



# High regret among people who smoke reinforces strong support for smokefree legislation

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# Summary

We have previously explained why [the coalition government has no mandate to repeal the smokefree legislation](#) and [outlined youth and young adults' very strong support for denicotinisation](#), large reductions in tobacco availability, and the smokefree generation policy. In this briefing, we draw together findings from different surveys undertaken to estimate public support for the measures contained in the [Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Amendment Act 2022](#) (SERPA Act). We also consider regret and desire to quit among people who smoke and conclude that not only does the coalition government have no mandate to repeal the SERPA Act, but doing so would create a policy vacuum that fails to support the aspirations of people who smoke, the vast majority of whom wish to be smokefree.

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Public support for smokefree policies has typically been high, and likely bolstered by evidence that tobacco companies have targeted children,<sup>1</sup> and undermined studies documenting their products' harms.<sup>2,3</sup> Widely viewed as corporate pariahs,<sup>4</sup> [tobacco companies have done little to earn public trust](#) and much to merit the loss of social acceptability they have experienced.<sup>5</sup> Widespread distrust has seen strong support for robust smokefree policies.<sup>6</sup>

Young people strongly support measures introduced in the [Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Amendment Act 2022](#) (SERPA). As [we explained in an earlier briefing](#), a 2023 survey of 3414 16 to 29 year olds found very large majorities want a smokefree future and protection from an industry that has targeted them unscrupulously. In-depth analyses found young people considered the smokefree generation (SFG) policy empowering, believed it would protect their freedoms, and called on the government to implement it.<sup>7</sup>

The [International Tobacco Control programme](#), a global study with [an NZ-arm](#), examines use of diverse nicotine products and estimates support for policies among people who have smoked or recently quit smoking. [Findings released in late 2023](#) showed people who have recently quit strongly supported the Smokefree 2025 goal and the three measures introduced in the SERPA. While support and opposition were more evenly poised among people currently smoking, a majority supported the SFG (59% cf. 33% that opposed this measure) and were more likely to support than oppose denicotinisation (48% cf. 32%).

These data were collected before the coalition government proposed repealing the SERPA Act. After the coalition agreement details became public, [and given the lack of public consultation and mandate](#) for changing this law, [Health Coalition Aotearoa](#) commissioned a public opinion survey. The [results](#) again showed very high support for the SERPA; more than two thirds (67%) supported retaining the law, 77% supported denicotinisation and around two thirds (68%) supported reducing the number of stores selling tobacco and creating a smokefree generation (65%). Nearly two thirds (64%) of 2023 National voters surveyed supported retaining the SERPA and around three quarters of coalition party voters supported the denicotinisation policy (80% of National voters and 72% for both ACT and NZ First voters).

In short, support for the SERPA Act is high among young people, who stand to gain (or lose) most from the measures it contains, and who want policies that promote their wellbeing.<sup>7-9</sup>

Support is also high among the general public, who want stronger regulation of tobacco.<sup>5</sup> Even people who smoke, who might be expected to oppose these measures, were more likely to support than oppose the SFG and denicotinisation policies.

Support from these different groups may reflect the high regret people who smoke express. Nearly all people who smoke have tried to quit, plan to try quitting in the future, and do not want their children to smoke.<sup>10 11</sup> International studies first documented high regret among people who smoke 20 years ago;<sup>12</sup> this finding challenged the choice narrative tobacco companies have promoted and suggests people would not smoke, if only they could stop.<sup>13</sup>

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We see very similar results in Aotearoa NZ. The [2023 ITC EASE NZ](#) study found that 74% of those surveyed who currently smoke regretted having started to smoke; 84% would like to stop smoking, and 81% had made a quit attempt (41% had tried quitting in the last year). Over two thirds (69%) planned to quit smoking with nearly a third (31%) aiming to try quitting in the next six months. However, 87% reported feeling “somewhat” or “very” addicted to smoking.

Evidence of high and sustained regret among people who smoke challenges [ACT's recent media release](#). This party claimed: “The problem is the health lobbyists leading the charge [to retain the legislation] are hopeless on the economics of black markets, they're hostile to personal freedom, and they're disinterested [sic] in the voices of actual smokers who would be made miserable under a prohibitionist tobacco regime”.

In fact, [72% of ACT voters support denicotinisation](#) and the party is out of touch with what people who smoke would find helpful. More importantly, inconsistencies in ACT's approach raises important questions about who is shaping their policy. How can ACT justify a referendum on Te Tiriti o Waitangi while they are ignoring their own voters' clear policy preferences?

What measures would people who smoke find helpful? The answer is clear: denicotinising tobacco so it is less addictive and much easier to stop using. The SERPA does exactly that by setting a new nicotine standard that would render smoked tobacco products essentially non-addictive.

Politicians who genuinely want to reduce smoking will stop taking “[soundings](#)” from tobacco companies and start listening to people who smoke. Repealing the SERPA Act flies in the face of public opinion and removes a vital measure designed to help the thousands of people who smoke and desperately want to quit. Implementing the legislation will help those people achieve their smokefree aspirations, bring [profound health, economic and social improvements](#),<sup>15</sup> and benefit future generations. A [government that has claimed it will make principled and evidence-based decisions](#) has only one course of action: ensure the SERPA Act is implemented as planned.

## What is new in this briefing?

- Support for the [Smokefree Environments and Regulated Products Amendment Act 2022](#) (SERPA Act) comes from all sectors of society, including young people, the general public, and people who smoke.
- Very high levels of regret among people who smoke parallel the high proportion that has tried to quit and that plans to quit; however, most people who smoke feel addicted.
- Reducing the nicotine content permitted in smoked tobacco products has high public support and would greatly assist people who smoke to realise the hope so many have of becoming smokefree.

## Implications for public health practice and policy

- Retaining the SERPA Act and denicotinisation measure would respect public opinion and support people who smoke.
- A government committed to acting in line with research evidence must retain the SERPA Act and ensure its full and rapid implementation.

### Authors details

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