



# SINGLE STICKS

## Fact Sheet

April 2023

### What are single sticks?

- Single sticks are cigarettes that are sold individually, not as part of a pack.

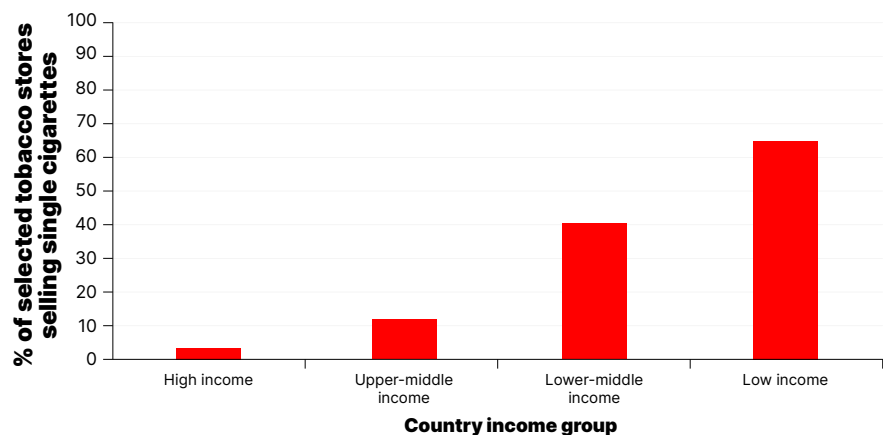
### Single sticks are a serious problem.

- Single sticks are more affordable than a full pack of cigarettes. This makes it easier for young people to start and continue smoking.
- Single stick sales make social inequity worse by increasing the availability of tobacco—and thus the risk of disease—to people with low incomes. Poorer people may be less likely to have reliable access to health care and may face worse health outcomes.
- Single stick sales undermine many effective tobacco control policies, including tobacco tax increases and health warnings on cigarette packs.

### Where are single sticks sold?

- Single sticks are sold in shops, or via informal, unregulated channels, such as street vendors.
- Single sticks are sold around the world, but are more prominent in low- and low-middle-income countries.<sup>1</sup>
- The sale of single sticks is banned in more than 80 countries,<sup>2</sup> but enforcement remains a challenge. For example, Ghana banned the sale of single sticks in 2017. Yet a 2023 study reported that 100% of retailers surveyed sold single sticks.<sup>3</sup>

### Proportion of tobacco-selling stores selling single cigarettes, 16 countries, 2009-2012



A survey of 16 countries showed that the number of outlets selling single sticks increased as country income decreased.

Data source: "The environmental profile of a community's health: a cross-sectional study on tobacco marketing in 16 countries"; <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/271817>

## How the Sale of Single Sticks Makes Inequity Worse

The tobacco industry targets people who have been systemically marginalized or oppressed, including people with low incomes.<sup>4</sup> Single stick sales make it easier for those who can least afford the costs of tobacco-related diseases to use dangerous and addictive products.

Tobacco use diverts money away from necessities such as food, education and housing, compounding existing financial hardship.<sup>5</sup> Further, the price customers pay per stick is often higher when sold individually than those sold as part of a pack. As a result, those with the least money often end up paying the most per cigarette.

Tobacco use is a major driver of health disparities between wealthier people and poorer people.<sup>6</sup> Evidence suggests that those in the lowest socioeconomic groups are more likely to die from smoking than those in the highest socioeconomic groups.<sup>7</sup>

## The tobacco industry benefits from the sale of single sticks

- Single sticks help the tobacco industry acquire new customers and keep current ones.
- Single sticks can encourage young people to start smoking, because they're affordable and do not come with any health warnings that could deter a new user. Single sticks also provide a cheaper way for price-conscious smokers to continue smoking instead of quitting.
- While tobacco companies may publicly oppose the sale of single sticks, some support it behind closed doors.
  - In 2008, British American Tobacco (BAT) was found to be assisting shop-keepers in Mauritius with selling single sticks.<sup>11</sup>
  - BAT also produced posters advertising single sticks in Malawi and Nigeria.<sup>12</sup>
  - A leaked document from 2014 also showed that BAT planned to oppose a ban on single stick sales in Uganda.<sup>13</sup>

## Single stick sales undermine tobacco control policies



**Health warnings on packs:** Written and pictorial health warnings on cigarette packs can deter people from starting to smoke and encourage people to quit.<sup>8</sup> When people buy single sticks, they don't see any health warnings and don't receive the intended information or protection of these warnings.



**Tax and price increases:** Tobacco tax increases that raise cigarette prices and decrease affordability are the most effective way to reduce tobacco use.<sup>9</sup> When cheaper single sticks are available, however, users who can no longer afford a pack of cigarettes may switch to single sticks instead of quitting.



**Age restrictions:** Age restrictions on purchasing cigarettes are crucial in curbing youth uptake of tobacco. Because single sticks are often sold through informal, unregulated channels, children and youth may be able to buy them without showing any proof of age.



**Advertising bans:** Prohibiting the advertising of tobacco products is shown to reduce tobacco consumption. Even where tobacco advertising is banned, some have reported that seeing single sticks for sale can cue cigarette cravings and prompt consumers to smoke. The sticks themselves can also serve as advertisements, with brand names and logos often visible on commercial cigarettes.<sup>10</sup>

### Examples of estimated price differences between cigarette packs and single sticks

The price differences between single sticks and packs of cigarettes can be extreme. In some cases, single sticks cost just 2-10% of the price of a pack of 20 cigarettes. Their affordability makes them accessible to children, young people and those with low incomes who are likely to face worse health outcomes than smokers with higher incomes.

#### BANGLADESH:<sup>14</sup>



**Pack price:**  
80 – 284 BDT  
(US \$.76 – 2.68)



**Single stick price:**  
As low as 5 BDT  
(US \$.05)

(Bangladeshi taka, 2023)

#### SRI LANKA:<sup>15</sup>



**Pack price:**  
1,300 Rs  
(US \$.47)



**Single stick price:**  
65 Rs  
(US \$.20)

(Sri Lankan rupees, most popular brand, 2020)

#### COLOMBIA:<sup>16</sup>



**Pack price:**  
3,250 COP  
(US \$.71)



**Single stick price:**  
300 COP  
(US \$.07)

(Colombian peso, economy-brand category, 2017)

U.S. dollar conversions as of April 2023

## Recommendations

1

**Governments must ban the sale of single sticks.** A ban could reduce youth uptake of tobacco by making cigarettes harder to access. A ban would also protect those with low incomes from shouldering the added financial burden of tobacco use and tobacco-related disease.

2

**Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control are obligated to ban single stick sales.** Article 16, which requires Parties to prohibit the sale of tobacco to and by minors, notes that this may include banning the sale of individual cigarettes or those sold in small packets, as these increase the affordability of tobacco to minors.<sup>17</sup>

3

**Single stick sales bans must be enforced.** Even in certain countries where single stick sales are banned, single sticks remain available.<sup>18</sup> Retailers and the public must be well-informed of the ban, and regulators must hold retailers accountable so that bans' intended protections can take effect. Requiring vendors to be licensed to sell tobacco can also reduce informal sales.<sup>19</sup>

### Endnotes

1. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/271817/PMC4669733.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
2. <https://www.tobaccocontrol.org/legislation/find-by-policy?policy=sales-restrictions&matrix=srSalesRestrictions&handle=sales-restrictions&criteria=sale-of-single-cigarettes-sticks&status=B>
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7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3430638/>
8. <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/31/2/272#ref-3>
9. <https://www.who.int/activities/raising-taxes-on-tobacco>
10. <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/26/5/604>
11. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7475259.stm>
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13. [https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/Uganda-BATs-Tactics-to-Undermine-the-Tobacco-Control-Bill/#Promoting\\_Single\\_Cigarette\\_Sales](https://tobaccotactics.org/wiki/Uganda-BATs-Tactics-to-Undermine-the-Tobacco-Control-Bill/#Promoting_Single_Cigarette_Sales)
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16. <https://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2022/05/31/tobaccocontrol-2022-057333>
17. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42811/9241591013.pdf;jsessionid=9A0908765C797A19C00166E3A1DEE6A3?sequence=1>
18. <https://atca-africa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Report-Sale-of-Single-Sticks-in-Africa.pdf>
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A GLOBAL  
TOBACCO  
INDUSTRY  
WATCHDOG

### About STOP (Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products)

STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog whose mission is to expose the tobacco industry tactics that undermine public health. Comprised of a network of academic and public health organizations, STOP researches and monitors the tobacco industry, shares intelligence to counter its tactics, and exposes its misdeeds to a global audience. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies as part of the [Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use](#). For more information, visit [exposetobacco.org](https://exposetobacco.org).