

Time for a public health response to gambling



Today, we publish the *Lancet Public Health* Commission on gambling—an inquiry and response to a neglected, understudied, and expanding public health threat. Gambling is not a simple leisure activity; it is a health-harming addictive behaviour. The harms associated with gambling are wide-ranging, not only affecting an individual's health and wellbeing, but also their wealth and relationships, affecting families and communities with potential lifelong consequences, and deepening health and societal inequalities. By assessing the barriers to preventing gambling-related health harms, the Commission unveils and deciphers the intersections between the social, commercial, legal, and political determinants of health.

The Commission estimates that 46.2% of adults and 17.9% of adolescents had engaged in gambling in the past year, globally. While only a small proportion of individuals will be classified as engaging in problematic gambling (1.4%), considering the effect of gambling across the entire spectrum of consumption is crucial. An estimated 5.5% of women and 11.9% of men experience any risk gambling. The epidemiological landscape is changing, with a substantial number of women and young people taking part. For the gambling industry, this is not an epidemiological landscape, this is a rapidly expanding and highly profitable market.

Building on the *Lancet* series on the commercial determinants of health, and the work of others who have for decades described harmful industry practices, the Commission delves into the commercial determinants of gambling. The commercial gambling sector promotes its products and protects its interests by adopting corporate practices designed not only to influence consumer behaviour, but also the narrative and political processes around regulation—with a tendency to focus on individual responsibility rather than broader policy changes. Such practices are not new and have been used by other harmful industries, but in today's digitalised, interconnected, and borderless world they pose increasing threats to public health.

The Commission describes a complex gambling ecosystem with unparalleled realms and capacities offered by digital transformation. Use of innovative digital marketing to target consumers through social media and user data, along with sports and media sponsorship

are supporting gambling expansion. The boundaries between digital gaming and gambling are also becoming blurred. With the gambling industry leveraging digital transformation, the need to prevent and mitigate gambling-related harms is even more prescient.

For too long, governments—also conflicted because of the benefits they gain from taxes and revenues of a profitable industry—have paid little attention to understanding gambling-related harms. They have relied on oversimplified approaches, pointing to individual responsibility and the dangers for individuals at high-risk. Balancing public health with competing economic interests is now crucial. The Commission calls on governments and policy makers to treat gambling as a public health issue—just as for other addictive and unhealthy commodities, such as alcohol and tobacco—and provides recommendations to prevent and mitigate the broad range of harms associated with gambling. Interventions at both population level and individual level are important. The Commission calls for effective gambling regulation to be put in place in all countries, and to include reductions in population exposure, through prohibitions or restrictions on access, promotion, marketing, and sponsorship. The Commission also asks for the provision of affordable, universal support and treatment for gambling harms alongside campaigns to raise awareness of those harms. The Commission recommends that regulatory protections include children and young people, enforcing minimum age requirements and mandatory identification; the provision of effective consumer protection measures, such as universal self-exclusion; the regulation of products proportionate to the risk of harms; and measures limiting gambling consumption, such as enforceable deposit and bet limits.

The industry will claim that their products are enjoyed by millions of people, the overwhelming majority of whom do not suffer adverse consequences, and that such recommendations are unfairly encroaching on the freedom of individuals. This Commission exposes these assertions as deeply misleading. Governments have a duty to protect their citizens from harmful and addictive products and to adopt a public health response to gambling. ■ *The Lancet Public Health*

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