

More than just financial loss, the social impact of gambling cannot be underestimated

November 2 2017, by Crystal Fulton



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The UK government is [mulling a review of the regulations on fixed odds betting terminals](#) commonly found in pubs and betting shops, in order to

reduce the risk of problem gambling developing.

Based on a [report](#) from the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, this would see the maximum stake gamblers can bet on the machines reduced from £300 a minute to between £2 and £50.

Given that the Gambling Commission, the industry regulator, found 43% of people who use the machines are either problem or at-risk gamblers, some such as opposition Labour MP Tom Watson, have described this as "[a squandered opportunity](#)". Critics believe the proposals don't go far enough to protect people from fixed odds betting terminals, sometimes described as "the crack cocaine of [gambling](#)" due to their addictive nature.

Harmful gambling can have crippling financial and social effects on the gambler, their friends and family. In the first [national study of the social impact of harmful gambling in Ireland](#), we examined how it affected recovering gamblers, their families and friends. We also heard stories from counsellors and those who provide services to help gamblers. Talking to people from all walks of life, from different age groups and different economic backgrounds, we found that a common theme was the devastating social effects gambling had on people's lives.

In particular, we learned that gamblers were often exposed to gambling at an early age, for example by collecting betting proceeds for a family member, or watching adults place bets. This then led them to participate in gambling before the legal age of 18.

Gamblers reported gambling in secret, isolating themselves from family and friends to feed their addiction. As relationships deteriorated, the gambler's behaviour would only be discovered when they were no longer able to maintain a double life, such as failing to intercept unpaid bills that had been part of trying to maintain a facade of normality. The

availability of technologies, such as smartphones, means that it's possible to conceal a secret gambling habit for years, before financial and emotional crises reach breaking point.

For young people, such technology exacerbates the potential harm of gambling. The participants in our studies frequently spoke of their concern for young people and their risk of addiction due to the availability of gambling apps and websites easily accessible from their smartphones. And while there is supposedly agreement [not to offer fixed odds betting terminals in Ireland](#), some gamblers reported that they had got themselves into trouble using them.

Gambling as a public health issue

The social harms that stem from addictive gambling are not only for the gambler. For example, the wives of gamblers in our study reported how they could sense there was a problem, but believed they were struggling with marital issues, rather than the fallout from [gambling addiction](#). Parents and children of gamblers reported that they could no longer trust the gambler, that they could no longer leave money unattended, and that the [gambler](#) had become someone they did not recognise or understand.

In Ireland, the legislation around regulating gambling is outdated. The regulations that might mitigate harms for the individual and for society have not been introduced, and – with support from the [Irish Research Council](#) and Ireland's [Department of Social Protection](#) and [Department of Justice and Equality](#) – our research sought to provide the evidence base to help draw up the necessary social policies.

The government indicated its intention to move forward with legislation in early 2017, and my [research](#) and its [follow-up study](#) should inform politicians how to address the social harms of gambling – the costs of which the [Institute of Public Health in Ireland](#) has estimated to be

greater than government revenue from gambling taxes.

Listen to what gamblers say they need

The participants interviewed said there is a need for open discussion about gambling and the risk it can pose to individuals and their families. Gambling addiction carries with it significant social stigma, shame and isolation – talking openly about its effects can change how we approach this issue.

Interviewees suggested a variety of measures government could take, including regulations that would protect the most vulnerable to gambling addiction, and particularly in regulating how technology now enables secretive gambling. They also identified the need for support that would help prevent and address the harmful effects of gambling addiction.

While there are addiction treatment centres around the country which include services to address harmful gambling, there is little help for those affected by a partner's or family member's gambling. The [RISE Foundation](#) is a notable exception, providing treatment for the families of those affected by a variety of addictions. But it is based in Dublin only, and family members may no longer have the financial resources to access treatment and support there.

There is an urgent need for a unified, transparent approach to tackling gambling's harms in Ireland – a national strategy that encompasses public and private sector organisations, similar to those that target alcohol and drug addiction. The UK has the [Gambling Commission](#) and NHS [support and advice](#); Ireland has nothing comparable.

Despite the lack of progress from government on the issue there have been benefits to this research: uncovering the extent of gambling's social harms has helped to get people talking about gambling. For example, in

September 2017 the [European United Left/Nordic Green Left](#) European Parliamentary Group sponsored a one day conference in Dublin to direct the spotlight on the subject and emphasise the need for updated legislation.

Within the Republic, [Problem Gambling Ireland](#) recently opened its doors to lobby against the spread of harmful gambling and to provide referral services to those affected by gambling. These may seem like small steps, but it is small steps that lead the charge for change.

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: More than just financial loss, the social impact of gambling cannot be underestimated (2017, November 2) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-11-financial-loss-social-impact-gambling.html>

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