

# Tobacco smuggling in Europe lower than industry figures suggest

December 10 2012

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The prevalence of tobacco smuggling in Europe is lower than industry figures suggest, reveals the largest study of its kind, published online in *Tobacco Control*.

Significantly, it is availability, rather than price, that seems to determine the level of [illicit trade](#), the research suggests a finding that runs directly counter to the arguments proffered by the [tobacco](#) industry say the authors. They base their findings on a representative population sample of 1000 people from each of 18 European countries: Albania; Austria; Bulgaria; Czech Republic; Croatia; England; Finland; France; Greece; Hungary; Ireland; Italy; Latvia; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Spain, and Sweden.

Only tobacco purchased from unauthorised sources or sold at very heavily discounted prices from legitimate retailers was defined as having been illicitly traded. [Health warnings](#) and / or tax stamps that were either absent / inappropriate / tampered with, or clearly those of a duty free outlet were deemed the hallmarks of smuggled products.

Among the 18,056 participants, some 5,268 (27% of the sample) classified themselves as current smokers; the final analysis was based on the responses of 5,114. When quizzed about the provenance of their [tobacco products](#), most respondents said they had bought them from a legal source. Just 4% said that they had purchased their tobacco illegally, amounting to 296 packs.

The only distinguishing feature of the purchasers of illicitly traded products was their [educational attainment](#): those with low levels were significantly more likely to buy them. Two thirds (65.5%) of illicitly traded packs had an inappropriate health warning; half had an inappropriate tax stamp; and just over one in four (27%) had been bought at a knock down price.

The prevalence of illicit manufactured packs of 10 and 20 cigarettes was 5.9%, and 11.7% for hand rolled tobacco, with an overall prevalence of illicitly traded products of 6.5%. Industry commissioned reports put the overall figure at just below 10%. Hand rolled tobacco was twice as likely to have been illicitly traded as manufactured cigarettes. The availability of illicit tobacco was four times as high in countries bordering Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, and Belarus than it was elsewhere.

Almost four out of 10 tobacco products (37.8%) purchased in Latvia came from an illicit source; in Sweden the comparable figure was almost one in five (19%), with Bulgaria coming third in the league table at 18%.

At the other end of the scale, the prevalence of illicitly traded tobacco was 1% or less in Greece, Austria and Portugal. Frequency of illicit trading was also higher in countries where a 20 stick pack of Marlboro cost less than the average, rather than more. Obtaining reliable figures on tobacco smuggling is difficult, precisely because this kind of activity does not tend to be recorded, say the authors, who acknowledge that their methods are not full proof either.

But to date, analysts have relied heavily on reports commissioned by tobacco manufacturers, which are unlikely to be neutral, they argue.

"The [tobacco industry](#) has claimed that high cigarette taxes drive smuggling, and has argued that with governments, sometimes successfully, that they should not increase tobacco tax because this will

increase the level of trade," they write. But they conclude: "This study suggests that the supply of illicit tobacco, rather than its price, is a key factor contributing to it."

**More information:** Illicit cigarettes and hand-rolled tobacco in 18 European countries: a cross sectional survey  
[doi10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050644](https://doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2012-050644)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Tobacco smuggling in Europe lower than industry figures suggest (2012, December 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-tobacco-smuggling-europe-industry-figures.html>

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