

The Canada-Wide Menthol Cigarette Ban Did NOT Increase Illicit Purchases

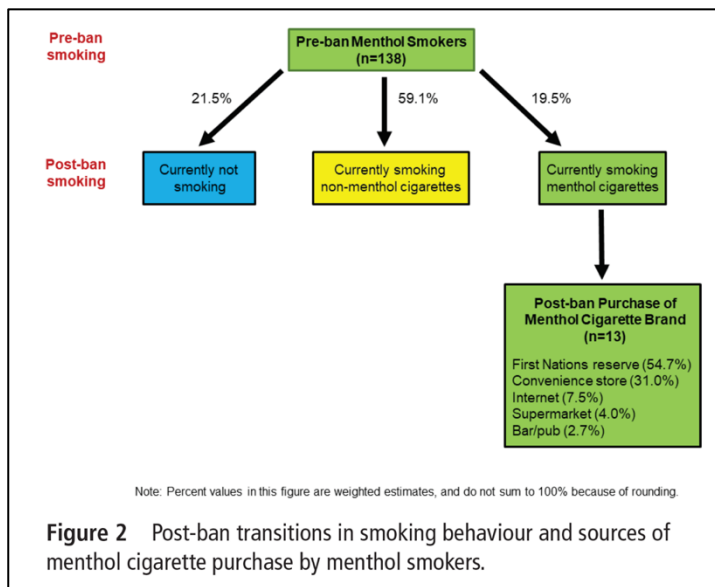
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Chung-Hall et al. (2021)¹ conducted a pre-post evaluation of the Canadian menthol cigarette ban across 7 provinces (covering 83% of the Canadian population) that implemented the ban in 2016-17. The ITC Project evaluation study included a breakdown of how menthol smokers changed their behavior after the menthol ban.

Figure 2 from the article shows that among the pre-ban menthol smokers, after the ban, 21.5% were no longer smoking (compared to 14.0% of non-menthol smokers after the ban, $p=0.06$), 59.1% switched to non-menthol cigarettes, and 19.5% reported still smoking menthol cigarettes. However, not all smokers reporting still smoking menthols were really smoking menthol cigarettes—some were reporting a menthol ‘replacement’ brand (those for which the pack color or brand name have been used to convey menthol-like qualities, as reported by previous studies in Alberta² and Ontario.³ Others who reported still smoking a menthol brand or one that was not clearly a menthol brand. Specific details are provided in the text of the article:



“Post-ban purchase of menthol cigarettes

Of the 38 pre-ban menthol smokers who said they still smoked menthol cigarettes at follow-up, 13 reported a menthol cigarette brand as their last purchase (36.1%, 95% CI 22.5 to 52.3), 5 reported a menthol ‘replacement’ brand (6.9%, 95% CI 2.7 to 16.8) and 20 reported a non-menthol brand or indeterminate brand (57.0%, 95% CI 41.4 to 71.4). Among the 13 post-ban menthol smokers who reported a menthol cigarette brand as their last purchase, 54.7% (95% CI 28.6 to 78.4) reported buying them from a First Nations reserve and 31.0% (95% CI 12.3 to 58.9) from convenience stores. Few smokers purchased menthol cigarettes from all other sources (range: 2.7% in bars/pubs (95% CI 0.2 to 26.5) to 7.5% by internet (95% CI 0.7 to 48.4)) (figure 2).”

It is important to note that the 19.5% of menthol smokers reporting still smoking menthols is close to the 22% reported by Chaiton et al. (2019).⁴ However, with additional questions about brand smoked, the ITC evaluation study was able to determine whether these reports were accurate. Many of them were not. After removing incorrect reporting of post-ban menthol cigarettes, **less than 10% of menthol smokers (13 of 138) were smoking illicit menthol cigarettes. And importantly, the percentage of pre-ban menthol smokers who purchased cigarettes from illegal sources after the ban was not higher than that of non-menthol smokers (12.2% vs. 9.0%).**

¹ Chung-Hall J, Fong GT, Meng G, Cummings KM, Hyland A, O’Connor RJ, Quah ACK, Craig LV. Evaluating the impact of menthol cigarette bans on cessation and smoking behaviors in Canada: Longitudinal findings from the Canadian arm of the 2016-18 ITC Four Country Smoking and Vaping Surveys. *Tobacco Control*. Epub ahead of print: 06 April 2021. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-056259>.

² Brown J, DeAtley T, Welding K, et al. Tobacco industry response to menthol cigarette bans in Alberta and Nova Scotia, Canada. *Tob Control* 2017;26:e71–4.

³ Borland T, D’Souza SA, O’Connor S, et al. Is blue the new green? Repackaging menthol cigarettes in response to a flavour ban in Ontario, Canada. *Tob Control* 2019;28:e7–12.

⁴ Chaiton MO, Nicolau I, Schwartz R, et al. Ban on menthol-flavoured tobacco products predicts cigarette cessation at 1 year: a population cohort study. *Tob Control* 2020;29:tobaccocontrol-2018-054841–2017.