

Study refutes industry claims that ban on menthol cigarettes leads to increased use of illegal smokes

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A new research study has found that banning menthol cigarettes does not lead more smokers to purchase menthols from illicit sources,

contradicting claims made by the tobacco industry that the proposed ban of menthol cigarettes in the U.S. by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will lead to a significant increase in illicit cigarettes.

Researchers at the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Policy Evaluation Project at the University of Waterloo evaluated the impact of federal and provincial [menthol](#) cigarette bans in Canada by surveying smokers of menthol and non-[menthol cigarettes](#) before and after Canada's menthol ban.

Smokers were asked whether their usual cigarette brand was menthol-flavored and to report their last brand purchased. Those who were still smoking after the menthol ban were also asked where they last purchased their cigarettes.

Results showed that after the ban, there was no significant change in the purchase of cigarettes from First Nations reserves, the main source of illicit cigarettes in Canada.

"The [tobacco industry](#) has a long history of claiming that policies to reduce smoking will lead to substantial increases in illicit trade," said Dr. Janet Chung-Hall, a research scientist for ITC and lead author of the new study. "We can add the Canadian menthol ban to the long list of effective policies, such as graphic warnings and plain packaging, whose evaluation disproved the scare tactics by industry—showing that [illicit trade](#) did not, in fact, increase."

A 2022 study that combined the ITC Project data with data from a comparable Ontario evaluation study showed that the Canadian menthol ban led to an increase of 7.3 percent in quitting among menthol smokers above that of non-menthol smokers. Projecting this effect to the U.S., whose Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has proposed its own menthol ban, the ITC researchers estimate that a U.S. menthol ban

would lead 1.33 million smokers to quit.

"Our previous research from Canada and the Netherlands showed that a menthol cigarette ban leads to significant reductions in smoking," said Dr. Geoffrey Fong, principal investigator of the ITC Project and professor of psychology and public health sciences at Waterloo. "These findings combine to provide powerful evidence in support of FDA's proposed menthol ban."

Smoking is still the number-one preventable cause of disease and death around the world. Health authorities, including the World Health Organization, have long called for banning menthol in cigarettes because they promote smoking. Canada was one of the first countries to ban menthol cigarettes, with more than 30 countries implementing similar bans to date.

The study appears in the journal *Tobacco Control*.

More information: Janet Chung-Hall et al, Illicit cigarette purchasing after implementation of menthol cigarette bans in Canada: findings from the 2016–2018 ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Surveys, *Tobacco Control* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/tc-2022-057697](https://doi.org/10.1136/tc-2022-057697)

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