



MALAYSIAN ILLICIT CIGARETTE CONSUMER PERCEPTION

Wawasanex Poll, 28 May 2026





ABOUT WAWASANEX

Wawasanex is a Malaysia-based public policy startup established in October 2024 to advance evidence-based policymaking and drive meaningful public discourse. Focused on three strategic pillars which are sustainable technology, national competitiveness, and quality of life, Wawasanex serves as a platform that brings together policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers to generate practical insights and innovative solutions for Malaysia's evolving policy landscape.

OVERVIEW: ILLICIT CIGARETTES IN MALAYSIA, WAWASANEX POLL FINDS



The consumer poll, conducted in May 2026, among 603 respondents across Malaysia, found that illicit cigarettes remain widely accessible and increasingly normalised, with 63.8% of respondents admitting to purchasing illicit cigarettes within the past 12 months. Affordability emerged as the strongest purchase driver (98%), followed by ease of access (85%), highlighting that price and convenience continue to outweigh awareness of risks.

The survey also points to strong public concern over the issue, with 85% expressing concern about the impact of illicit trade on public health and the economy. At the same time, respondents perceive enforcement gaps and widespread availability as enabling factors, with most indicating illicit cigarettes are easy to obtain through everyday retail channels.

Despite continued demand, public sentiment leans towards stronger intervention, with respondents calling for stricter penalties, stronger enforcement actions, and greater accountability across the supply chain. Overall, the findings indicate that tackling illicit trade will require a combination of enforcement visibility, deterrence, and reduced accessibility rather than awareness efforts alone.

THE OBJECTIVE

To build a clear, data-driven baseline on the reality of Malaysia's illicit cigarette trade from a consumer perspective.

The poll seeks to:

- Quantify the prevalence of illicit cigarette purchasing among Malaysian smokers
- Identify who is selling illicit cigarettes and where transactions take place
- Understand the price and accessibility dynamics sustaining demand
- Measure public awareness of legal consequences and enforcement activity
- Gauge public opinion for stronger policy and enforcement intervention

POLLING METHODOLOGY

This poll was designed and conducted by **Wawasanex**, in May 2026. A total of **603 respondents** were surveyed across a nationally representative sample spanning **Peninsular and East Malaysia**. Any conclusions drawn from this data represent the independent assessment of Wawasanex.





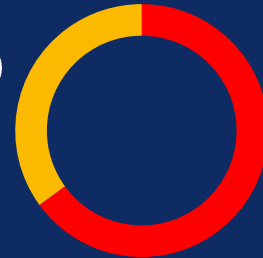
THE PERVASIVENESS OF THE BLACK MARKET

Q: In the past 12 months, have you purchased cigarettes that you knew or suspected were illicit?

65%

...of respondents acknowledge purchasing cigarettes they knew were illicit within the past 12 months

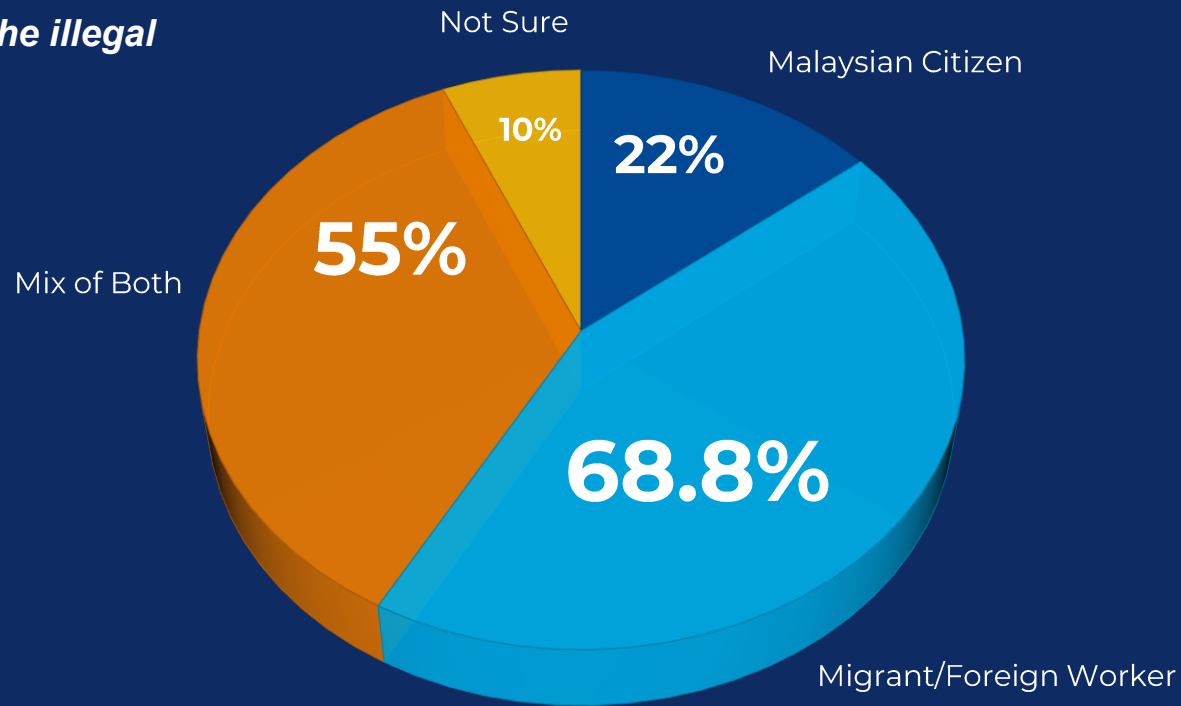
No (35%)



Yes (65%)

THE MARKET DRIVER ECOSYSTEM

Q: The person who sold the illegal cigarettes to you was?





THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

Step 1: The Perception

*Q: How easy was it to find or access
illicit cigarettes?*

99%

Find illicit products easy to access

(75% 'Very Easy' + 24% 'Somewhat Easy')

Step 2: The Physical Reality

*Q: Where did you purchase these
cigarettes?*

83.8% - Retail Shops

12.5% - Aceh Shop/Kedai Aceh

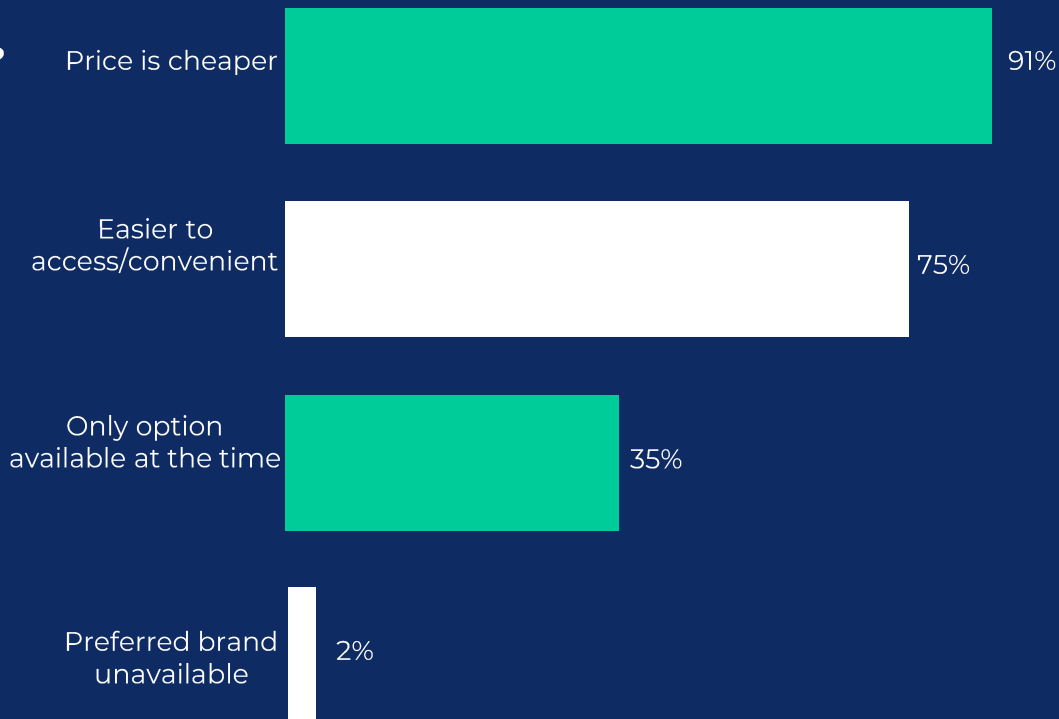
2% - Coffee Shops/Restaurants

THE PRICE IMPERATIVE

Q: Why did you buy illegal cigarettes?

91%

...cite a cheaper price as the absolute primary motivation for purchasing illegal cigarettes.

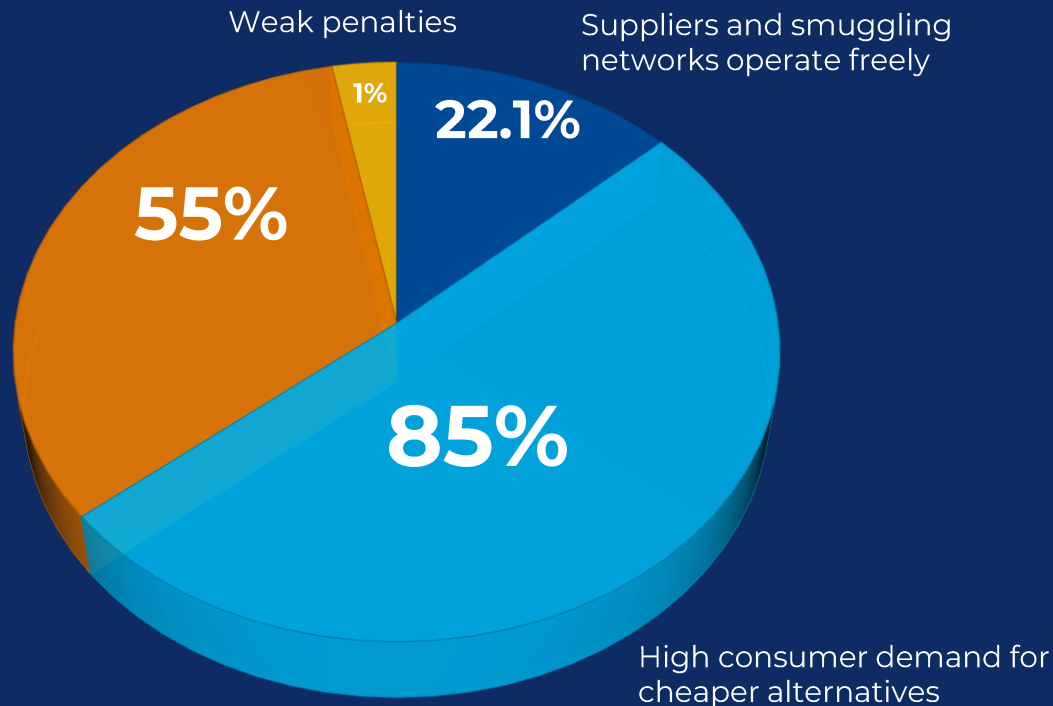


THE MARKET DRIVER ECOSYSTEM

Q: In your view, why do you think illicit cigarettes are so easily available in Malaysia?

Retailer's active willingness to stock illegal products

...The black market is sustained by a self-reinforcing cycle. High demand guarantees rapid turnover.



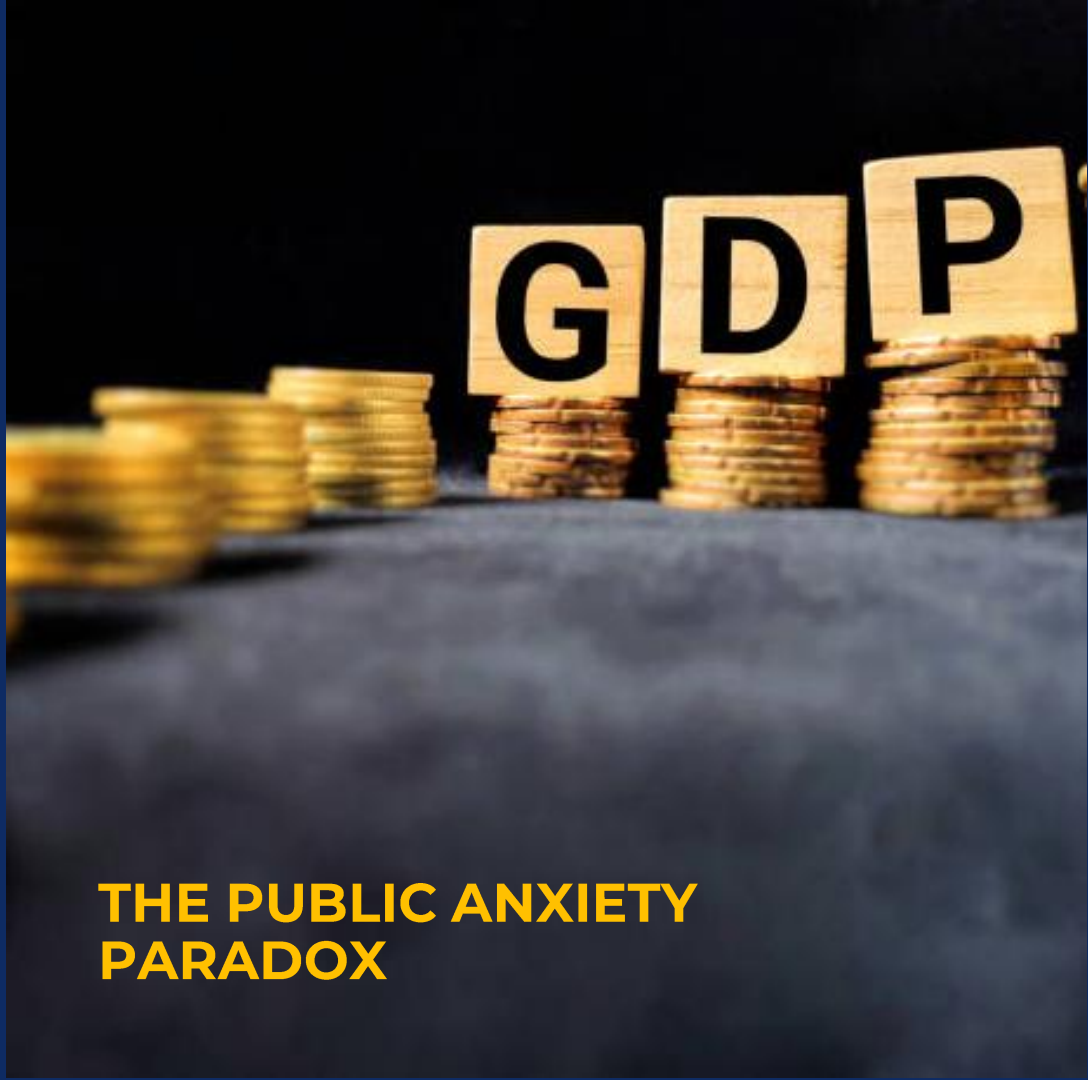
Q: How concerned are you about the impact of the illicit cigarette trade on Malaysians' health and the economy?

85%

Despite widespread purchasing, majority are very concerned about the crippling impact of the illicit cigarette trade on Malaysia's health and national economy.

Very concerned (85%)

Somewhat concerned (15%)



**THE PUBLIC ANXIETY
PARADOX**



Q: Which of the following measures would you support to combat the illicit cigarette trade?

87%

...of respondents asking for heavier penalties for anyone involved

67.8% - Direct fines on employers

65% - Stricter on the ground enforcement

43% - Public exposure of businesses

33.8% - Business license suspension

**THE PUBLIC MANDATE FOR
STRICT ENFORCEMENT**

ILLEGAL CIGARETTE SUPPLY CHAIN IN MALAYSIA

68.8%

identified **foreign worker**
as their seller

91%

buy because it's
cheaper



63.8% bought illegal cigarettes in the last 12 months,
equivalent to **3 million smokers***

83.8%

bought at
Sundry Shop



12.5%

bought at
Kedai Aceh

75% said illegal cigarettes are
very easy to get



*Based on the 4.5 million smokers recorded in Malaysia's National Health and Morbidity Survey 2023.



RECOMMENDATION

The poll findings point to five priority actions for policymakers and enforcement agencies:

Strengthen Enforcement Visibility Greater publicisation of raids, arrests, fines, and prosecutions is needed to close the perception gap. When fewer than 1% of the public associate weak penalties with why the trade persists, the consequences exist but are simply not being seen or felt on the ground.

Disrupt Point-of-Sale Access With 84% of purchases occurring at sundry shops and 12% at Kedai Aceh outlets, enforcement and retailer accountability measures must be concentrated at the retail level, where the illicit trade operates openly and without meaningful barrier.

Empower Consumers to Identify Legal Products Increasing awareness of JKDM's excise stamp verification tools like Setem Cukai and JKDM2u enabling quick legitimacy checks at the point of purchase and support anonymous reporting. To be complemented by establishing a publicly accessible national register of cigarette brands that are not registered with MOH, identified as illegal, or sold below the Minimum Retail Price (MRP), improving transparency and helping consumers avoid illicit products.

Combine Deterrence with Targeted Education Awareness of risks alone is insufficient to drive behavioural change. Despite 85% of buyers expressing concern about the trade's broader impact, purchasing continues. Campaigns must move beyond awareness to communicate tangible, personal consequences for both buyers and sellers.

Pursue Coordinated Multi-Agency Action A sustained and effective response requires enforcement agencies, retailers, and public education initiatives to operate in concert, disrupting supply chains, reducing retail accessibility, and reinforcing the legal, economic, and social consequences of participation in the illicit cigarette trade.

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