

# Australian research leaves smoking stereotypes up in smoke

February 19 2024

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A first-of-its-kind national study from The Australian National University (ANU) has debunked common myths about who smokes in Australia and will help provide better support and potentially life-saving

interventions for 2.5 million daily smokers.

The study, the first national population profile of people who smoke, counters widespread perceptions that smokers are largely uneducated, unemployed and suffer poor mental health. Instead, the findings make clear [smoking](#) affects the whole community. The research is [published](#) in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Study senior author Professor Emily Banks, from ANU, said the findings will help break down stigma surrounding people who smoke as well as ensure that support is better targeted to the people who need it.

"Smoking remains Australia's leading cause of premature death and disability, so it's vital that we better understand who smokes and the reasons why they do," Professor Banks said.

"People who smoke are often stigmatized and stereotyped as uneducated, unemployed and mentally ill."

Lead author, ANU medical student Jessica Aw said, "We analyzed nationally representative data on smoking in Australia to get a better understanding of who smokes in our population. We found that around 2.5 million people smoke daily in Australia; around 60% of people who smoke are men, 65% live in major cities, and 92% are non-Indigenous.

"In addition, 69% have completed year 12, 69% of those of working age are in paid employment and 73% had good mental health.

"Although smoking is more common in people who are experiencing structural disadvantage—like people in more [remote areas](#), Indigenous peoples, those with less education and those living in poverty—most people who smoke are educated, employed and in good mental health, similar to the total population of Australia."

Professor Banks said that people who smoke need to be supported and empowered to quit.

"They need to 'see themselves' in material and campaigns tackling tobacco," Professor Banks said.

"These findings should reduce unfair stigma around smoking and support evidence-based tobacco control measures."

Study co-author Associate Professor Raglan Maddox said, "Effective, relevant communications reflect the lives of people who smoke.

"We need both broad messages and specific approaches for priority populations, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, while taking care not to frame it as an issue unique to one particular group."

Aw said, "This is a world-first, as previous studies have focused on comparing people who smoke with those who don't, but have never looked at the population of people who smoke really are.

"No other study nationally or internationally has sought to comprehensively understand this. Results from previous studies have described associations with smoking such as people who smoke are more likely to be living rurally, unemployed, uneducated and have poor mental health which can contribute to [stigma](#).

"We now know the whole population of people who smoke are similar to the whole Australian population."

**More information:** Jessica Yi Han Aw et al, Who smokes in Australia? Cross-sectional analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics survey data, 2017–19, *Medical Journal of Australia* (2024). [DOI: 10.5694/mja2.52216](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.52216)

Provided by Australian National University

Citation: Australian research leaves smoking stereotypes up in smoke (2024, February 19)  
retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-02-australian-stereotypes.html>

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