

The Forgotten Smoker: Latin America

Latin America hasn't solved smoking; 9 out of 10 people in the region demand a better approach

Nine in ten adults surveyed in Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama want more done to address the harms of smoking

On average across Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama, nine in ten adults want more done to address the harms of smoking, and 86% say more taxes and restrictions on cigarettes won't be enough. Yet 83% wrongly believe nicotine causes cancer, a myth that keeps adults who smoke from seeing better alternatives

Buenos Aires, October 7, 2026 — Although studies from public health institutions point to a moderate decline in smoking in the region, with adult tobacco use in the Americas falling by almost a quarter over the last decade¹, people from Latin American say the problem is far from solved. *The Forgotten Smoker: Latin America*, a new survey conducted by Povaddo on behalf of Philip Morris International (PMI), finds that smoking remains a serious and unsolved public health challenge for people in Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama.

In the survey, respondents were shown the annual smoking death toll in their own country, and those numbers vary enormously: more than 50,000 in Mexico, compared with more than 15,000 in Colombia, over 1,500 in Costa Rica, and roughly 1,000 in Panama. Yet more than 90% of adults in every country say more needs to be done to address smoking. The public's concern doesn't scale with the size of the death toll. As long as people continue to die from smoking, the public wants more action.

The conclusions presented in PMI Technovation Buenos Aires, draw from a survey of 2,009 adults across Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Panama conducted by Povaddo in April 2026. On average, 72% of respondents believe smoking rates in their country are rising or unchanged, and 70% say tobacco control measures have not reduced the number of people who smoke. When reminded of how many lives smoking costs their country each year, 92% said more should be done.

"Smoking is not a solved problem, but it is a solvable one. Latin Americans are telling us clearly that the current approach isn't working, and they want public health policy to catch up with the science. The adults who still smoke deserve accurate information about better alternatives, not to be forgotten." — Matias O' Farrel, corporate affairs VP Latin America for PMI

A public ready for change, held back by myths

The research reveals a striking disconnect. Latin Americans recognize that smoking remains a serious problem, but most do not see the role smoke-free products could play in reducing its harm:

- **83%** mistakenly believe nicotine itself causes cancer. Nicotine is addictive, but it is not classified as a carcinogen by the WHO, FDA or IARC; it is the smoke and tar from burning tobacco that drive most smoking-related disease.

- **92%** believe all tobacco and nicotine products are equally harmful to the user.
- Only **10%** are familiar with heated tobacco products and **8%** with nicotine pouches.
- Only **6–10%** see heated tobacco or nicotine pouches as lower-risk than cigarettes.

At the same time, **42%** of adult smokers, on average, say they feel discriminated against because they smoke, rising to 68% in Costa Rica.

What Latin Americans say it will take

Survey respondents clearly support a smarter, science-based approach:

- **92%** say public health agencies should provide science-based information on the relative risks of different tobacco and nicotine products.
- **86%** agree a new approach to tobacco control is needed, because more taxes and restrictions on cigarettes will not be enough.
- **79%** agree products that pose higher health risks should be taxed more than lower-risk products.
- **80%** say adults who would otherwise keep smoking should have access to, and information about, a range of smoke-free products.
- **72%** say regulation should be updated regularly to keep pace with new smoke-free products.
- **67%** agree adults who smoke should be encouraged to switch from cigarettes to smoke-free products.

Adult smokers themselves point to information, more than price, as what would make the difference. On average, **74%** of cigarette-only smokers would be more likely to consider smoke-free products with accurate information at the point of sale, and **71%** with clarity on whether these products are less harmful than cigarettes, compared with 57% if they were more affordable. Three in four (**75%**) adults say government should consider the views of adult smokers when deciding how to tax and regulate these products.

"For the first time, the science, the technology and the public's will to act are all in place. What's missing is clear information and regulation that reflects the evidence. Latin Americans are asking for both, and adults who smoke are telling us that clarity would make them more likely to choose a better alternative." — Can Kuterdem, President, Latin America & Canada Region for PMI

Illicit trade: the hidden obstacle

The survey also identified illegal tobacco and nicotine products as an entrenched barrier to progress. **76%** of adults say their country has a problem with illegal products, and respondents estimate that nearly half (**47%**) of cigarettes smoked are illegal. **80%** say illicit products are a source of revenue for organized crime, and **94%** want the government to do more about it. Nearly two in three (**64%**) say regulations that allow the legal sale of a wide range of smoke-free products would help reduce illegal trade.

A blueprint for Latin America

The Forgotten Smoker: Latin America outlines a path toward ending smoking that includes:

- **Ensuring adults who smoke have clear information about better options**, delivered by sources they trust, including health professionals and the point of sale.
- **Letting the science lead**, with public health agencies providing evidence-based information on relative risk and correcting misinformation about nicotine.
- **Enacting science-based regulation** that is updated regularly and enables legal access to smoke-free alternatives for adults.
- **Adopting risk-based taxation**, keeping cigarettes at the highest rate while taxing lower-risk products in proportion to their risk.
- **Giving adult smokers a voice** in the policies that affect them.
- **Maintaining clear guardrails and combating illicit trade**, with access limited to legal-age adults and strict enforcement.

Country highlights

- **Mexico** has the highest smoking prevalence of the four countries (15%) and more than 50,000 smoking-related deaths each year. 78% say tobacco control has not worked, and 64% of adult smokers would be more likely to consider smoke-free products if a wide range were legally available.
- **Colombia** shows the strongest nicotine misconceptions: 86% believe nicotine causes cancer. But 72% of smokers would respond to government information on relative harm.
- **Costa Rica** is the most open to change: 75% say smokers should be encouraged to switch, and 73% see a meaningful role for innovation in reducing smoking rates.
- **Panama** shows the deepest concern about illicit trade (82%) and the strongest support for risk-based taxation (91%).

Survey methodology

The survey was conducted by Povaddo LLC for PMI from April 6 to 13, 2026, among 2,009 general-population adults aged 18 and older in Colombia (n=544), Costa Rica (n=498), Mexico (n=531) and Panama (n=436). Interviews were conducted online in Colombia and Mexico and through a mix of online and face-to-face interviews in Costa Rica and Panama. Data was weighted by age, gender and tobacco and nicotine use. Regional figures are averages of the four country results. Questions asked only of adult smokers are based on smaller samples.

Notes

¹ Adult tobacco use in the Region of the Americas fell from 18.2% in 2015 to 14.0% in 2024. Source: World Health Organization, *WHO global report on trends in prevalence of tobacco use 2000–2024 and projections 2025–2030* (2025); see also [PAHO/WHO, October 6, 2025](#).

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