

REPORT



Tale of Two Nations

Vol 1: A comparative study of how South Africa and New Zealand are faring in the fight against smoking



Overview

The global fight against smoking has shown that countries adopting progressive policies and innovative solutions are making the greatest strides in reducing smoking-related harm.

This report examines the differing approaches of South Africa and New Zealand, offering a stark contrast in policy direction.

While New Zealand is achieving world-leading results by embracing harm reduction and safer alternatives, South Africa is moving toward stricter regulations that could undermine the potential of these lifesaving innovations.

Champions v under-achievers

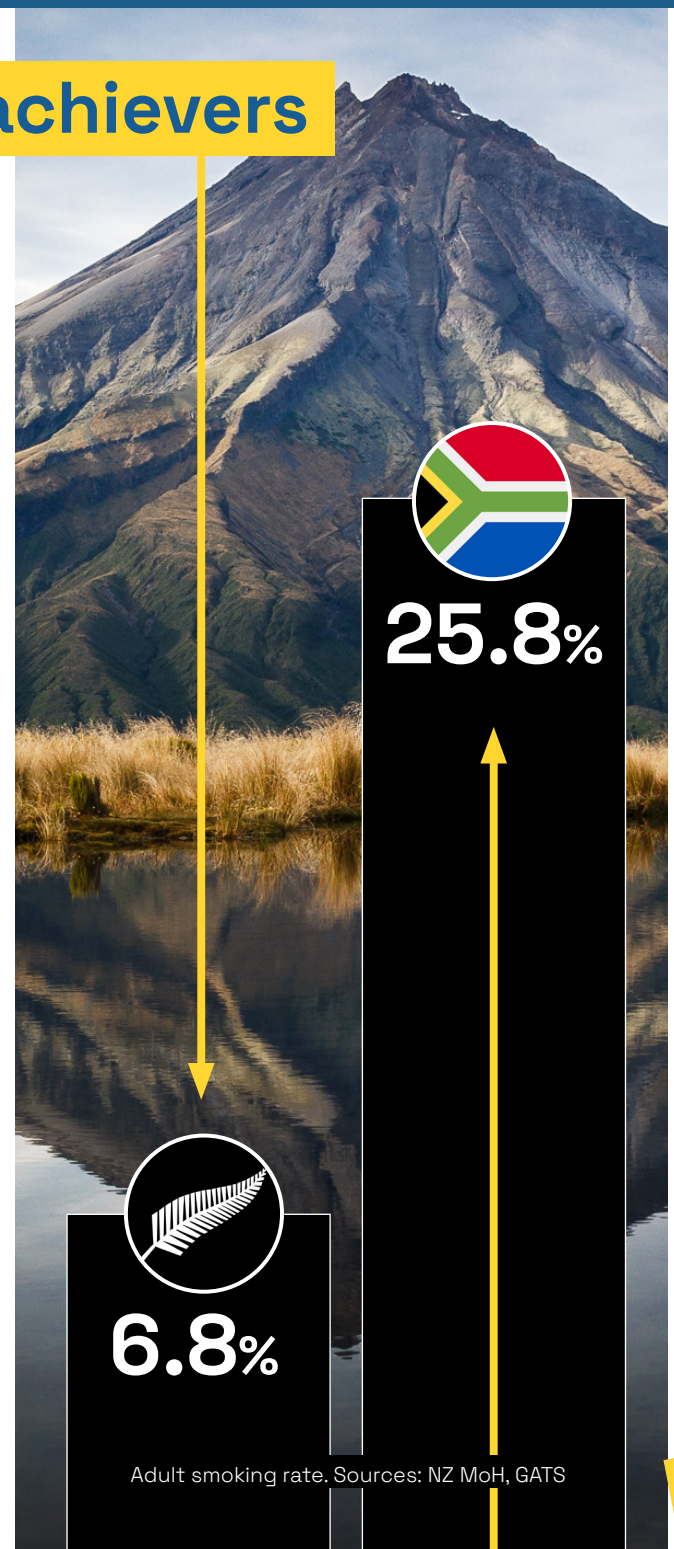
On the sports field, New Zealand and South Africa have long shared a fierce yet closely fought rivalry. However, when it comes to tackling the deadly toll of cigarettes, one nation has surged ahead as an uncontested leader.

After decades of high cigarette consumption, New Zealand has achieved a remarkable feat: halving its smoking rates in just five years. The 'land of the long white cloud' is on the cusp of becoming one of the first countries in the world to attain official smoke-free status, with fewer than 5% of adults smoking.

Meanwhile, offering a striking disparity, South Africa's smoking rates have remained stubbornly high for decades. Today, almost 26% of adults in South Africa smokes daily, and in 2021, nearly 30% of South Africans over the age of 15 used tobacco products. That same year, smoking-related diseases such as cancer and heart and lung conditions claimed the lives of approximately 42,000 people in the country.

Despite implementing traditional tobacco control measures - such as excise tax hikes, advertising bans, and even a temporary prohibition of nicotine products during the COVID-19 pandemic - South Africa's smoking prevalence remains nearly **four times higher** than New Zealand's.

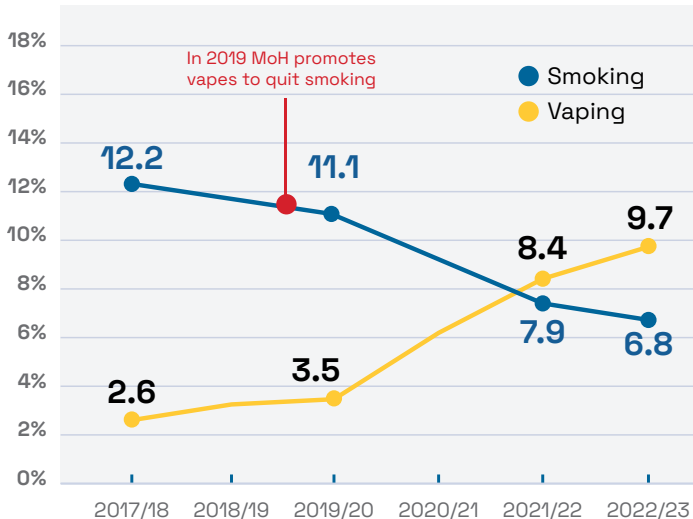
Worryingly, this disparity could widen further if South Africa proceeds with its proposed draconian regulations on alternative nicotine products - measures that oppose the policies that have fuelled New Zealand's success.



Adult smoking rate. Sources: NZ MoH, GATS

Kiwis lead the way

Figure 1: New Zealand smoking/vaping prevalence by year, age 18+



Source: Ministry of Health, 2023, Annual Data Explorer 2022/23: New Zealand Health Survey

New Zealand was once a nation of heavy smokers. In 1983, one in three Kiwis was a smoker, a statistic that underscored the urgent need for change.

Over the years, tobacco control measures such as banning smoking in indoor public workplaces (2004) and regular excise tax hikes helped reduce smoking rates. However, progress was far slower than hoped, and New Zealand remained way off track to achieve its ambitious goal of reducing smoking prevalence to 5% by 2025.

While vaping products entered the market in 2009, it wasn't until years later, thanks to grassroots peer-to-peer advocacy, that vaping gained significant attention from public health authorities. This evidence-based approach led to groundbreaking regulations for vaping and heat-not-burn products.¹

These were supported by a government-led campaign, Vape to Quit Strong,² and the launch of the information platform VapingFacts (www.vapingfacts.health.nz), giving clear, factual guidance on vaping as a harm-reduction tool.

The results have been extraordinary. Since 2018, smoking rates have plummeted from 12.2% to 6.8% - an almost 50% reduction in just a few years.

Meanwhile, the prevalence of adult daily vaping

increased from 2.6% to 9.7%. Most daily vapers (78%) are either ex-smokers, or current smokers (dual users).³

The New Zealand Public Health Communication Centre noted: **“The most plausible explanations for changes in smoking prevalence... [include] growing use of vapour products resulting in increased quitting smoking among people who smoke and/or reduced uptake if young people substitute vaping for smoking.”**

New Zealand has adopted a consumer-friendly approach, making smokeless alternatives accessible, acceptable and affordable.

A broad range of vaping products with varying flavours and nicotine strengths is available, and these products are taxed proportionally to their reduced risk - at standard VAT rates rather than punitive excise levels. Vaping products can be purchased in specialist stores, convenience stores and online, all under strict safety and age restrictions.

By actively promoting vaping as a smoking cessation tool through clear public health messaging, New Zealand has struck the right balance - dispelling misinformation, preventing youth uptake and helping adult smokers switch to significantly less harmful alternatives.

Key milestones



In **2017**, the establishment of an advisory group that leads to groundbreaking regulations for vaping and heat-not-burn products.

In **2019**, the Ministry of Health launches the smoking cessation website, Vaping Facts, which informed smokers: “Vaping is a way to quit cigarettes by getting nicotine with fewer of the toxins that come from burning tobacco.”

In **2020**, the government launches the Vape to Quit campaign. This initiative, endorsed by the Ministry and associated health groups, actively promoted vaping as a smoking cessation tool.

RIGHT: Ministry of Health public communication on relative risk of vaping



BELOW: Ministry of Health messaging on vaping for use in retail stores (2020)



Escape route

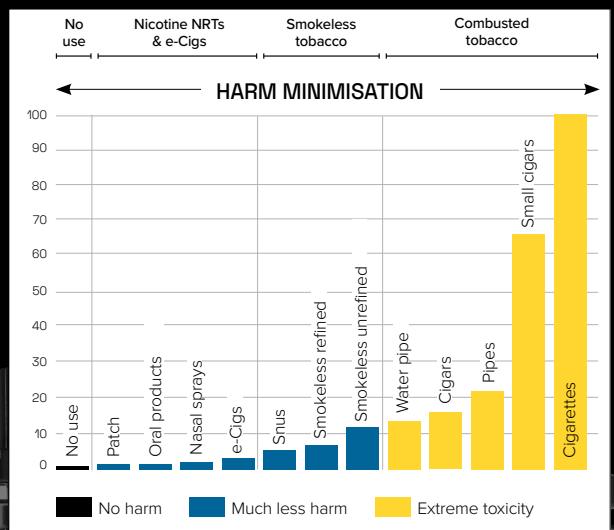
Just as buildings have escape routes or doors in case of fire, smokers seeking to quit have multiple “escape routes” from the dangers of combustible cigarettes. Nicotine pouches, vapes and snus offer safer alternatives that can help smokers transition away from the harmful effects of combustible tobacco.

That is because the vast majority of harm caused by smoking comes from thousands of toxins released by the burning of tobacco in combustible cigarettes.

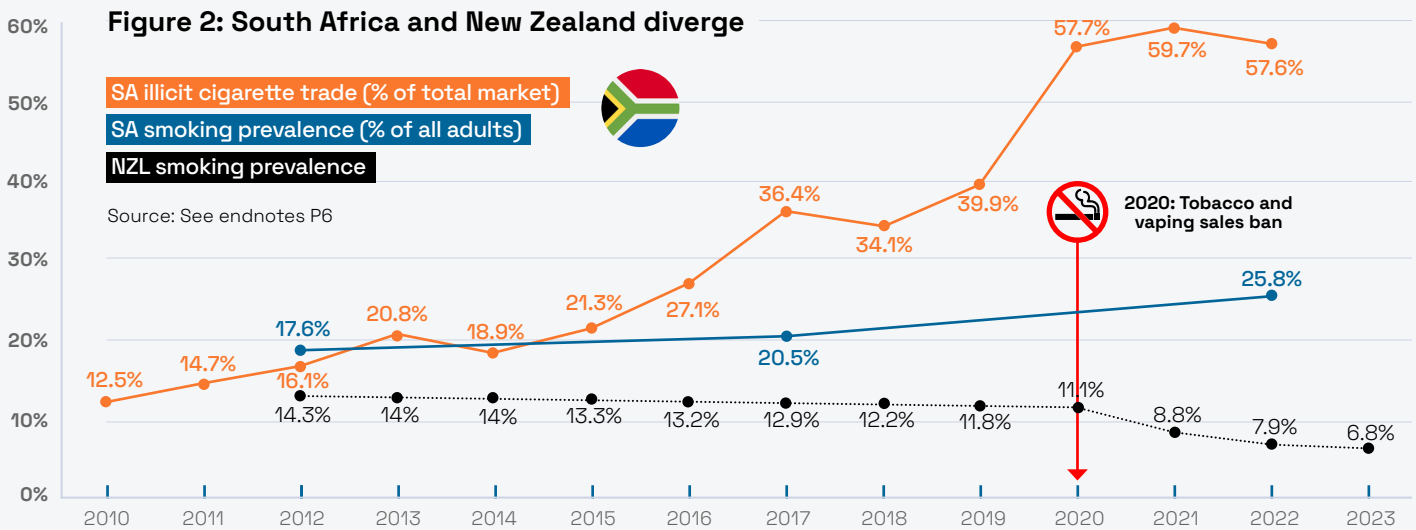
Evidence of how much safer these alternative products are is abundantly clear.

For example, the UK Royal College of Physicians (RCP)⁴ states that the health hazards arising from long term vapour inhalation from e-cigarettes is unlikely to exceed 5% of the harm from smoking tobacco. In other words, e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than cigarettes. Oral nicotine products, such as nicotine pouches, are even less harmful.

A visualisation of the relative harm of all products available for purchase in Sweden can be found in this table, from the Oral Nicotine Commission 2020 Report.



South Africa's new misstep: Prohibition



South Africa has recent experience of the pitfalls of poorly conceived regulation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government imposed a ban on all tobacco and nicotine product sales, ultimately fuelling an already expanding black market.

Despite the prohibition, more than 90% of smokers continued to buy cigarettes, albeit at inflated prices through illicit networks.⁵ When the five-month ban was lifted, these networks had entrenched themselves in the market.

By 2022, more than 57% of cigarettes sold in South Africa were illicit, costing the fiscus R27 billion annually in lost excise revenue that should be funding vital services. Illicit trade fosters other organised crime, further destabilising the economy.⁶

Prohibition of nicotine products in South Africa has failed.

In contrast, New Zealand has implemented regulations giving access to affordable and acceptable smokeless nicotine alternatives to adults who smoke. In turn, this has helped drive down illicit trade in tobacco to 2.9% in 2021.

In South Africa, 59.7% of all tobacco sales in 2021 were illicit. A staggering difference, that hurts not only the economy, but more importantly, leads to lives being lost unnecessarily.

What's next?

Despite its struggles to enforce existing laws, the South African government is now advancing the Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems (TPENDS) Control Bill. This legislation proposes stringent restrictions on vapes and other smokeless alternatives, treating them the same as cigarettes.

This approach disregards substantial evidence that these smokeless alternatives are significantly less harmful and are helping smokers to quit worldwide.

The new regulations would also restrict the dissemination of information about these products, effectively depriving smokers of potentially life-saving guidance. Given the government's track record with enforcement, these measures are likely to intensify the illicit trade of unregulated products, posing greater risks to consumer health and undermining public health goals.

By failing to differentiate between combustible cigarettes and less harmful alternatives, the proposed legislation overlooks the varying levels of harm associated with different products. This one-size-fits-all approach risks hindering harm reduction efforts and is likely to see South Africa fall even further behind smoke free pioneers such as New Zealand.

Conclusions

- 1. Impact of harm reduction:** New Zealand's smoking rate reduction demonstrates the effectiveness of harm reduction approaches, particularly through vaping alternatives.
- 2. Policy direction matters:** The contrasting outcomes between New Zealand and South Africa show that progressive harm reduction policies deliver better public health results.
- 3. Regulatory approaches:** New Zealand's supportive vaping regulations succeed where South Africa's proposed regulations will limit harm reduction potential.
- 4. Public health campaigns:** New Zealand's success relied heavily on clear communication about vaping as a safer alternative.
- 5. Prohibition doesn't work:** South Africa's total ban led to increased illicit trade, economic damage and reduced access to regulated smokeless alternatives.
- 6. Ongoing challenges:** Continued vigilance is needed to maintain progress, particularly regarding youth vaping.

Recommendations

- 1. Adopt harm reduction strategies:** South Africa can reduce smoking rates by following New Zealand's harm reduction model.
- 2. Regulatory balance:** Create frameworks that protect public health while keeping harm reduction products accessible.
- 3. Public health campaigns:** Implement comprehensive public health campaigns that provide clear, factual information about the benefits of harm reduction products.
- 4. Monitor and evaluate:** Regularly assess harm reduction strategies to ensure effectiveness.
- 5. Address youth uptake:** Implement safeguards to prevent youth uptake of vaping while still promoting these products to adult smokers as safer alternatives. This can include age restrictions, marketing regulations and educational initiatives.
- 6. Reverse the effects of prohibition:** Regain control of the market through evidence-based regulations and enforcement.

By learning from New Zealand's experience and embracing harm reduction, South Africa can make significant strides in reducing smoking-related harm and improving public health outcomes.



- 1:** [Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products \(Vaping\) Amendment Act 2020](#)
- 2:** Smokefree [Vaping to quit](#)
- 3:** Ministry of Health [Smoking status of daily vapers: New Zealand Health Survey 2017/18 to 2021/22](#)
- 4:** Royal College of Physicians [Nicotine without smoke: Tobacco harm reduction, 2016](#)
- 5:** REEP, University of Cape Town [Lighting Up The Illicit Market](#)
- 6:** Oxford Economics [Impact of the Tobacco Industry in South Africa](#)

Tobacco sales ban - 2020 graph (p5)

- BMJ Open - [Tax revenue lost due to illicit cigarettes in South Africa: 2002-2022](#)
- 2012: SciELO - [SAMJ: South African Medical Journal](#)
- 2017: GATS - [Global adult tobacco survey](#)
- 2022: saMRC - [First national Global Adult Tobacco Survey highlights the huge burden of tobacco use in SA](#)