

## ILLEGAL TOBACCO AND ILLICIT DRUGS – MORE THAN JUST COMFORTABLE BEDMATES

### What is happening in the Tobacco and illicit Drug Marketplace?

Here is an introduction to an excellent analysis by: Kevin McDonald

For the full article go to [drugfree.org.au](https://drugfree.org.au)

The disproportionate tax rate applied to legal cigarettes in Australia has arguably been a success in reducing smoker numbers over the years but on balance today, that strategy is no longer effective and now serves to fuel black-market crime. The high price of legal cigarettes has become the primary driving force behind the illegal tobacco trade which is firmly embedded together with illicit drug networks.

Australia ranks among the highest tobacco taxing countries in the world. The federal government draws about \$34 tax on every \$50 pack of cigarettes sold. This financial year, the government expects to earn revenue of \$7.4 billion, down from \$12.6 billion in 2022–23, and an earlier peak of \$16.3 billion in 2019–20.

In the context of a prevailing economic crisis, the price of legal cigarettes has encouraged many to seek the much cheaper, illegal version. A standard pack of illegal cigarettes cost about \$15 and it doesn't take the infamously pipe smoking Albert Einstein to work out the shift from legal cigarettes to illegal cigarettes is a direct consequence of the current tax structure. The federal government has created a mess they steadfastly refuse to fix.

As cigarette taxes were progressively raised, organized criminals quickly realized the dollar value of the illicit tobacco market and exploited established drug importation and distribution networks to gain a foothold. Local drug dealers operated at street level selling illegal cigarettes and also setting up store front businesses – right under the nose of governments and police. Today, the resulting crime impacts are increasing and of grave concern.

According to a 2025 article reproduced by the Institute of Public Affairs, in Victoria alone more than 100 tobacco shops have been firebombed over the past year and a woman was even tragically killed in Melbourne in an apparently mistaken arson attack.

It would be easy to say state governments and police agencies have fallen asleep at the wheel over the period the unlawful tobacco trade evolved and became established – because that is precisely what has happened.

This failure to act highlights three critical concerns.

1. Immutable connections between the illegal tobacco market to illicit drug networks
2. Failures of law enforcement to effectively police the illicit drug trade at the local level, and by extension the illegal cigarette trade who use the same networks.
3. There is probably no better example than the illegal tobacco trade of why illicit drugs should never be decriminalised.

#### References:

1. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2025/04/02/tobacco-excise-revenue-has-tanked.html>
2. <https://www.news.com.au/finance/culture/inside-parliament/treasurer-jim-chalmers-shuts-down-calls-to-slash-tobacco-taxes/news-story/48e45db9cf2ff88f1a9858bdeb1d1ee4>
3. <https://ipa.org.au/read/how-australias-tobacco-excise-has-led-to-a-black-market>



## THE ROTARY ACTION GROUP – ADDICTION PREVENTION (RAGAP)

For the past 12 months, Drug Free Australia has partnered with the Rotary Action Group for Addiction Prevention in promoting and selecting a young person to become a Youth Prevention Influencer. We are now very pleased, to formally introduce you to the Oceania Youth Prevention Influencer for 2026.



She is Eva, a senior secondary student, who resides in South Australia and has received sponsorship from two Rotary Clubs. Therefore, Eva has agreed to attend the forthcoming Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna, to join in the Youth Forums in March.

Eva's submission to qualify included reasons strong arguments on WHY we should stay illicit drug free and HOW we can achieve this.

Her personal strengths include the ability to speak in public, often 'off the cuff' and to respond well to audience questions. At school she has addressed her peers at school assemblies and functions. She is also a highly skilled basketballer reach state level.

Here is a glimpse of the type of forum in which Eva will be able to participate.

[VIEW HERE](#) >

In addition the Rotary Action Group has a Side Event (Youth Prevention Influencers (YPI): Peer-to-Peer Prevention Training Led by Umbrella Youth Organisations) in which Eva will take part on Wednesday 11 March from 3-4 pm.

This side event showcases Youth Prevention Influencers (YPI), a youth-led, peer-to-peer prevention training programme developed and implemented by umbrella youth organisations active in larger regions. YPI empowers young people to become credible prevention actors within their own communities, addressing substance use, mental health, and the growing influence of online drug cultures.

Grounded in non-formal education and co-creation, YPI combines professional training, safe-space dialogue, and practical peer action. This approach is closely aligned with the key conclusions of the recent Trimbos Institute study "Not Without Us?!", which demonstrates that youth participation in drug prevention is only sustainable and effective when young people are engaged not merely as a target group, but as active co-designers and co-implementers of prevention initiatives. The study highlights the necessity of clear enabling conditions, a shared language, appropriate professional guidance, and a solid evidence-based prevention framework. These principles explicitly underpin the methodology of YPI and are further substantiated in the Trimbos report included as an annex.

The programme explicitly responds to challenges highlighted at the 69th Commission on Narcotic Drugs, including ICT-enabled drug promotion, early exposure, and social vulnerability. Speakers from youth organisations will share practical lessons on training design, safeguarding, inclusion, partnerships with prevention professionals, and measuring social impact. The session aims to inspire country representatives, NGOs and civil society actors to replicate or adapt the model in their own contexts, strengthening cross-sector cooperation and ensuring that prevention remains by youth, with youth, and for youth.

## KERRYIN'S KORNER

### Marijuana scheduling – in the United States – a Dangerous Precedent

This month Kerryin addresses a vital issue –

Recently the President of the USA has moved Marijuana from Schedule I to Schedule III. He claims to have received no opposition to this change in schedule. Apparently, this is not accurate. Most people, experienced in this field, or drug information organisations educated in marijuana use, recognise this as a troubling move for many reasons.



#### 1. Health Risks Are Still Significant

Marijuana is not harmless, especially for adolescents and young adults.

Research links frequent use to:

- Impaired memory and learning
- Increased risk of anxiety, depression and psychosis
- Teens who regularly smoke marijuana increase the risk of dropping out of school early.

Consequence: Schedule III downplays these risks and would likely increase use.

#### 2. Insufficient FDA-Approved Medical Evidence

The fact is that whole-plant marijuana lacks the large-scale, FDA-style clinical trials required for most medicines. Existing FDA-approved cannabis-based drugs (like dronabinol) already exist, making rescheduling unnecessary.

#### 3. Increased Youth Access and Normalisation

Rescheduling sends a message that marijuana is “safe” and will likely increase teen ‘experimentation’.

Many public health groups see that this would clearly undermine prevention efforts, especially in schools.

#### 4. Conflict With Federal and State Law Enforcement

Schedule III status would create legal grey areas:

- Marijuana would still be federally controlled but widely sold in some states
- Law enforcement could face confusion over regulation, prescribing, and distribution

A strong argument is that the system is not ready for this complexity.

[continued...](#)

## KERRYIN'S KORNER CONTINUED

### 5. Risk of Commercialisation Over Medicine

It seems clear that rescheduling would:

- Benefit large marijuana businesses more than patients
- Encourage profit-driven marketing, similar to tobacco or opioids
- Prioritise economic gain over public health.

### 6. Slippery Slope to Full Legalisation

Many see Schedule III as a step toward full legalisation because:

- It weakens federal drug policy
- It reduces the government's ability to discourage drug use

### 7. International Treaty Concerns

- The U.S. is aligned to international drug control treaties.
- Critics argue rescheduling marijuana could:
  - Violate or weaken these agreements
  - Reduce U.S. credibility in global drug enforcement

### 8. Executive Overreach Concerns

- Some argue a president should not unilaterally change drug scheduling.

They believe:

- Congress, not the executive branch, should make such major policy changes
- Using executive power sets a risky precedent

In summary, it is abundantly clear that this was not a decision made in the best interests of the public, especially regarding youth, teens and young adults.

As a drug & alcohol awareness educator with a tragic lived experience, I personally agree that this re-scheduling of Marijuana/cannabis will lead to far more harm than good and undermine the earnest efforts of drug prevention education.

*Kerryin Redpath*

**MORE**



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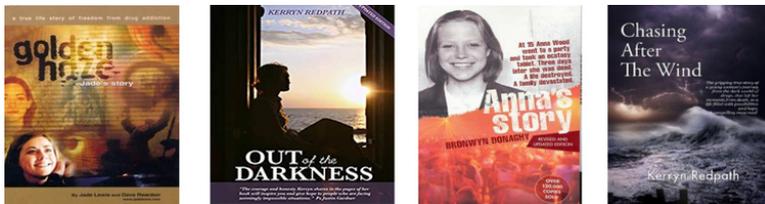


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For WCTU Primary & Secondary programs contact Dawn Stark: [drug-free@bigpond.com](mailto:drug-free@bigpond.com)

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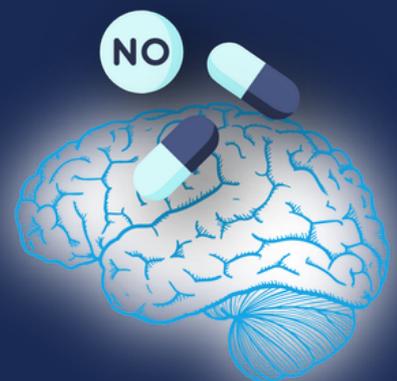
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