

Smuggled and fake tobacco

Illicit tobacco – whether it's smuggled or fake - puts children at risk. That's the view of nine out of 10 people in the North West, according to major new research by partners in the North of England Tackling Illicit Tobacco for Better Health programme.¹

Nearly two thirds also think it brings crime into local communities.²

In July 2009 an initiative was launched to rid the North West of illicit tobacco, with the aim of cutting smoking-related death rates and clearing the region's streets of a significant source of crime.

Illicit tobacco is in high demand in the North of England due to high levels of smoking and low income levels.

The initiative brings together health organisations through Smokefree North West, trading standards departments, and Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC) for the first time in the UK. They will be co-ordinating a regional crackdown on the trade, which according to Cancer Research UK kills four times as many people as smuggled illegal drugs.³ An estimated 60 million cigarettes and 15 tonnes of illegal tobacco were seized in HMRC operations in the region in 2008/09.⁴

It is important to change the attitudes of consumers towards those who supply these illegal goods. Many will have been offered cheap cigarettes, perhaps in a pub or their workplace. Some may think they are getting a good deal and that 'robbing the taxman' is to be applauded. However, if they buy these products they are supporting an illegal trade which encourages smokers to continue their unhealthy habit and specifically targets the young and the vulnerable.

Dr Ruth Hussey, North West Regional Director of Public Health, said: “Smuggled and counterfeit tobacco can be half the price of genuine products and it encourages people to keep smoking. It also provides a source for children and young people to access tobacco.”

Andrea Crossfield, Director of Smokefree North West, said: “Adults need to realise that if they buy cheap illegal tobacco they are supporting a trade run by people who don’t care who they make their profits from, including our children and young people.”

A recent survey of almost 14,000 young people by Trading Standards North West exposed how widespread the problem is locally. Up to half admitted buying fake cigarettes and one in five of making purchases from street sellers, neighbours – and even ice cream vans.⁵

To help stop this illegal trade contact the Customs Hotline with information about illicit tobacco sellers on 0800 59 5000 or via the website www.hmrc.gov.uk.

There are three types of illicit tobacco.

Smuggled	Involves the illegal transportation, distribution and sale of legitimately manufactured tobacco products. The product is diverted, usually when in the wholesale distribution chain, avoiding payment of tax.
Bootlegged	Tobacco products are purchased in a country with a low level of taxation and illegally brought into countries with higher taxation rates.
Counterfeit	Involves the illegal manufacture of tobacco products, usually abroad but sometimes in the UK. The product is then transported, distributed and sold, avoiding tax.

Smuggling statistics

- Illicit tobacco kills four times as many people as smuggled illegal drug⁶
- An estimated 60 million cigarettes and 15 tonnes of illegal tobacco were seized in the region in 2008/09⁷

- Four thousand fewer people each year would die from smoking-related illnesses in the UK if smuggling was eradicated ⁸
- HM Revenue and Customs estimates that about one in seven cigarettes is illicit ⁹
- The illegal trade results in £2.5bn a year in lost revenue and also harms the businesses of local shopkeepers ¹⁰
- Counterfeit cigarettes have been found to contain some unsavoury contents including rat droppings, sawdust and beetles. ¹¹

To find out more about the *North of England Tackling Illicit Tobacco for Better Health* programme please visit www.illicittobacconorth.org

References

^{1 and 2} North of England Public Opinion Survey. This public opinion survey consisted of 6,000 telephone and street interviews carried out in July 2009.

³ Cancer Research UK

^{4, 7, 9 and 11} Her Majesty's Revenue & Customs (HMRC)

⁵ Market Research Report for Trading Standards North West, 25 June 2009

^{6 and 8} Why combating tobacco smuggling is a priority, West et al, BMJ 2008; 337:a1933
http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/337/oct09_2/a1933

¹⁰ Tackling Tobacco Smuggling Together, HMRC, November 2008
<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/pbr2008/tobacco-2800.pdf>