<sup>35</sup> [Unveiling the Digital Landscape of E-Cigarette Marketing in India: Evidence From Mixed Method Study](#), Sage Journals, 2024

The economic implications are likewise instructive – by banning legal sales outright, India eliminated the possibility of a regulated, taxable market and allowed illegal operators to capture all associated revenues. Crucially, the prohibition has served to disincentivise as many as 100 million adult smokers<sup>36</sup> – many of whom are older, law-abiding individuals – from trying to switch to safer alternatives, thus contributing to the country’s annual tobacco-attributable death toll of approximately 1.35 million.<sup>37</sup>

Despite organisations including the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences<sup>38</sup> and Indian Psychiatric Society<sup>39</sup> arguing against the prohibition, the policy continues to harm public health by deterring switching among smokers while doing little to restrict access for those unconcerned by illegality, mirroring the same counterproductive outcomes observed in Australia and Brazil.

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<sup>36</sup> [Trends in bidi and cigarette smoking in India from 1998 to 2015, by age, gender and education, National Library of Medicine, 2016](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Health Topics – Tobacco, World Health Organisation, 2024](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Indian Doctors Join Call to End the Country’s Vape Ban, Filter, 2025](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Experts disagree with ICMR recommendations on ENDS, Bio Spectrum, 2019](#)

# THE PATH FORWARD

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The evidence clearly shows that Prohibition Does Not Work, and that the proposed entrenchment of a prohibition on these products would be disastrous for Bangladesh. In fact, recent reporting shows that the same kinds of complex illicit distribution networks seen in Australia and Brazil are already beginning to take shape in Bangladesh as a result of vapour products' particular legal status.<sup>40</sup> While the best time for Bangladesh to have embraced evidence-based policies that work to reduce smoking rates would have been years ago, the second-best time is now. For these reasons, **PDNW urges the Government not to pursue a blanket ban on vapour products, and to instead institute an evidence-based risk-proportionate regulatory approach.**

Appropriate regulation both protects the underage and offers adult smokers access to regulated, less-harmful alternatives. Such a framework should clearly define vapour products and other less harmful nicotine products in law; set and strictly enforce age-of-sale laws in all retail settings and set robust product standards and testing requirements. Enforcement should target illegal suppliers rather than penalising adult users, while a balanced tax regime could keep cigarettes expensive but allow regulated alternatives to remain widely affordable, with revenues available to be reinvested in health.

PDNW stands ready to assist the Government and relevant agencies in Bangladesh by sharing international comparative data, technical regulatory templates, and enforcement best-practice. **We would welcome the opportunity to discuss pragmatic, evidence-based measures that will prevent youth uptake, reduce smoking-related disease, reduce the network of illicit products and preserve government revenue for health.**

We thank you for your consideration and for Bangladesh continued commitment to reducing the harms of tobacco. We hope we may look forward to supporting the development of constructive policy that builds on Bangladesh impressive tobacco-control record while responsibly incorporating less harmful alternatives for adult smokers.

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<sup>40</sup> [Bustling Market for Banned Vape, Ittefaq, 2025](#)

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