

MEDIA RELEASE

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Illegal tobacco: New Illicit Tobacco Ladder shows which states are up for the tackle and which are still on the bench

In a bid to assess progress in the fight against illegal tobacco the Australian Council on Smoking and Health (ACOSH) today released a National Illicit Tobacco Ladder — a state-by-state league table ranking how governments across the country are performing.

The results show a lopsided effort, with clear front-runners like Queensland and South Australia — followed by a sharp drop-off across the remaining states and territories, some of which are barely off the bench.

It's a performance that is justifiably worrying for Australian communities, who are paying the price — from escalating violence, including firebombings, shootings and extortion, to the widespread availability of cheap illegal tobacco that risks driving smoking rates in the wrong direction.

“To shut down the illicit tobacco business model once and for all, every state and territory needs to turn up and play their role — backed by strong, coordinated leadership from the federal government,” said Laura Hunter, CEO of ACOSH.

ACOSH has put every jurisdiction under the microscope — benchmarking supply chain controls, penalties and enforcement — exposing the gaps illegal operators are exploiting across the country.

“The state of play shows a stark drop-off from the top two, with most jurisdictions falling well behind. Without tighter licensing, stronger enforcement and tougher, immediate penalties, illegal operators will continue to thrive,” Hunter said.

But even the top performers have room to strengthen their approach — with the oversupply of tobacco retailers emerging as a key issue all governments must address nationwide.

Australia currently has around 40,000 stores selling tobacco, despite only around 10% of adults smoking.

“That's more outlets than everyday essentials like bread and milk — for a highly addictive, toxic product used by a small minority,” Ms Hunter said.

“It's a clear oversupply, and it makes effective oversight incredibly challenging — creating ideal conditions for illicit trade to thrive. We need to be far more selective about who is allowed to sell tobacco.”

The message from the league table is clear: some governments are playing finals-level footy — others need a full rebuild.

“For those stuck at the bottom of the ladder, this should be a wake-up call,” Ms Hunter said. “When teams keep underperforming, the coach comes under pressure — and it should be no different here.”

“Governments around the country are on notice: if you’re not controlling illegal tobacco, you’re dropping the ball on public health.”

Support Resources

- Quitline: Call 13 7848 (13 QUIT) for free, confidential coaching and support.
- Quit.org.au: for digital tools and resources.
- GP Consultation: Speak to your local doctor about Medicare-subsidised nicotine replacement therapies (NRT) and prescription options.

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