



VIPER Taskforce execute 27 warrants and lay Commonwealth charge of directing a criminal organisation

VIPER and Lunar taskforces charged eight people with Commonwealth offences for directing an organised crime syndicate.

Last updated 22 October 2024

Detectives from the VIPER and Lunar taskforces have this morning charged eight people with Commonwealth offences for their part in directing and assisting an organised crime syndicate.

It will be alleged the syndicate was leasing stores, employing staff as supervisors, store managers and couriers and commencing deliveries under the guise of operating the stores as legitimate gifts and confectionary stores, while selling only illicit tobacco and related products.

Investigators have obtained transactional records which reflect the syndicate earned over \$30 million in a 12-month period through the sale of illicit tobacco in these stores.

Supported by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), Australian Border Force's (ABF) Illicit Tobacco Taskforce and Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA), officers today executed more than 27 search warrants across Victoria as part of an ongoing investigation targeting serious organised crime in the illicit tobacco market.

With assistance from Taskforce Lunar, the Armed Crime Squad, the Illicit Firearms Squad, Financial Crime Squad, Criminal Proceeds Squad,

Joint Organised Crime Taskforce, Echo Taskforce, Cybercrime Squad, Joint Anti-Child Exploitation Team, Wyndham, Knox, Hobsons Bay, Echuca, Cobram, Ararat, Northern Grampians and Geelong Crime Investigation Units, Westgate Divisional Response Unit, Eastern Region Crime Squad and State Highway Patrol, search warrants were executed from 5am this morning at tobacco stores, warehouses and residential addresses statewide.

Three industrial properties in Truganina were searched, as well as residential addresses in Truganina, Hoppers Crossing (3), Glen Waverley, Lara, Grovedale, Footscray and Mount Cottrell, and tobacco stores in Herne Hill, Bell Park, Grovedale, Werribee (2), Dallas, Kensington, Boronia, Ararat (3), Kyabram, Echuca (2) and Yarrawonga.

A 25-year-old Hoppers Crossing man was arrested at Melbourne Airport just before 6:00 am.

He has since been charged with the Commonwealth offence of directing the activities of a criminal organisation, possess tobacco products with the intent of defrauding the revenue (*Customs Act 1901*), possess proceeds of crime and sell/distribute e-cigarettes.

He will appear at Melbourne Magistrates' Court later today.

Directing the activities of a criminal organisation carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison.

Four other people were arrested and have been charged with the same offences.

They include:

- a 26-year-old Hoppers Crossing man, who will appear at Melbourne Magistrates' Court later today
- a 21-year-old Hoppers Crossing man, who will appear at Melbourne Magistrates' Court later today
- a 50-year-old Grovedale woman, and
- a 51-year-old Glen Waverley man, both of whom have been bailed to appear at Melbourne Magistrates' Court on Monday (28 October).

Five other people were arrested, including:

- a 25-year-old Hoppers Crossing man, who was arrested in Ararat and charged with support a criminal organisation and illicit tobacco offences

- a 46-year-old Ararat man, who was arrested in Ararat and charged with support a criminal Organisation and illicit tobacco offences
- a 38-year-old Tarneit man who was arrested attempting to remove stock from a retail outlet in Werribee. He was charged with support a criminal organisation and illicit tobacco offences
- a 50-year-old Mount Cotterill man was arrested in relation to illicit tobacco and possession of commercial cigarette manufacturing equipment located. He was released and is expected to be charged on summons, and
- a 21-year-old Yarrawonga man was interviewed and released, he is also expected to be charged on summons.

During the warrants, police seized a Lamborghini Coupe and Range Rover from the Hoppers Crossing address, at least 600,000 illicit tobacco sticks, over 75 kgs of loose-leaf tobacco and a significant quantity of cash from the residential addresses as well as utilities and vans investigators will allege were used in the distribution of illicit tobacco.

Searches of the tobacco stores are still underway with total seizures to be confirmed.

The investigation commenced in December 2023 to specifically target and disrupt the trade of illicit tobacco and e-cigarettes linked to this organised crime syndicate.

Over 130 members were involved in today's activities, including the entirety of the VIPER Taskforce office.


Victoria Police continues to support local councils and the Victorian Department of Health who have responsibility for tobacco and vape enforcement and compliance.

Detectives continue to work alongside external agencies such as the ABF, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, AFP, TGA, ATO and interstate counterparts.

Victoria Police has identified a number of state, national and global organised crime syndicates involved in the illicit tobacco conflict.

These syndicates are comprised of personnel from Middle Eastern organised crime groups and outlaw motorcycle gangs who are then engaging local networked youth and youth gangs to carry out the offending.

Investigators continue to appeal to anyone, especially store owners and staff, who have information about these incidents and who is responsible to come forward.

Anyone with information about these incidents or with further information about serious and organised crime linked to the illicit tobacco trade is urged to contact Crime Stoppers on **1800 333 000** or submit a confidential crime report at www.crimestoppersvic.com.au 

Victoria Police quotes

Crime Command Assistant Commissioner Martin O'Brien said:

"Organised crime syndicates and their serious offending linked to the infiltration of the tobacco industry remain a top priority for Victoria Police.

Those involved have the potential and the propensity to commit serious acts of violence and given their complete disregard for the safety of others, pose a serious risk to the community. Their criminality cannot be tolerated.

The disruption of this syndicate today will have a substantial impact on the illicit tobacco trade. These were significant players who we believe were directing the activity of a criminal organisation, turning a huge profit at the expense of others.

We have said a number of times that Victoria Police is focused on targeting syndicate leaders, directors, facilitators and organisers. That remains critical for us, and we are doing absolutely everything we can to bring this criminality to an end and to make involvement in illicit tobacco as hostile a proposition as possible for organised crime groups."

ABF quotes

Assistant Commissioner Tony Smith said:

"ABF continues to work closely with our partners to disrupt and deter attempts by criminal syndicates seeking to profit from the illicit tobacco trade in Australia.


We remain committed to seizing illicit tobacco and dismantling these supply chains which we know criminals use to make immense profits as well as to fund a whole host of other nefarious criminal enterprises."

ATO quotes

Acting Assistant Commissioner Justin Clarke said:

"Today's whole of government response has been a successful step forward in addressing the Victorian tobacco dispute. These arrests and seizures show our commitment to stamping out illicit tobacco and removing it from our communities.

With the help of our partners, we continue to support coordinated efforts to detect, disrupt, and dismantle these organised crime syndicates who use profits from illicit tobacco to fund other serious illegal activities.

Organised crime costs Australians around [\\$60 billion each year](#)  and the illicit tobacco trade not only takes away vital funding from essential community services, but it also disadvantages small businesses who do the right thing."

QC 103258

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