

REPORT



# Tale of Two Nations

Vol 4: A comparative study of how France and Sweden are faring in the fight against smoking



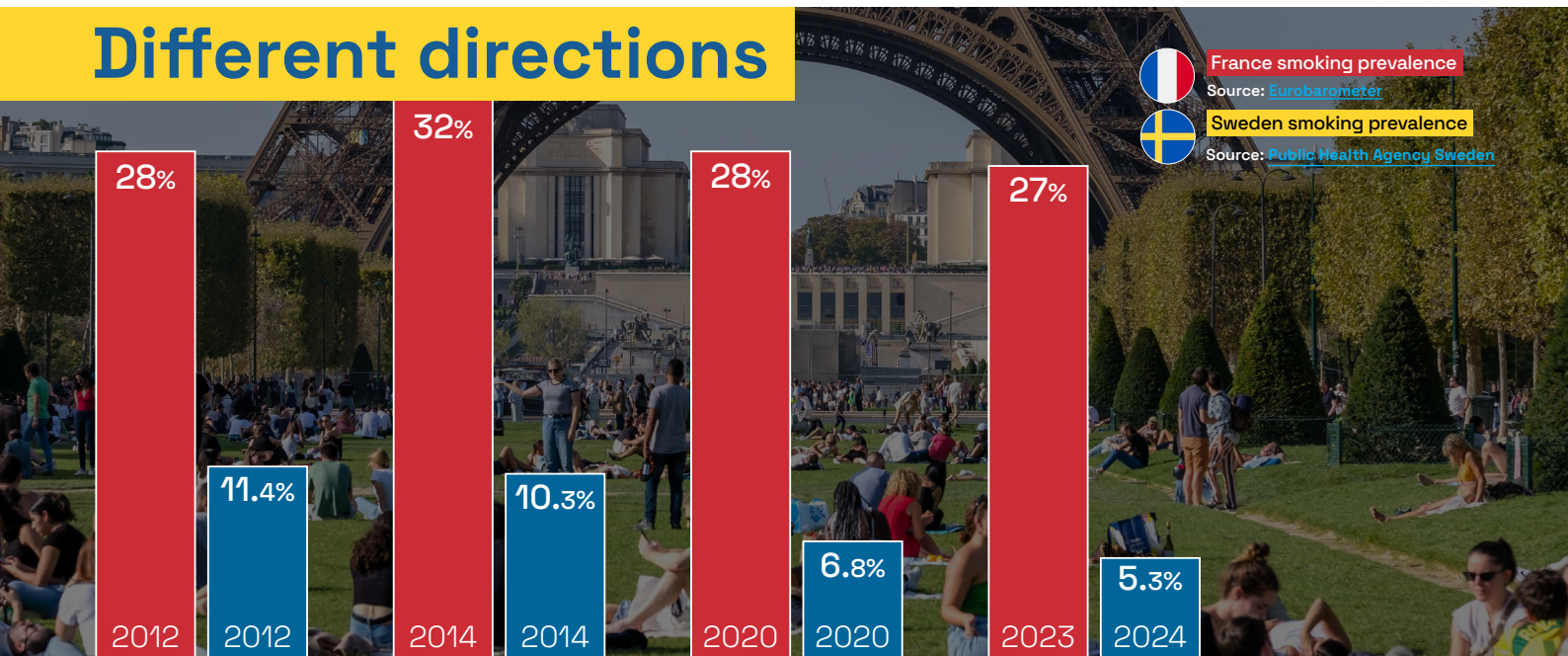
# Overview

The global fight against smoking has shown that countries adopting progressive policies and innovative solutions are making the greatest strides in reducing smoking-related harm.

This report examines the differing approaches of France and Sweden, offering a stark contrast in policy direction.

While Sweden is achieving world-leading results by embracing harm reduction and safer smoke-free alternatives, France is imposing regulations that could undermine the potential of these lifesaving innovations.

## Different directions



France is losing its fight against smoking. After decades of implementing outdated tobacco control policies, its adult smoking rate has barely budged.

With 27% of adults still smoking, France remains far from the European Union's 2040 'smoke-free' target of 5%. In 2020, its smoking rate was 28%. At the current pace of decline, France is unlikely to reach the target before 2100.

In stark contrast, fellow EU member state Sweden has blazed a trail for all to follow.

Although half of all Swedish men smoked a few decades ago, **Sweden's smoking rate is now 5.3% - just one fifth of France's** - and it continues to fall. As a result, Swedes enjoy the lowest incidence of smoking-related disease in Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Sweden's success is built on embracing smoke-free nicotine products, such as snus, oral nicotine pouches and vapes, as a safer alternative for adult smokers.

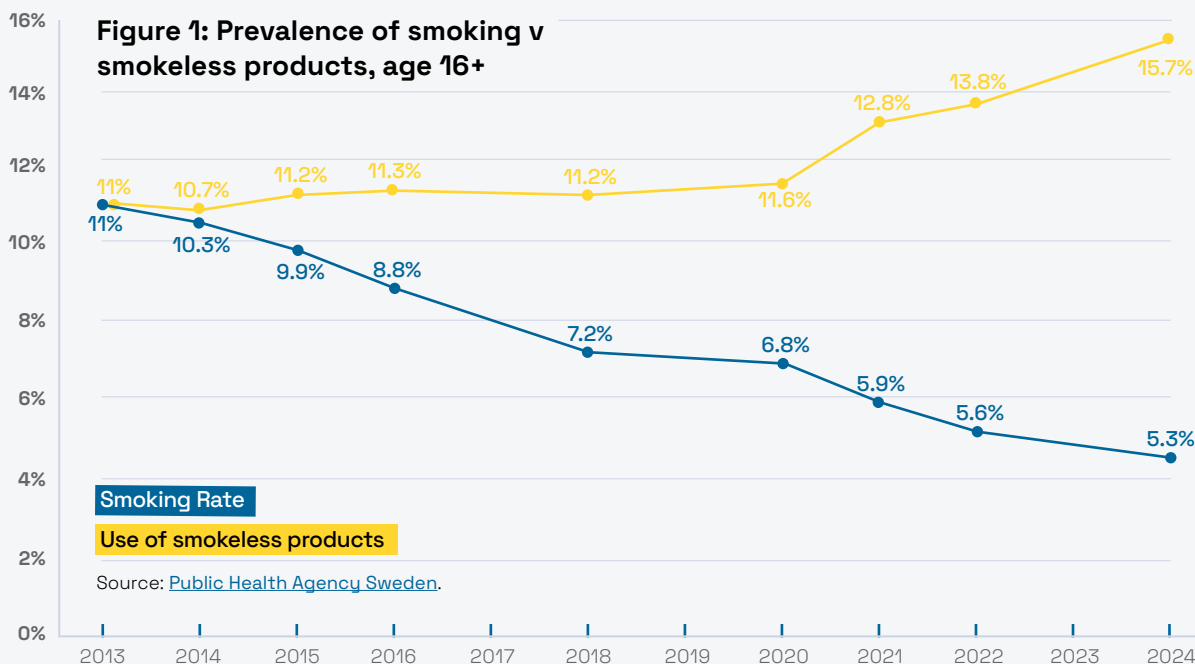
While this innovative evidence-based strategy should represent a policy roadmap for the rest of the world, France is heading in the opposite direction. It plans to ban nicotine pouches and impose strict restrictions on other smoke-free alternatives.

Instead of prioritising access to safer alternatives that could help adult smokers quit, French policymakers may limit the availability of these potentially life-saving products.

Before moving forward with these measures, they could benefit from studying how the Swedes have virtually eradicated smoking.



# Sweden's journey to smoke-free



In the early 1960s, Sweden faced a public health crisis, with nearly half of its men smoking cigarettes. Today, the country stands as the guiding star for tobacco control, with smoking rates barely above 5% - the global benchmark for 'smoke-free' status.

Sweden's success is the result of a long-running, real-world harm reduction experiment that offers undeniable, unimpeachable proof that replacing smoking with smokeless nicotine products leads to **significant public health benefits**.

Sweden's cancer incidence is 41% lower than the European average, with a corresponding 38% lower rate of total cancer deaths.<sup>2</sup> These impressive outcomes highlight the effectiveness of harm reduction policies grounded in science rather than prohibition.

Rather than banning or excessively restricting nicotine products, Sweden embraced safer substitutes. The transition began with traditional snus and later expanded to include vaping (2015) and nicotine pouches (2018). By ensuring these alternatives are **accessible, affordable and socially acceptable**, Sweden has successfully reduced its smoking rate by 54% since 2012.

Official data reinforces this success. Among

Swedish-born individuals over 16, **only 4.5%<sup>3</sup> smoke**. Notably, Swedish residents born elsewhere in Europe are, on average, three times more likely to smoke if they had not moved to Sweden - further evidence of the country's effective harm reduction environment.

Sweden's success comes from decades of rethinking tobacco control, integrating smokeless nicotine products with traditional measures while others opposed nicotine outright. Key policy actions include:

- **Legal access to safer nicotine products** through both online and retail markets.
- **Permitted advertising** to raise awareness of harm reduction options.
- **Proportional taxation:** In 2024, excise taxes on snus were reduced while cigarette taxes increased, reinforcing the incentive to switch.

Sweden has now formally adopted **tobacco harm reduction as a national policy**, shifting its focus from "reducing consumption" to actively "reducing harm". This commitment has positioned the country as a global leader in public health innovation. The case for tobacco harm reduction is no longer theoretical. Sweden's experience provides **undeniable, real-world proof that harm reduction strategies work**.

Smoke free  
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less than

**5%**

of adults  
smoking

**54%**  
fewer  
smokers

# Harm reduction as state policy



On December 11 2024, the Swedish Parliament voted to change the overall goal of their national tobacco strategy from focusing on “reduced tobacco use” to instead read “reduced medical and social harm caused by tobacco and nicotine products.”

The [Riksdag’s Budget](#) stated:

SVERIGES RIKSDAG

“...tobacco policy must consider the varying harmful effects that various tobacco and nicotine products can cause.

...cigarettes and smoking tobacco pose a greater health hazard than smokeless tobacco and nicotine products...

This approach is also reflected in the taxation of these products in Sweden and must also be reflected in the target for tobacco policy.”



# Escape route

Just as buildings have escape routes or doors in case of fire, smokers seeking to quit have multiple ‘escape routes’ from the dangers of combustible cigarettes.

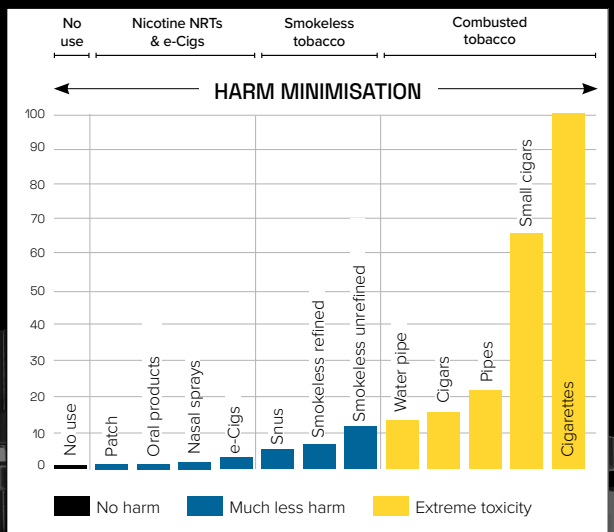
Nicotine pouches, vapes and snus offer safer alternatives that can help smokers transition away from the harmful effects of combustible cigarettes. That is because the vast majority of harm caused by smoking comes from thousands of toxins released by the burning of tobacco in combustible cigarettes.

Evidence of how much safer these alternative products are is abundantly clear.

For example, the UK Royal College of Physicians (RCP)<sup>4</sup> states that the health hazards arising from long term vapour inhalation from e-cigarettes are unlikely to exceed 5% of the harm from smoking tobacco.

In other words, e-cigarettes are 95% less harmful than cigarettes. Oral nicotine products, such as nicotine pouches, are even less harmful.

A visualisation of the relative harm of all products available for purchase in Sweden can be found in this table, from the [Oral Nicotine Commission 2020 Report](#).





# France stuck in the slow lane

Don't offer e-cigarettes as an 'official' alternative to smoking, French doctors told

JUTA  
MEDICAL BRIEF

France plans ban on nicotine pouches **POLITICO**

France bans nicotine pouches as EU war on product escalates **EURACTIV**

In 2012, the adult smoking rate in France stood at 28%. Eleven years later, that figure had dropped by just a single percentage point.

In the same period, the Swedes managed to cut their smoking rate by 54% (from 11.4% to 5.3%).

Despite France's evident failure at reducing smoking rates – and Sweden's dazzling success – the French have doubled down on their traditional tobacco control policies.

Yes, France has both implemented and planned restrictions on various nicotine alternatives, including e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches.

In January 2022, the French advisory body on health, le Haut Conseil de la santé publique (HCSP), **changed its previous advice to doctors and said they should not recommend e-cigarettes as an official alternative to smoking.**<sup>5</sup>

In February 2023, the French National Committee Against Smoking (CNCT) recommended banning non-tobacco flavours in all nicotine products,<sup>6</sup> despite evidence showing that flavours in safer smoke-free alternatives help smokers to transition away from combustible cigarettes.<sup>7</sup>

The crackdown intensified in 2024 when Health Minister Genevieve Darrieussecq announced

plans to ban nicotine pouches.<sup>8</sup> She **branded them "dangerous", despite their evident success in helping the Swedes become smoke-free.** On February 25 2025, the French parliament notified the European Commission<sup>9</sup> that the sale of pouches will be prohibited.

Beyond product bans, France has expanded its smoke-free zones to encompass parks, beaches and forests. While these measures may be well intentioned, they raise questions about effectiveness.

The stark contrast with Sweden's approach – which embraced harm reduction through alternatives like snus – highlights two fundamentally different philosophies in tobacco control.

As France tightens its grip on nicotine products, the numbers tell a sobering story. Their restrictive approach has yielded minimal results compared to Sweden's more pragmatic strategy.

**The French government's latest moves suggest a commitment to prohibition over harm reduction, despite evidence that alternative nicotine products might help smokers quit.** The question remains: will France's hardline stance finally move the needle on smoking rates, or is it time to reconsider its approach and learn from Sweden's remarkable success?

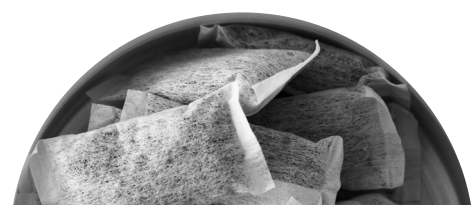
## Conclusions

- 1. Policy Impact:** Sweden's harm reduction approach has achieved a 5.3% smoking rate, while France's traditional tobacco control measures have stalled at 27% - five times higher than Sweden's rate.
- 2. Progress Comparison:** Sweden cut smoking rates by 55% in a decade, while France managed just a 1% reduction in eleven years (28% to 27%), demonstrating the superior effectiveness of Sweden's strategy.
- 3. Policy Direction:** France's increasing restrictions on smoke-free alternatives, including bans on nicotine pouches and disposable vapes, contrast with Sweden's successful approach of embracing safer alternatives.
- 4. Healthcare Guidance:** France's health advisory bodies actively discourage the use of smoke-free alternatives, with the HCSP advising doctors against recommending e-cigarettes, contrary to Sweden's evidence-based approach supporting harm reduction.
- 5. Regulatory Philosophy:** France's prohibition-focused strategy and expansion of smoke-free zones has yielded minimal results compared to Sweden's pragmatic harm reduction approach.

## Recommendations

- 1. Policy Realignment:** France should reconsider its prohibitive stance and adopt elements of Sweden's successful harm reduction strategy while maintaining appropriate controls.
- 2. Evidence-Based Approach:** Update policies based on Sweden's real-world evidence showing the effectiveness of smoke-free alternatives in reducing smoking rates.
- 3. Healthcare Integration:** Develop guidelines for the responsible inclusion of smoke-free alternatives in smoking cessation strategies, rather than banning them.
- 4. Smart Regulation:** Focus restrictions on combustible tobacco while maintaining proportional regulation for lower-risk alternatives, following Sweden's model.
- 5. Goal Alignment:** Revise current policies to align with the EU's 2040 'smoke-free' target, acknowledging that the current trajectory will not achieve this goal for over a century.
- 6. Public Education:** Launch campaigns to accurately inform the public about the relative risks of different nicotine products, enabling adult smokers to make informed choices about safer alternatives.

1. Tobacco Induced Diseases - [Sweden's pathway to Europe's lowest level of tobacco-related mortality](#)
2. Ramström, L. (2020) - [Institute for Tobacco Studies. Death rates per 100,000 attributable to tobacco - Sweden and the rest of the EU in 2019. Compiled from The Global Burden of Disease Study](#)
3. Public Health Agency Sweden/Folkhälsomyndigheten - [Användning av tobaks- och nikotinprodukter \(självrapporterat\) efter födelseland, kön och år. Andel \(procent\).](#)
4. Royal College of Physicians - [Nicotine without smoke: Tobacco harm reduction, 2016](#)
5. Juta Medical Brief - [Don't offer e-cigarettes as an 'official' alternative to smoking. French doctors advised](#)
6. CNCT - [Le Comité national contre le tabagisme alerte sur le développement anarchique des nouveaux produits et demande l'interdiction des arômes](#)
7. PMC PubMed Central - [How Does the Use of Flavored Nicotine Vaping Products Relate to Progression Toward Quitting Smoking? Findings From the 2016 and 2018 ITC 4CV Surveys](#)
8. Politico - [France plans ban on nicotine pouches](#)
9. TRIS - European Commission - [Proposal for a Decree on the prohibition of products for oral use containing nicotine](#)





# About the author

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Dr. Delon Human is a specialist family physician and global health advocate. He is the former Secretary-General of the World Medical Association, International Food and Beverage Alliance and Co-founder of the African Harm Reduction Alliance (AHRA). He has acted as an adviser to three WHO Directors-General and to the UN Secretary-General on global public health strategies.

## Smoke-Free Scorecard



Smoking Rate (% of population)	5.3%*	27%**
Smoking Rate Reduction (since 2012)	54%	4%
Formal Harm Reduction Policy	✓	✗
Lower-Risk Products Widely Available	✓	✗
Lower Taxes on Harm Reduction Products	✓	✗
Wide Variety of Flavour Options Permitted in Lower-Risk Products	✓	✗
Strict Public Smoking Bans (but not on alternatives)	✓	✗
Government Actively Promotes Harm Reduction	✓	✗
Overall Policy Direction (Harm reduction vs. prohibition)	✓ Progressive	✗ Regressive

\*Public Health Agency Sweden  
\*\*Eurobarometer

