

For immediate release

‘Not if, but when’: GSTHR Situation Report 2026 charts growing consumer demand for tobacco harm reduction, despite widening policy gulf

- The report’s analysis shows that **rising use of safer nicotine products (SNP) has coincided with declining smoking prevalence** across multiple countries and regions;
- Exclusive GSTHR estimates suggest that globally, **200 million people now use SNP**;
- SNP use is equivalent to a **fifth to a quarter of the global smoking population**;
- Since 2025, the balance of global policy has moved **further toward restrictive regulation and safer product bans**, while cigarettes remain universally legal.

Monday, 17 August 2026. Today, the Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction (GSTHR), a Knowledge•Action•Change project funded by Global Action to End Smoking, is launching [The Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction 2026: A Situation Report](#). The report is the fifth in a unique series documenting tobacco harm reduction’s development, history and possible futures.

The GSTHR research team’s analysis indicates that rising use of SNP, which include nicotine vapes, pouches, snus or heated tobacco products (HTP), has coincided with falls in smoking prevalence across 28 countries. The GSTHR researchers also developed new estimates for the global number of vapers and HTP users that were separately accepted for publication in two peer-reviewed journals, [Global Epidemiology](#) [1] and [JMIR Public Health and Surveillance](#) [2].

Covering developments from January 2025 to early 2026, the [Situation Report](#) offers a comprehensive overview of the international regulatory and policy landscape, the latest independent research on SNP and their role in smoking cessation, and the human cost of policies blocking harm reduction. Smoking remains a leading cause of preventable death worldwide, responsible for eight million deaths every year. A summary of the report follows overleaf.

Co-author Giorgi Mzhavanadze said: “It’s no coincidence that countries leading in tobacco harm reduction are also the world’s top performers on reducing smoking rates. Our analysis shows a pattern: across 28 countries, the rise of SNP use has coincided with clear falls in smoking prevalence. In Sweden, Norway, Iceland, New Zealand and the UK, the use of SNP has already overtaken smoking. This is substitution at work – and it’s good news for individual and public health.”

Co-author Harry Shapiro said: “For too long, international tobacco control has done little to help almost a billion people who still smoke – many of whom can’t or don’t want to stop using nicotine. Millions are now using safer products instead of deadly combustible tobacco. Making these products inaccessible through restrictive regulation or bans denies those who smoke access to tools that could reduce individual and population-level harm. Prohibition doesn’t improve public health – it just gifts organised crime new opportunities.”

David MacKintosh, GSTHR Project Director, said: “Since emerging in the 1980s as part of the response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, harm reduction has saved countless lives. In the 21st century, the sheer number of people who still smoke globally means that if harm reduction were equitably applied to tobacco use, the life-saving potential would be even greater. The Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction has been documenting the approach since 2018; today we’re proud to launch our fifth major report, offering original research, analysis and reflections on where tobacco harm reduction stands in 2026 – as well as what its future might look like.”

The report authors drew on multiple publicly available sources of information, including market data, data on the epidemiology of smoking and use of SNP, and the extensive country-based information held in the [online GSTHR database](#). Below is a summary of the key findings. Full references are accessible at the end of each chapter of the report.

>>Millions want safer alternatives to combustible cigarettes

Nicotine does not cause smoking-related diseases; burning tobacco leaves releases around 7,000 chemicals, including 70 known carcinogens, inhaled as smoke. No SNP burn tobacco and switching to any non-combustible products is substantially safer than continued smoking.

Original GSTHR research conducted for the report estimates that **around 129 million adults use nicotine vapes** and **around 49 million use HTP**, based on separate analyses. Combined with a fast-growing, though less well-quantified, base of snus and nicotine-pouch users, the GSTHR estimates that **around 200 million people worldwide now use SNP overall**. It is important to note that this figure is an approximate aggregate rather than a precise count of unique individuals: because some people use more than one SNP category, adding the product-specific estimates may involve a degree of double-counting.

Even so, **the scale of SNP use equates to between a fifth and a quarter of the global smoking population**, which remains at around one billion people. No longer marginal, SNP have become structurally embedded in the global nicotine market – presenting a major opportunity to improve public health by rapidly accelerating reductions in the number of people who smoke.

>>Rising SNP use coincides with declining smoking prevalence

In countries where consumers can access SNP, the GSTHR report finds a consistent pattern: **data from 28 countries show that rising SNP use has coincided with declining smoking prevalence**. In Sweden, Norway, Iceland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, the use of SNP has now overtaken smoking prevalence outright. While cautious, the report also notes **early, provisional signals of population-level health improvements in these countries**, including shifts in cardiovascular and respiratory indicators consistent with reduced exposure to combustion.

>>Inequalities continue to develop within tobacco harm reduction

Access to **tobacco harm reduction is heavily skewed toward high-income countries (HIC)**: of the 28 nations with the clearest substitution trends, 27 are high-income and one is upper-middle-income. In HICs, price structures often facilitate switching away from cigarettes. **In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), by contrast, the price premium on most SNPs is a direct barrier to harm reduction**. The GSTHR report reveals that disposable vapes cost on average 2.5 times the price of the cheapest cigarette brand in LMICs. **In most LMICs, home to 80% of the world's people who smoke, cigarettes remain the cheapest nicotine option**.

>>Scientific evidence builds for role in smoking cessation – even as misperceptions grow

In a 2025 update that consolidated a decade of accumulating trial data on the efficacy of vaping for smoking cessation, the latest gold-standard **Cochrane review found high-certainty evidence that vapes outperform NRT**. Multiple switching studies show **large reductions in toxicant exposure among people who switch from smoking to vaping**, approaching levels seen in people who quit entirely. The GSTHR report also presents evidence that **switching is more effective among disadvantaged populations than other cessation methods**; for example, research

showed that among socially disadvantaged adults in Australia, vapes produced 28.4% six-month cessation rates versus 9.6% for NRT, almost a threefold advantage, indicative of tobacco harm reduction's potential to reduce health inequalities. Yet **public misperception of relative risk is worsening**, even in countries that have embraced elements of harm reduction. By 2023, 57% of adult smokers in England incorrectly believed vapes were equally or more harmful than cigarettes.

>>Restrictions and prohibitions on safer products are increasing

Despite growing international evidence of the efficacy of harm reduction in reducing smoking rates, during the reporting period **restrictive policy actions that reduced or limited access to SNP vastly outnumbered pro-harm reduction reforms**. The most dangerous form of nicotine delivery, combustible cigarettes, remain universally legal.

Nicotine caps and flavour restrictions intensified, sometimes equivalent to de facto bans. Denmark's 9mg pouch cap is projected to remove approximately 90% of products from the market; modelling suggests 35% of affected users will turn to the black market and 13% will revert to smoking. At least ten countries enacted new SNP prohibitions during the report period; **by March 2026, one-third of the world's population, in 109 countries, were living under a complete ban on all SNP**. Restrictive regimes are fuelling large illicit SNP markets, with criminal supply-chain involvement including cartel activity in Mexico and fatal firebombing incidents in Australia.

>>Opposition from global health leaders is a major barrier to harm reduction

Institutional resistance to tobacco harm reduction remains strong. At the eleventh Conference of the Parties (COP) to the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, held in Geneva in 2025, the Convention Secretariat claimed that there is no legitimate role for tobacco harm reduction. **WHO continues pushing for bans or cigarette-equivalent treatment of SNPs**. However, a small but growing group of countries, including New Zealand, North Macedonia and the Solomon Islands, did raise harm reduction at the COP meeting, arguing for evidence-based, risk-proportionate policy, an unprecedented development.

>>The human cost of failing to integrate harm reduction is significant

Modelling studies suggest that **there are substantial likely benefits of facilitating harm reduction to reduce smoking-related death and disease**. US scenario modelling found 99% of tested vaping scenarios produced net gains in life-years (up to 65 million by 2100). Matching Sweden's low smoking rate across the EU could avert around 210,000 premature male deaths annually. The WHO's own investment cases document GDP losses of 1.1–2.9% from smoking in poorer countries, but none evaluate harm reduction as a potential solution.

>>Tobacco harm reduction: not if, but when

With around a billion people still smoking worldwide, the potential population-level health gains from further substitution remain vast. While governments and global institutions are likely to shape the pace of transition away from combustible tobacco, around the world millions of people are already making that transition themselves. **For tobacco harm reduction, the report concludes, it is not a matter of if, but when.**

*****Ends*****

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The Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction 2026: A Situation Report is authored by Harry Shapiro and Giorgi Mzhavanadze, with research analysis by Tomasz Jerzyński. It is published by Knowledge•Action•Change. The full report, plus policy-focused Briefing Papers in up to 13 languages and GSTHR's free-to-access global database is available at <https://gsthr.org>

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[1] Jerzyński, T., Mzhavanadze, G. and Stimson, G.V. (2026) 'Estimation of the global number of nicotine vapers in 2025', *Global Epidemiology*, 11, 100257. doi: 10.1016/j.gloepi.2026.100257. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590113326000167>

[2] Mzhavanadze, G., Stimson, G. and Jerzyński, T. (2026) 'Global heated tobacco product user estimates, 2014-2024: descriptive surveillance study using manufacturer disclosures', *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*, 12, e88761. doi: 10.2196/88761. Available at: <https://publichealth.jmir.org/2026/1/e88761>