SPORTS AND ONLINE GAMBLING:

a summary of trends and impacts

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**Levels and Patterns of Sports and Online Gambling**

Online gambling is conducted through the internet, typically using computers, tablets or smartphones. Gambling on sports is largely conducted online, with the result that trends in participation and expenditure on such gambling provides some suggestions about corresponding patterns of online gambling.

*Prevalence*

The 2018/19 Victorian Population, Gambling and Health Study determined that 5.8% of adults had gambled on sports and 19.1% had gambled online (on computers, tables and smartphones), during the previous 12 months (Rockloff et al, 2020). By contrast, an earlier inquiry, conducted in 2011, determined that 8.1% of Australian adults had participated in online gambling during the previous year (Gainsbury et al, 2015).

Among respondents to the Population, Gambling and Health Study, more than three-quarters of all sports gamblers conducted their sports gambling online, compared with a third of horse and greyhound gamblers.

Just as most sports betting is conducted online, a substantial proportion of online gambling relates to sports betting. A 2015 Australian survey determined that 59% of those who used the internet for gambling had participated in online sports betting (Winders and Derevensky, 2019), echoing other Australian findings (Parke and Parke, 2019) and global trends.

*Age and Gender*

Local investigations confirm that participation in sports betting is highest among young people, and males in particular (Miller, 2017).

In the findings of a succession of earlier surveys, the prevalence of sports betting recorded among Australian young people ranged from 17% of 12-18 year-olds (Dowling et al, 2010), to 18.1% of 13-17 year-olds (Delfabbro et al, 2009), and 20.7% people aged 15-17 (Purdie et al, 2011).

*Chart, bar chart

Description automatically generated*More recently, a 2015 Victorian study determined that 14.6% of 18-24 year-old males had engaged in sports betting in the previous year – more than four times the corresponding proportion of women the same age, of 3.5%.

A substantial, though declining, proportion of older men also participated, including 12.3% of 25-34 year-olds and 9.4% of those aged 35-44 (Hare, 2015) (chart, right).

Prevalence of sports betting by sex and age: Victorian adults, 2015

Similar trends emerged in the results of the national HILDA survey, which found that sports betters were generally male (88%) and aged less than 50 years (75%) (Siegff, 2017; Armstrong and Carroll, 2017; Palmer, undated). A wide difference in the prevalence of sports gambling among women and men was also recorded in the findings of the 2018/19 Victorian study, which determined that 9.7% of male adults and 2% of females had gambled on sports during the previous 12 months (Rockloff et al, 2020).

The reasons for the higher level of participation in online and sports gambling among young men than women, and their experience of gambling problems, are not clear.

Research has also established a link between gambling-related problems and low self-esteem, anxiety and depression among men (Quirk, 2021). However, studies indicate that low self-esteem (Cooke, 1999; Bliedorn, 2015) as well as depression and anxiety (MacLean et al, 2011; Mayo Clinic, undated) are more common among young women than men – a finding which challenges this as an explanation for the over-representation among men among sports and online gamblers.

Other possibilities, which receive some support in the findings of research, include a higher level of interest in sporting outcomes, and engagement with networks that are influenced by sports, among men (Winders and Derevensky, 2019; Deaner et al, 2016), a more prevalent tendency to seek out intense or thrilling experiences (Rahamani and Lavasami, 2012; Cross et al, 2013), and exaggerated perceptions among some males about the role of skill in determining the outcome of gambling (Hing et al, 2014).

*Socioeconomic Status*

In addition to age and gender, the HILDA survey documented other characteristics of gamblers, finding that sports betters were generally employed (85%), unmarried (55%), had an average, or above-average, education and income, and were renting (Siegff, 2017; Armstrong and Carroll, 2017; Palmer, undated). The finding that sports betters tend to be of higher socioeconomic status though, is contested by other research which indicates that a substantial proportion may have limited education and lower incomes (Palmer, undated; Hing et al, 2017; Koivola, 2020).

*Online Gambling Patterns*

Similar trends are also reported in relation to online betting in general, with the 2018/19 Victorian Population, Gambling and Health Study finding that the proportion of gamblers who had used the internet to gamble on sports, racing, pokies and casino games in the previous year, was highest among younger people, declining from its peak of over a quarter of 18-24 year-old gamblers, to about one in fifty of those aged over 75 (Rockloff et al, 2020) (accompanying chart).

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Proportion of gamblers who gamble online, by age: Victoria, 2018/19

As with sports betting, men were twice as likely to gamble online as women, with 18% of male gamblers engaging in such activities in the previous 12 months, compared with 9.3% of females.

This survey also reported elevated levels of participation in online gambling among higher income earners.

**Rising Expenditure Sports and Online Gambling**

Rising expenditure on sports betting in recent years, accounting for four-fifths of online betting in Victoria (Rockloff et al, 2020), provides some suggestion of scale of growth in expenditure on sporting and other on-line gambling.

A 2015 national survey found that expenditure on sports betting was $579 million p.a., representing 6.7% of total annual gambling expenditure (Siegff, 2017).

Expenditure on such gambling is rapidly rising, with Victorian sports gambling losses surging by $176 million between 2000/01 to 2018/19 (after inflation), the largest increase of any legal form of gambling expenditure. By contrast, state-wide expenditure on electronic gambling machines plunged $934 million and racing declined by $547 million, during this period (Queensland Government Statistician’s Office, 2021).

Further inquiries show that by 2017, average annual losses incurred by sports betters in Australia stood at $2,305 (Armstrong and Carroll, 2017).

**Sports and Online Gambling during the COVID Pandemic**

Sports and other online gambling have burgeoned under lockdown conditions during the COVID pandemic. Scott and Blashki (2021) recount the findings of an Australian analysis which revealed that gambling losses rose nearly three-fold (by 2.8) during the NSW and Victorian lockdowns, including a national rise of 67% in a single week, largely attributable to a surge in online gambling, citing one commentator who observed that many people "...discovered a poker machine in their pocket". A further study, of 2,019 existing Australian online gamblers, recorded a rise in gambling frequency and a 56% increase in expenditure among young males (Jenkinson et al, 2020).

Gambling providers enjoyed a corresponding surge in revenue, with Flutter Entertainment (the Sportsbet parent company) recording a 45% rise in online revenue in Jan-June 2020, while Ladbrokes registered a 43% increase in profits during the same period (Silva, 2020), Tabcorp Holdings secured a 34% rise in online gambling revenue (Blashke, 2021) and similar trends were reported overseas (Hakansson, 2020).

Investigators conclude that such rising involvement in sports and other online gambling stemmed largely from social isolation, especially among working class men, for whom gambling alleviated the monotony of social isolation, enhanced their sense of engagement in outside events and consolidated their social networks (Silva, 2020; Rasker, undated; Jenkinson et al, 2020).

**Circumstances which attract People to Sports and Online Gambling**

A range of conditions, including the personal circumstances of those who participate in sports and other online gambling, and the convenience and marketing of such activities, may be implicated in their rising popularity.

Among the circumstances highlighted in the research are gamblers' participation and interest in sport (Winders and Derevensky, 2019; Palmer, undated) and the influence of their friends and family with a similar interest in sports and gambling (Pitt et al, 2017; Miller, 2017), sometimes compounded by unrealistic confidence in their ability to predict the outcomes of sporting events (Winders and Derevensky, 2019; Siegff, 2017).

Efforts to ease social isolation, boredom and stress, and to establish connections with friends, may also fuel sporting and online gambling, according to counsellors (Co-As-It, undated). In a survey of 2,000 online gamblers during the pandemic, largely young men, most cited social isolation and boredom as conditions which enticed them to participate in sports and online gambling. One gambler commented that he became so bored that he would gamble "…just to get a thrill of it... with no knowledge of the sport..." (Silva, 2020).

Among young people in particular, sport and online gambling – as well as gambling problems – also appear to be associated with poor coping skills, mental health issues and impulsivity (Siegff, 2017). Regarding impulse control, Remo et al (2015) report attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) among 23% of people seeking gambling treatment. Sharpe and Jain (2000) explain that individuals with ADHD have limited control of impulses - as do many problem gamblers, and conversely, that the boredom, depression and low self-esteem which often accompany ADHD are alleviated by the 'stimulus and reward' of gambling. Impulse control problems may not be particular to online or sports gambling though, as a high prevalence of such problems is reported among people with gambling problems more generally (Mestre-Bach et al, 2020; Ioannidis et al, 2019), though convenient access to online gambling may aggravate the risk to some individuals.

Other mental health concerns, including the alleviation of personal distresses, efforts to cope with past trauma, and the influence of drug use, may also fuel sports and other online gambling (Hing et al, 2017). In addition, Siegff (2017) observes that for many young people, gambling may foster the appealing illusion of power, success and control.

**The Convenience of Sport and other Online Gambling**

Aside from the personal characteristics and social circumstances of individuals, the ready availability of online gambling, coupled with its promotion by gambling operators, exert a crucial influence upon levels of participation in such activities.

Access to the internet has surged in the past two decades, with 86% of Victorian households having internet connections by 2016 (ABS, 2017), 80% of adolescents possessing a smartphone (Miller, 2017), and the proportion of the Australian population with a smartphone expected to reach 80% by 2025 (Granwal, 2020).

Meantime, the proportion of Australians who used the internet to gamble more than doubled in six years, from 16% in 2012 to 34% by 2018, and the proportion who gambled on a smartphone rose four-fold during the same period, from 5.6% to 23% (Roy Morgan Research, 2019). Similar trends have been witnessed overseas, with a ten-fold escalation in world-wide mobile phone gambling expenditure in the five years to 2011 alone (Guillou-Landreat et al, 2021).

The development of internet technology, coupled with a proliferation of gambling operators, presents gamblers with an opportunity to bet on a wide range of events, and at any place or time of day (Siegff, 2017; Parke and Parke, 2019). As a result, much gambling has shifted out of hotels and other social environments, to the home, where it may proceed in seclusion (Palmer, undated). The observations of one gambler are illustrative: "Whenever I'm bored, my finger automatically opens the app." (Silva, 2020).

Moreover, online betting allows outcomes to be determined swiftly, providing rapid reinforcement, while features introduced by online gambling providers, such as live betting, cash-out, instant depositing (enabling gamblers to bet their winnings) and the opportunity to repeatedly gamble on a succession of minor events, have all supplied gamblers with the means to participate in intensive, continuous and impulsive gambling (Parke and Parke, 2019). Such circumstances, commentators warn, elevates the risk of gambling harm (Winders and Derevensky, 2019).

**Promotion of Sport and other Online Gambling**

Further contributing to the rise of sport and other online gambling is their promotion by gambling providers. Young males are the primary target, since they are among the most receptive segments of the community, display the highest rates of participation in such activities and are most vulnerable to gambling problems (Winders and Derevensky, 2019; Miller, 2017). Indeed, interviews with 48 Australian 8-16 year-olds found that their interest in sports betting was largely shaped by marketing of gambling products – as well as the influence of friends and family, and their perceived knowledge of sport (Pitt et al, 2017).

In their promotions, gambling operators often link gambling with sport, identifying their products with popular sporting values of loyalty and mateship, seeking to generate sensations of excitement, victory and power (Deans et al, 2017; Miller, 2017) and often establishing a 'brand personality" (Guillou-Landreat et al, 2021). As Guillou-Landreat et al explain, the gambling industry has crafted ingenious ways of "controlling and capturing human emotions...through the creative us of touch, hearing and sight".

Exposure to such promotions is almost inescapable, with advertisements on TV, radio, websites, hyperlinks in social media, through direct messaging, and elsewhere (Kim et al, 2017), with particular impact upon those most susceptible to, or already experiencing, gambling problems (Guillou-Landreat et al, 2021).

Commentators caution that the ready availability of gambling products, their aggressive promotion, efforts to promote their link to sporting attributes, and the proliferation of gambling among peer groups for some young people, has made online gambling and its promotion a routine and unexceptional part of everyday life (Macniven et al, 2011; Siegff, 2017; Palmer, undated; Parke and Parke, 2019), thereby increasing the ease with which they may be lured into such activities.

**Exposure to Online Gambling among Children and Adolescents**

Another circumstance which may accentuate the participation of young people in gambling, is their experience of online ‘gambling-like’ activities during their childhood and adolescence. Commentators note that sports betting often begins in adolescence or early adulthood (Winders and Derevensky, 2019; Dundie et al, 2011; Miller, 2017). Some express concern at the impact of online poker and casino games where no money changes hands but which may introduce young people to the prospect of online gambling (Palmer, undated), and others caution that some adventure or role-playing games incorporate features where a player may pay money for an advantage (such as a weapon or special power) which is unseen until purchased – a form of gambling (Zendle et al, 2019). Accordingly, some commentators propose that the Commonwealth Government further restrict the exposure of children and adolescents to such online activities (Pitt et al, 2017), while others urge that parents set an example of restraint in their gambling behavior and take steps to obstruct children's access to such sites (Co-As-It, undated).

Of further concern is the exception of sporting advertisements from the prohibition of gambling advertisements during children's viewing times (Palmer, undated).

**Sports and Online Gambling-related Problems**

Sports and other online gambling activities are associated with a relatively high prevalence of gambling problems (Hakansson, 2020; Winders and Derevensky, 2019), with sports betting reportedly the main form of gambling among people seeking treatment for gambling problems (Parke and Parke, 2019), and Victorian problem gamblers three times more likely to gamble online than others - at 31% of people with severe gambling problems, compared with 11% of those with no gambling problems (Rockloff et al, 2020). Armstrong and Carroll (2017) report that 41% of regular sports betters experienced one or more gambling problems in 2015, noting that, at 23%, their prevalence of moderate to severe problems was nearly three times greater among other gamblers, at 8%.

As with gambling problems in general, behavioral patterns associated with difficulties with sports and other online gambling include preoccupations with gambling, gambling increasing amounts of money, efforts to cease gambling, 'chasing' gambling losses, concealing losses from family and friends (Rasker, undated), with impacts which include personal distresses, financial difficulties, family conflict, work problems and others (Armstrong and Carroll, 2017).

**Regulation of Online Gambling**

Section 51 (v) of the Australian constitution states that the Commonwealth Government may make laws relating to “postal, telegraphic, telephonic, and other like services”. As a result, issues concerning access to online gambling opportunities fall chiefly within the jurisdiction of the Federal Government (Jackson, 2001; Horne, 2021).

One major effort to regulate online gambling was the *Interactive Gambling Act 2001*. In 2000, the Federal Government received a report from the National Office for the Information Economy, which determined that the government could legislate to ban domestic interactive gambling service providers which failed to adhere to prescribed standards (Jackson, 2001). The following year, the Government passed the *Interactive Gambling Act 2001*, which prohibited online casinos, in-play sports betting, sports betting services with no Australian license, the advertising of banned services and provision of credit for online sports betting (Australian Communications and Media authority, undatedA; Palmer, undated). Subsequent amendments tightened restrictions on non-Australian services and added a self-exclusion register. However, a 2012 Federal review of the act concluded that its impact was limited, and that a rising number of Australians were accessing any of over 2,000 online gambling providers illegally operating in this country, attracting expenditure then estimated at $1 billion p.a. (Dept. Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2012). Authors of the review instead proposed that some currently banned online gambling providers be permitted to operate in Australia on condition that they promote lower-risk activities such as card games rather than slot machines and adhere to harm minimization and consumer protection measures.

Notably, in contrast to Australian government-regulated sites, many unregulated, overseas operators are disguised to look Australian and sometimes fail to pay winnings, disappear and retain customers' money, or continue withdrawing funds from customer's bank accounts without permission (NSW Responsible Gambling, undated).

Current rules about the promotion of sports gambling on TV and radio, published and enforced by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (undatedB), prohibit gambling advertisements during children's viewing hours (6-8:30 am and 4-7 pm) and in the course of play in broadcasts of sporting events on TV or radio, and forbid promotion of odds during, as well as 30 minutes prior to and after, a sports broadcast.

Some commentators though, urge that the Federal Government impose more stringent restraints upon advertising of sports betting during sports broadcasts (Macniven et al, 2011) and remove gambling advertisements from SBS (Alliance for Gambling Reform, 2021). Other proposed regulatory changes include measures to curtail continuous betting in sports (Parke and Parke, 2019).

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