



# Understanding the impact of smoking

Australians have come to enjoy living in a mostly cigarette-free environment. Travel to a country that doesn't restrict smoking in public places and, as you breathe in secondhand smoke during a train or bus trip, you'll gain a new appreciation of the difference. But understanding the far-reaching benefits of smoking restrictions underpinned by government policy and legislation requires sophisticated and ongoing data collection and analysis.

---

Enter the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), which helps guide, inform and measure the impacts on public health of reducing smoking rates. The AIHW is an independent government organisation that produces authoritative and accessible information and statistics to inform and support better policy and service delivery decisions. This includes measuring the impact of public health policies, such as the National Drug Strategy.

The AIHW's data is a valuable resource for academic researchers. But it's also used in Australia by state and federal government agencies and non-government organisations, as well as internationally to collaborate with organisations such as the OECD and the WHO.

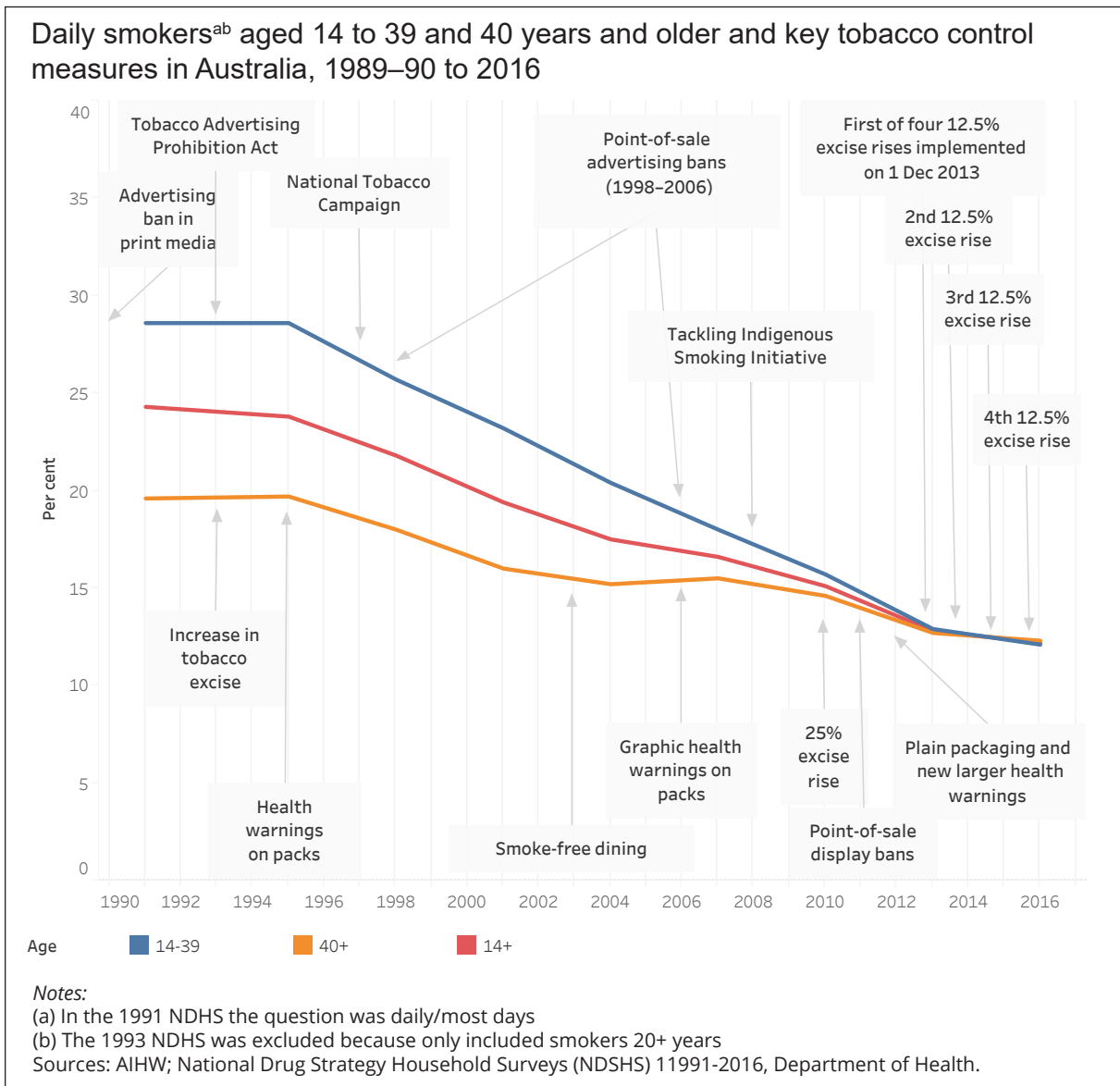
Dr Robert Tait, with the National Drug Research Institute at Perth's Curtin University, is one of many researchers worldwide who tap into data gathered and made available by the AIHW. 'The Institute's statistics appear in all my written work,' he explains. 'It's a fundamental resource for all drug researchers.'

Dr Tait is one of the authors of the report [Identifying the Social Costs of Tobacco Use to Australia in 2015/16](#), which estimated smoking caused around 20,000 deaths across the country and is responsible for more than \$136 billion annually in treatment and lost productivity.

The AIHW has been tracking the behaviour and attitudes of Australians to smoking since 1998, mainly through the National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS). Carried out every 3 years, the survey asks Australians a range of smoking-related questions. Do they smoke? How often? At what age did they start? It also explores the use of illicit drugs and alcohol. And it asks whether people support government policies and programs to reduce smoking and its harmful consequences. And, it reveals, most do support these policies and actions.

## The Australian Government has been tracking the behaviour and attitudes of Australians to smoking since 1985.

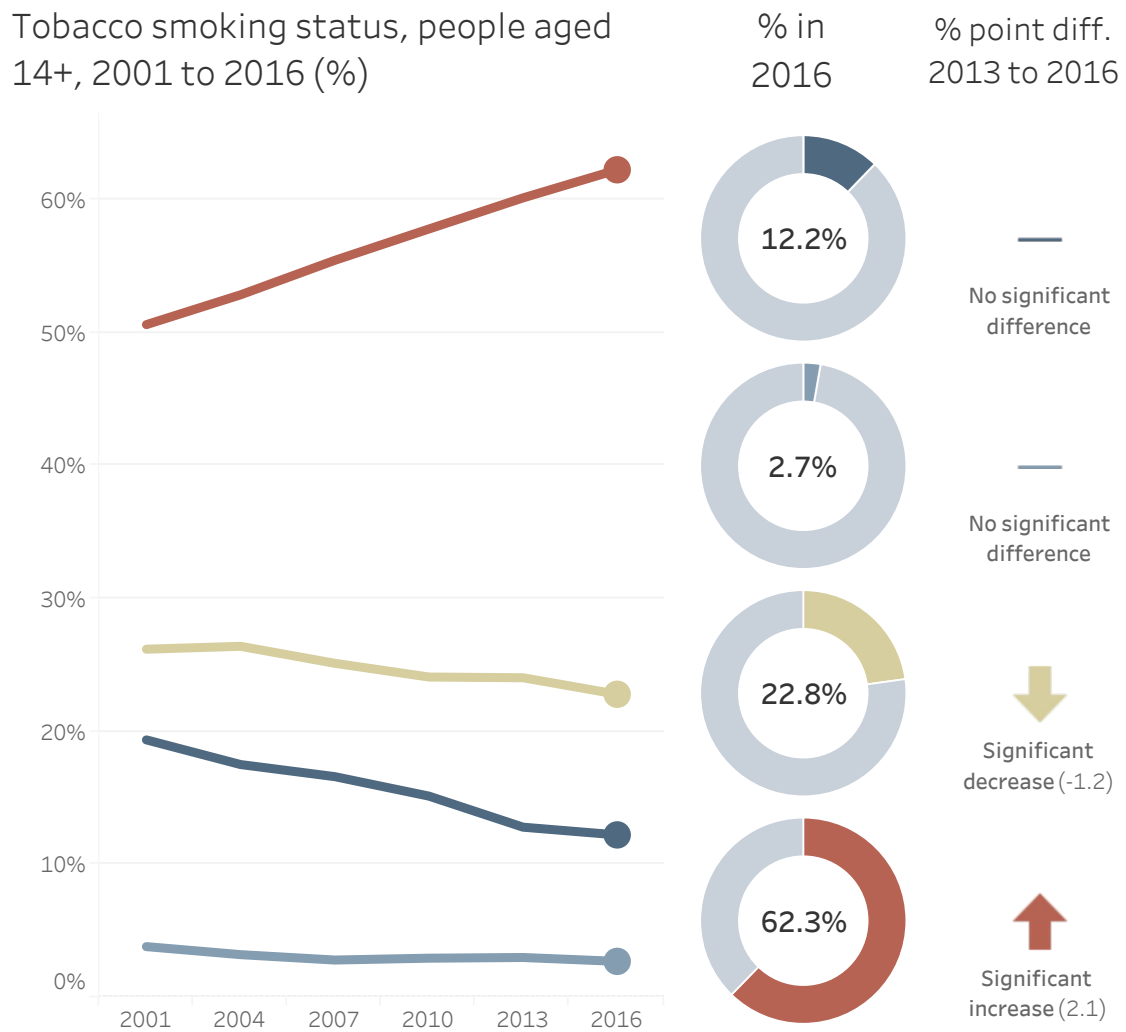
This chart shows the smoking rate decreased in people aged 14 and above between 1991 and 2016. The steady decline can be correlated with the introduction of control measures such as: advertising bans; tax increases on tobacco products; the introduction of plain packaging and graphic health warnings; and the reduction of allowances on duty-free tobacco.



from <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/contents/drug-types/tobacco>

An advisory body of researchers and representatives of Australian health departments and non-government organisations, such as the Victorian Cancer Council, provides input on the NDSHS. This ensures the survey evolves to cover new developments, such as the advent of e-cigarettes and legalisation supporting the medical use of cannabis.

'To understand emerging issues and develop sound policy, it's important we have the most up-to-date information,' says Cameron LeMaitre, Director of Governance, Research and International Policy Section at the Federal Department of Health. 'There's evidence, for example, that e-cigarettes in Australia are increasingly being marketed to children and adolescents, so there's a need for data that ensures e-cigarette regulations protect young Australians.'



Source: AIHW National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) <<http://www.aihw.gov.au>>  
Some data may have high relative standard error.

The NDSHS is one of several reports produced regularly by the AIHW and available on its [website](#), including an annual compendium of the most recently available information on the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs in Australia. Special reports include the recent [Burden of Tobacco Use in Australia](#) and other topical issues such as tobacco use by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, prisoners, and pregnant women.

## How else can NDSHS data be used to drive change and monitor policy effectiveness?

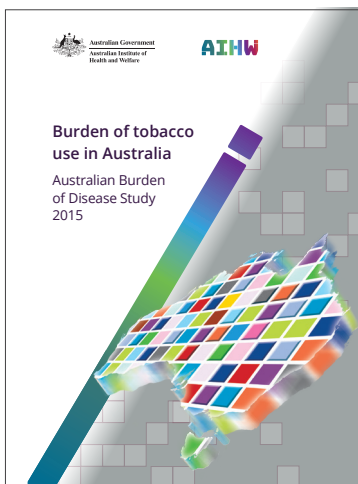
The NDSHS remains contemporary by continuous development of new survey questions to ensure policymakers have access to the latest evidence on emerging issues.

With a range of new government policies introduced in recent years to combat the harms caused by drug and alcohol use, future editions of the NDSHS report will help policymakers and researchers understand whether these initiatives are working, and providing evidence to help answer questions such as:

- Has banning the over-the-counter sale of codeine products brought down rates of pharmaceutical misuse?
- Has the legislation of cannabis for medical purposes had an effect on rates of recreational use?

Every NDSHS report up to 2016 is available from the AIHW website ([www.aihw.gov.au](http://www.aihw.gov.au)). The 2019 NDSHS has been completed and the report is due out later in 2020.

### For further information



Burden of tobacco use in Australia: Australian Burden of Disease Study 2015



Australia's health 2018



People with disability in Australia



Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia