

New Zealand vs. Australia: The Impact of Vaping Policies on Smoking Outcomes

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Executive summary

New Zealand

Since vaping was legalised and regulated in New Zealand in 2020 there has been an unprecedented decline in adult and youth smoking. The accelerated decline in smoking is mirrored by the rise in vaping.

From 2020-2023

Adults

- **The current adult smoking rate DECLINED by 39% (from 13.7% to 8.3%)** – an absolute decrease of 5.4%
- Māori smoking prevalence declined by 35% (from 31.2% to 20.2%)
- Smoking in the lowest socio-economic group declined by 50% (from 26.6% to 13.3%)
- Current adult vaping increased by 125% (from 5.3% to 11.9%) – an absolute increase of 6.5%

Youth

- Current youth smoking is under 3% and may be as low as 1%
- Current vaping in 2023 ranges from 16.4% (14-15 years) to 20% (15-17 years)

Australia

Adults

- **No clear evidence of any decline from 2020-2023**
- Current adult vaping increased 2.5% to 8.9%

Youth

- Current youth smoking in 2022/23 was 3.4%
- Current vaping ranges from 12.9% (12-15 years) to 22.1% (16-17 years)

Black market

- Australia's 'de facto' prohibition of vapes has resulted in a thriving black market, making access easy for young people. Much of this trade is controlled by criminal networks, and there is currently a violent turf war to gain control over it.

Conclusion

The legalisation and regulation of vaping and its widespread use in New Zealand has been a major public health success in reducing smoking with no clear evidence it has resulted in any more youth vaping than in Australia.

In contrast, Australia's prohibitionist approach to vaping occurs in a context of smoking rates stagnating, a thriving black market, and no clear difference in youth vaping rates. We believe the Australian anti-vaping policy is contributing to the slower progress in eliminating smoking in Australia, or alternatively the NZ vaping policies are enhancing the reduction in smoking.

Australian authorities should review the New Zealand approach and its potential benefits for Australia.

Notes

Unless otherwise stated prevalence estimates for smoking and vaping refer to use in the last month or at least monthly, which we call current smoking here. It is the only use metric where we have enough comparable data.

There is very limited data from Australia for 2020 due to COVID-19, so we often need to rely on earlier surveys.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors of this briefing have ever received funding from e-cigarette or tobacco companies. No funding was received for the preparation of this report.

Dr Colin Mendelsohn and Dr Wodak were Board Members of the Australian Tobacco Harm Reduction Association (ATHRA) when it received seed funding to assist with establishment costs from 2017-2019. This funding was publicly declared. They personally received no payments or financial benefits from ATHRA.

Professor Hall has not received any funding from the alcohol, pharmaceutical, tobacco or e-cigarette industries. His past research on tobacco related topics was funded by the NHMRC

Prof Borland has no conflicts. He has never worked for or accepted funding from any entity associated with tobacco or vaping. His recent research has been funded by his employers and grants largely from the Australian NHRC and US NIH.

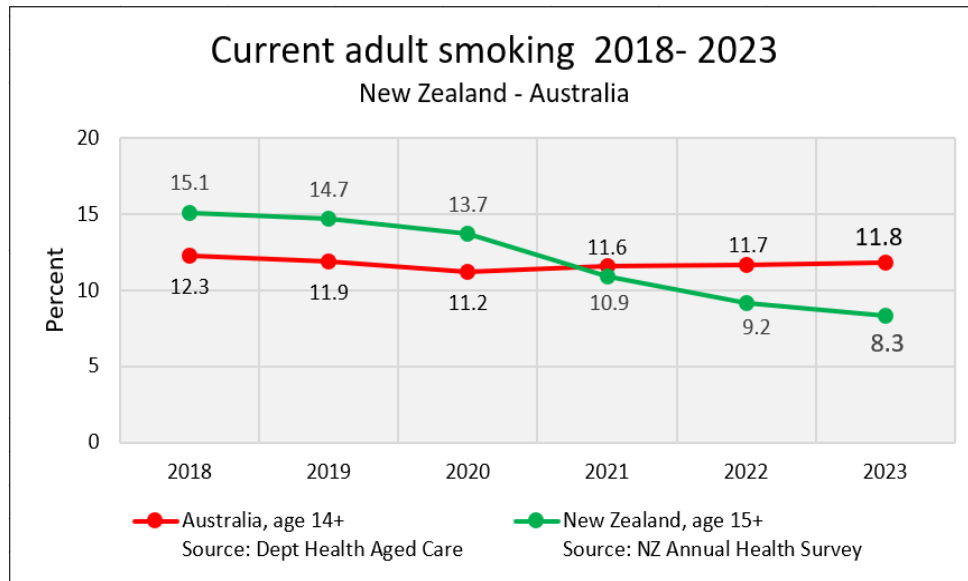
Adults

Adult smoking

In New Zealand, [legislation](#) to legalise and regulate vaping was passed in November 2020.

From 2020-2023, the adult smoking rate (smoked once or more in the last month)

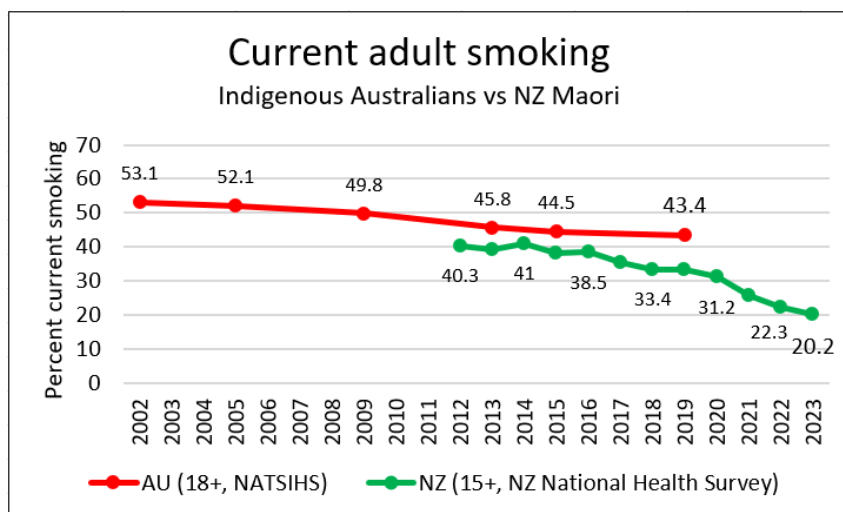
- **Declined in New Zealand by 39% (age 15+)** from 13.7% to 8.3%. ([NZ Annual Health Survey](#))
- **Increased marginally in Australia** (age 14+) from 11.2% to 11.8%. ([Dept Health and Aged Care](#))
However, the [National Health Survey](#) found current prevalence was 10.6% in 2022 (age 18+)



It is highly likely that vaping has been the major driver of the reduction in smoking in New Zealand. No other significant tobacco control policy change occurred during this time, except for the annual excise rise in line with inflation, a policy matched in Australia. ([NZ Ministry of Health 2023](#))

Indigenous and disadvantaged people

There was a 35% decline in **Māori smoking** from 2020-23. ([NZ Annual Health Survey](#)) Currently 20.2% of Māori aged 15+ smoke. The smoking rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (18+ years) was 43.4% in 2018-19. ([NATSIHS](#))

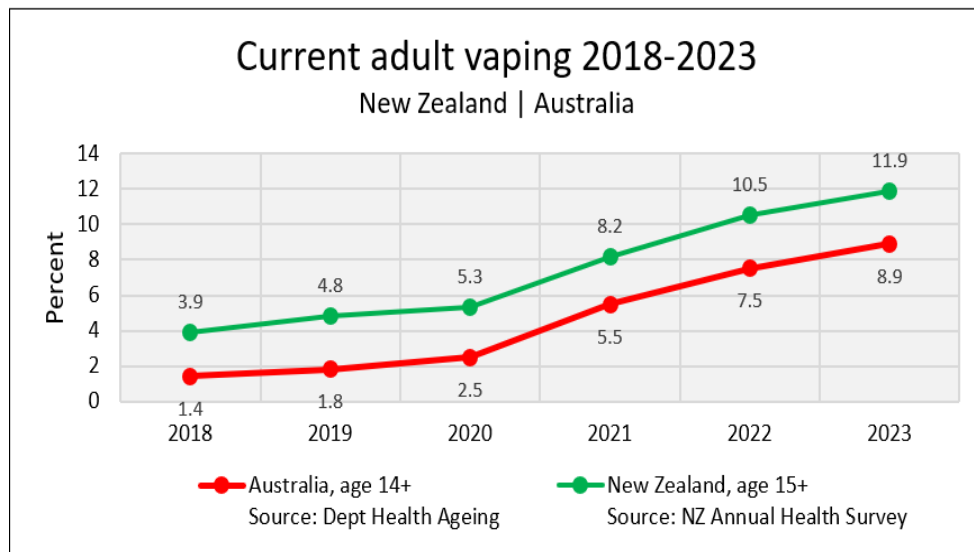


In New Zealand, current smoking in the lowest socio-economic group declined by 50% (from 26.6% to 13.3%).

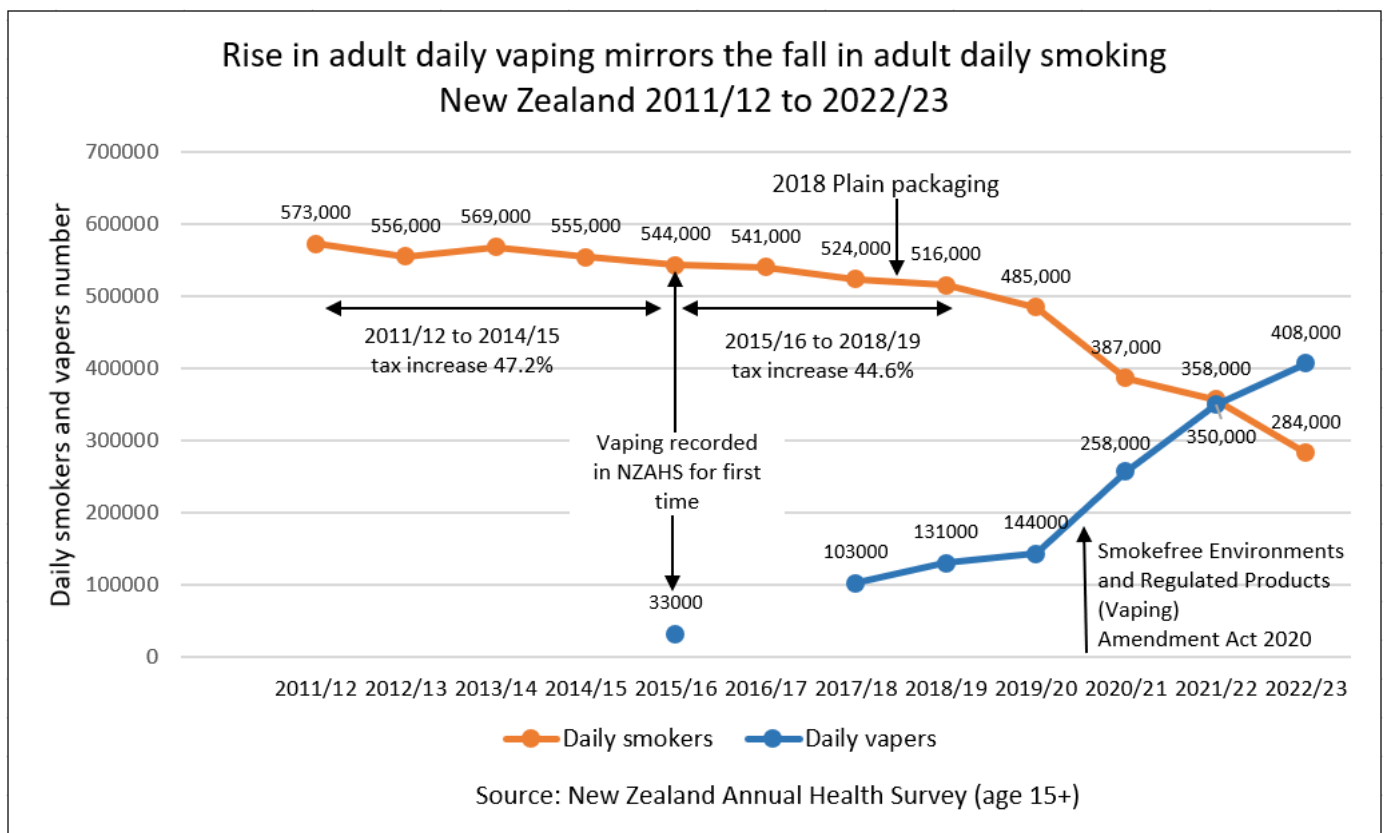
Adult vaping

In 2023, the current adult vaping rate was

- **11.9% in New Zealand** ([NZ Annual Health Survey](#))
- **8.9% in Australia** ([Dept Health and Aged Care](#))



The following timeline suggests that policies such as taxes and plain packaging contributed to a gradual decline in smoking, but the availability of vaping was mirrored by an unprecedented fall in smoking rates.



([New Zealand Annual Health Survey](#)).

Why has vaping not reduced smoking in Australia?

If vaping is responsible for the smoking decline in New Zealand, why don't we see a similar but smaller decline in Australia which has a current vaping rate not much lower. There are two possible explanations

1. **Daily** vaping is higher in NZ. Daily vaping is associated with higher quit rates than less frequent vaping. In New Zealand, 81.5% of current vapers vape daily. In Australia 63.6% of current vapers vape daily (unpublished data from the 2022 ITC survey).
2. In countries where vaping is more restricted like Australia, smokers who vape may be significantly less likely to quit than smokers in countries with less restrictive policies. ([Yong H et al. Nicotine Tobacco Research 2017](#))

Youth

Youth smoking

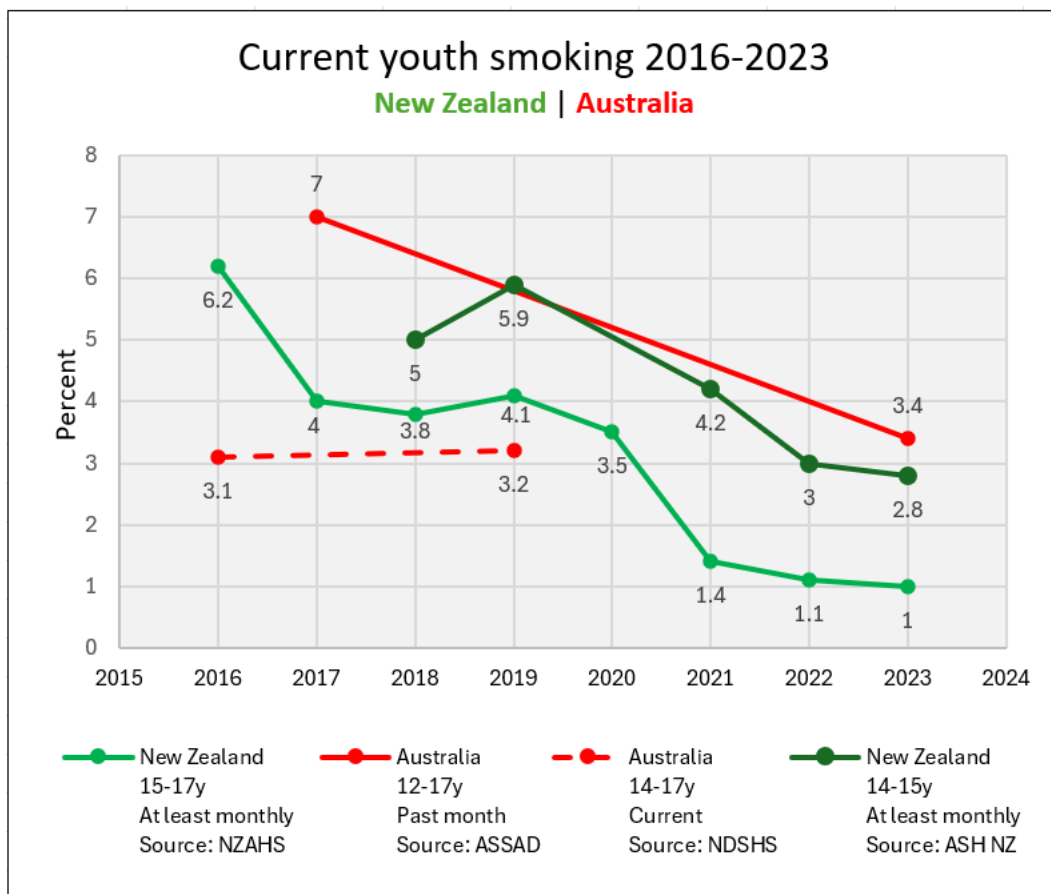
Youth smoking rates are declining in both countries.

New Zealand

- 1% (15-17-year-olds) in 2023 ([New Zealand Annual Health Survey](#))
- 2.8% (14-15-year-olds) in 2023 ([ASH Year 10 Snapshot Survey](#))

Australia

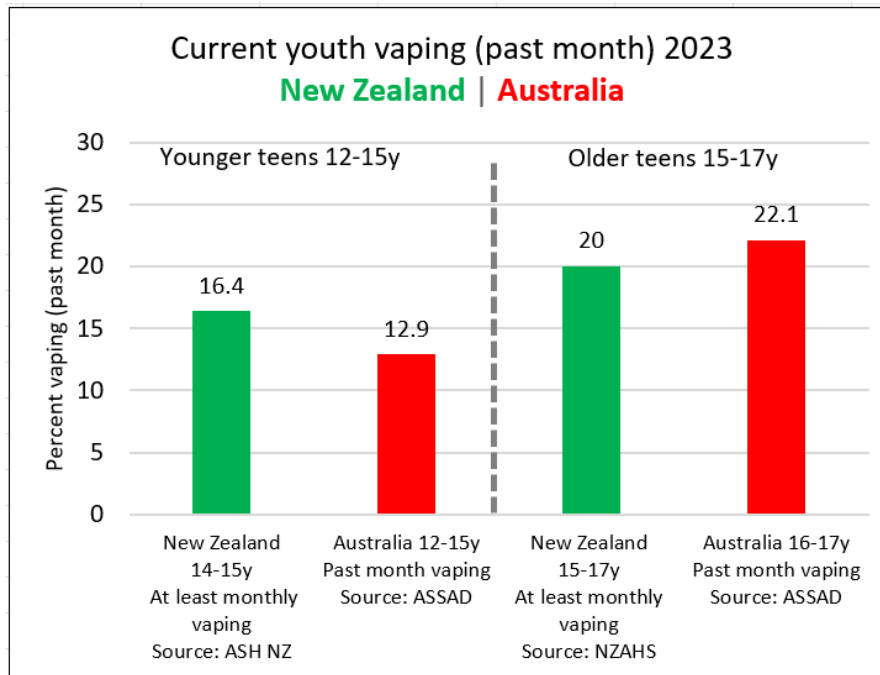
- 3.4% (12-17-year-olds) in 2023 ([ASSAD](#))
- 3.2% (14-17 year-olds) in 2019 (NDSHS [2016](#), [2019](#))



Note: Daily smoking is a better metric for harm. Recent data is available from New Zealand, but the most recent reliable daily data for Australia are from 2019 (NDSHS [2016](#), [2019](#))

Youth vaping

Youth vaping rates in the two countries in 2023 are remarkably similar despite a much more restrictive vaping policy in Australia. Vaping increases with age.



Sources

New Zealand

- [ASH Year 10 Snapshot Survey](#) (14-15 years)
- [New Zealand Annual Health Survey](#) (15-17 years)

Australia

- [ASSAD](#) (12-15 years, 16-17 years)

The black market

An important result of Australia's restrictive regulatory model has been the creation of a thriving black market for vape products. [Over 90%](#) of Australia's adult vapers purchase their products from illegal sources. In sharp contrast to Australia, there is no significant black market for vapes in New Zealand.

Some consequences of the black market for vapes in Australia are

- Control by criminal networks. Australia's black market for vapes is mostly controlled by the same [criminal networks](#) that import illicit tobacco. These criminal gangs are engaged in an escalating turf war to gain market share, with [firebombing](#) of tobacco shops and public executions (e.g., [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). According to the [Iron Law of Prohibition](#), illegal drugs become more potent and more dangerous.
- No tax is collected on vapes sold on the black market, in contrast to the legal sales in New Zealand.
- Funding of criminal activities. Health Minister [Mark Butler](#) says the black market for vapes is "funding the criminal activities of organised crime gangs, drug trafficking, sex trafficking and the like".
- Easy access for underage users. As [Professor Nicole Lee](#) from the National Drug and Research Institute (Melbourne) explained recently in *The Conversation*, the black market "makes it easier, not harder, for teens to access them [vapes], because there are no restrictions on who can sell or buy them."
- Endurance. Research has shown that black markets have only rarely been significantly disrupted by enforcement or crackdowns in Australia or overseas.

Policy implications

The legalisation and regulation of vaping in New Zealand has been a major net public health success in reducing smoking rates. The increased vaping rates only offset the public health gains to a small degree as "vaping poses only a small fraction of the risks of smoking". ([OHID, England, an evidence update 2022](#))

In comparison, Australia's prohibitionist approach to vaping has seen smoking rates stagnate and the emergence of a dangerous black market with no apparent benefit in inhibiting youth vaping.

The data presented suggest that Australia is not doing any better at restricting youth vaping than New Zealand, but may be severely disrupting the potential of vapes to reduce smoking.

Regulation should find the optimal balance between facilitating legal access for adult smokers while restricting access by youth. The preferred approach is a tightly regulated consumer model with nicotine vaping products sold by licensed retail outlets with strict age-of-sale verification. Regulation should be proportionate to risk and reflect the lower harms of vaping relative to smoking. A consumer model would bring Australia into line with other Western countries such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom and improve population health.

([Mendelsohn CP et al. Drug Alc Depend 2023](#))

Australian authorities should review the New Zealand approach and its potential benefits for Australia.

References

[Current vaping and current smoking in the Australian population aged 14+ years: February 2018-March 2023. Dept Health and Aged Care. 2023](#)

[New Zealand Ministry of Health, Annual Health Survey 2022-23](#)

[Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products \(Vaping\) Amendment Act 2020. New Zealand](#)

[ABS. National Health Survey 2022. Released 15 Dec 2023](#)

AIHW. National Drug Strategy Household Surveys, [2016](#), [2019](#)

[National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey. ABS 2018-19](#)

[ASH Year 10 Snapshot Survey – youth smoking and vaping. 2018-2023](#)

[Australian secondary school students' use of tobacco and e-cigarettes \(ASSAD\), 2022/2023](#)

[National Youth Tobacco Survey \(NYTS\). Centers for Disease Control 2004-2023](#)

[Mendelsohn CP, Wodak W, Hall W. How should nicotine vaping be regulated in Australia? Drug Alc Depend 2023](#)