

# Gambling- An issue for Social Work?

Dr Jim Rogers, School of Health and Social Care, University of Lincoln

[jrogers@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:jrogers@lincoln.ac.uk)



# What is problem gambling ?

- Problems with gambling are described and measured via a range of different methods and measures which are not always comparable and debates about classification and measurement continue to occupy the field of gambling studies (Wardle et al, 2018)
- Gambling which is problematic was re-classified from an impulse control disorder named 'pathological gambling', to an addiction, in the most recent version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V) and renamed 'gambling disorder' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)
- Additionally, there is a growing move to see the issue via a more public health focussed lens and to consider the range of gambling related harms which occur for individuals, their families and their communities

## How many people have problems?

- In the United Kingdom (UK), the latest available data from a 2018 Health Survey suggests that some 3.5% of the population were 'at risk' of developing gambling problems, some seven times more than the number who met the full criteria for disordered gambling, which was defined and assessed via the widely used Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) or DSM measures (Gambling Commission, 2020)
- It is estimated that for every problem gambler between six and ten other people are adversely affected (Goodwin et al, 2017) and at a population level between 2% and 19% of the population are affected, depending on definitions and measurements used (Castren et al, 2021)
- Such data suggests that well over two million individuals in the UK are at risk of developing gambling problems and that up to three million people in the population may be affected by the problem gambling of someone else

## Why is this relevant to social work?

- It is clear that those who are most affected by gambling harms are those who experience other forms of disadvantage, and are more likely to come into contact with social care services
- Research shows that problem gambling is linked to depression, suicide, debt, bankruptcy, family conflict, offending, domestic abuse, neglect and maltreatment of children making it central to social work territory (Rogers, 2013)



# The impact of gambling

- <https://vimeo.com/345419182>



# Impact on families

- In a review of relevant literature relationship harms featured in 28 qualitative studies. Respondents reported arguments and relationship strain between the gambler and their friends and families, which sometimes rippled out to affect wider family networks. Instances of gambling-related domestic or family abuse were commonly reported. Children of gamblers were also affected (Public Health England, 2021)
- *“As a family, we’ve lost quite a lot, and I would say the loss came from the repossession of the house. That’s a massive kick in the teeth. You look back and think ‘Gosh, I was really, really affected by that.’ At the time, I didn’t think it had affected me emotionally.”* - Child of a gambler
- *“The job I feel that I’ve done, I’ve been in this alone. There has been a lot... I’ve gone for months, hardly with any sleep. Because I’ve had to see to it that the kids are fine and that everything around here is all hunky dory so that no one can pick on me for anything.”* - Partner of a gambler
- *"He manipulated me over and over again, and that was very difficult. I look back and I was emotionally abused and manipulated with finances, really, all so he could just carry on with what he wanted to do with his life and his addiction."* - Female partner of a gambler with two children, quoted in CAB report 2018

# Gambling and Debt

- An obvious consequence of a gambling problem will be loss of money and in many cases, significant debts
- Proposals for reforms of gambling legislation include 'affordability' checks before allowing a person to gamble
- Many gamblers testify to losing tens of thousands and to accumulating significant debts
- Theft from family, and friends, and embezzlement from employers are also commonly reported

*“my addiction has got a lot worse since I was introduced to the machines. The last three paydays i have gone straight into the bookies and spent all of my wages on these machines which has left me with no money for the rest of the month” - Roy - problem gambler*

Debt and consumer advice agencies, including Step Change and CAB are good sources of advice and support

Many banks and agencies now recognise the issue, and allow blocks on all gambling transactions



# Gambling and Violence

*"One time, after I had the baby, the police were called because I took his cards away from him and he went absolutely crazy. I had quite a few bruises where he attacked me." - Ex-wife of gambler and mother of two quoted in CAB report 2018*

- Recent research found that, in a sample of treatment seeking problem gamblers, the prevalence of family violence was 25.5%, with 18.4% reporting victimization and 19.1% reporting perpetration
- That research also provided useful information about some of the factors which mediate between gambling and violence in the family context. Being a victim was predicted, to a significant degree, by psychological distress, symptoms of PTSD, and gambling-related legal consequences, while perpetration was significantly predicted by gambling symptom severity, gambling-related legal consequences, and impulsivity
- The association between gambling symptom severity and victimization was significant only for gamblers with low levels of gambling coping motives and moderate or high levels of alcohol use (Dowling et al,2021)



## Possible signs of problem gambling

Borrowing money	Not paying bills
Selling possessions	Declined credit
Family noticing money missing from bank accounts, wallet, other places	Carers, family, local authority noticing money missing from direct payment account
Seeming worried agitated upset for no apparent reason	Financial crimes – fraud, theft from employers
Suicide plans and attempts	Expression of suicidal thoughts
Depression	Anxiety
Relationship breakdown	Sleep loss/ insomnia
Loss of job or demotion	Increased use of alcohol or other drugs
Frustration, and violence towards objects or people	Increased isolation
Increasing amounts of time spent on screens (phone or computer)	Stress related health problems (headaches, stomach problems)



# A hidden addiction?

- Many individuals have talked of maintaining a high level of functioning, and of keeping their difficulties hidden even from close family, whilst developing and maintaining significant gambling related problem
- The hidden nature of a lot of gambling related harm poses a challenge for all concerned, and perhaps particularly for health and care professionals who have not had training on this issue and for whom there are few screening tools or sources of guidance
- It is known that only a small proportion of those affected discuss the issue and seek help – as noted above no more than 10% of those affected seek help and perhaps as low as 3% of individuals go to formal treatment services (Davies,2020)
- Also,many gamblers have deep shame and guilt about their behaviour and its consequences,and are therefore reluctant to admit and discuss it.Shame has been shown to be one of the primary barriers to help seeking by gamblers and the intensity of shame has also been shown to be correlated with avoidant coping strategies and further gambling (Yi and Kanetkar,2011)



# Starting a conversation

Some suggestions for routes into a relevant conversation about gambling are as follows:

*“Would it be ok to have a quick discussion about gambling? We like to cover this with all of our clients. It’s an opportunity to have a think about how this fits in to your life. Do you like to have a bet on the football, play bingo, buy scratch cards at all?”*

*“I know you were probably not expecting to be looking at this today, but I wonder what you think about how gambling fits in with some of the other issues that have brought you here ?”*

*"Is it ok if we work through a few quick questions about this issue. We use a standard questionnaire called a gambling screen. This provides you with a personal result. What you do with that information is your choice"*



## Screening Tools

### **Lie Bet Screen**

1. Have you ever had to lie to people important to you about how much you gambled?

2. Have you ever felt the need to bet more and more money?

# Screening Tools

## Problem Gambling Severity Index

Thinking about the last 12 months...

1. Have you bet more than you could really afford to lose?
2. Have you needed to gamble with larger amounts of money to get the same feeling of excitement?
3. When you gambled, did you go back another day to try to win back the money you lost?
4. Have you borrowed money or sold anything to get money to gamble?
5. Have you felt that you might have a problem with gambling?
6. Has gambling caused you any health problems, including stress or anxiety?
7. Have people criticized your betting or told you that you had a gambling problem, regardless of whether or not you thought it was true?
8. Has your gambling caused any financial problems for you or your household?
9. Have you felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?

## Social Work role

- Social workers are used to and skilled in dealing with sensitive issues, including those relating to substance use, which are common in many cases which arrive at their door
- The listening skills, motivational skills, and networking skills which social workers have, make them very well positioned to also respond to gambling related harm





# The Social Work Role

## How best to help?

- What is most valued by those recovering from addiction or trying to reduce levels of consumption in any way, includes practical help from staff. In the case of gambling, this might be particularly around dealing with debt and financial problems, but may also link to contacting housing providers, mental health teams, medical help via primary care, and a range of forms of social support

*“I had a client who lived on his own in a council property in receipt of a state pension, occupational pension and also in receipt of industrial injuries payments. He also had hoarding behaviours, I remember he had 5 microwaves. He also suffered from low mood and was socially isolated. He acknowledged his gambling was a problem and has discussed self exclusion from betting offices but is reluctant to accept offers of professional support and has refused to be referred to mental health services. Standing order and direct debt payments have helped him pay his utilities and I supported him to attend a local ex-serviceman club and other community groups to help with his isolation.” -Hull City Council, 2019*

# The Social Work role

- In a very helpful guide for social workers on how to respond to those with alcohol related problems, Galvani et al suggest that it often helps to start by addressing what the individual sees as their most pressing problem (Galvani,2015)
- That guidance also suggests three key roles for social workers: engagement; motivation and support; and supporting and maintaining change. Much of this is about helping individuals to build and rebuild trusting relationships, with professionals, with family and with broader social networks
- In fact, the building of social networks may be one of the most useful elements for a successful and sustained recovery from any addictive behaviour (Best et al, 2015)



# Roles of local authorities in relation to gambling

- Issuing gambling licenses
- The regulator for gambling in the UK is the Gambling Commission, and they are responsible for inspections and monitoring compliance with licensing regulations. The regulations which they implement are based on the Gambling Act 2005, which has three licensing objectives, including prevention of harm to the vulnerable
- However, the Gambling Act also had a major emphasis on allowing gambling and it removed many previous restrictions on promotion and advertising. Local authorities and others have struggled at times to reconcile the ways in which they are required to allow new gambling opportunities unless harm can be shown in advance (a very difficult thing to do), whilst also protecting the vulnerable from harm

# Role of local authorities

- In 2018 the Local Government Association (LGA) and Public Health England produced a document – Tackling Gambling Related Harm- A Whole Council Approach (LGA,2018)
- This notes that, beyond licensing and planning teams, many council service areas will be coming into contact with people experiencing or impacted by harmful gambling, including children's, family and adult services, treatment services, homelessness and wider housing services and financial inclusion services.
- There is a recommendation that councils should ensure that frontline staff are provided with training on harmful gambling so that they recognise potential cases



## Tackling gambling related harm

A whole council approach



# Preventing harm to the vulnerable

- As noted above certain groups and individuals may be particularly vulnerable to harm. Social workers are often involved in safeguarding vulnerable children and adults in various ways, including via formal safeguarding procedures, and the use of relevant legislation such as the Care Act 2014 and The Children Act
- Evidence indicates that there is an increased risk of physical abuse of children, and of neglect, by current problem gamblers. It should also be noted that those who are subject to physical or sexual abuse as a child are at significantly increased risk of developing problem gambling as an adult (Lane et al, 2016)
- Evidence from adult safeguarding reviews shows a number of cases in which gambling played a part. Examples can be found in the new database of Adult Safeguarding Reviews which is available via the Social Care Institute for Excellence Website - <https://nationalnetwork.org.uk/search.html>
- If you come across cases in which vulnerable individuals are involved in gambling and have concerns it may be useful to seek advice from your local safeguarding board. A number of safeguarding partnerships in local authorities have worked together with their licensing colleagues and local operators to produce guidance and good practice in relation to the issue of gambling



## Relevant research

- The only UK study to date of health and care staff found that some specific groups were thought by interviewees to be most at risk of gambling harms
- Those groups were: those with cognitive impairments, individuals experiencing homelessness, and older people (Bramley et al, 2019)



# Cognitive Impairments

- The Gambling Commission, in their guidance about who should be considered vulnerable, state that those with diminished capacities to make informed decisions should be considered in this category
- However, there is a notable absence of studies which have looked at gambling by those who may lack the mental capacity for decision making in relation to that activity
- Anecdotally a number of social workers report that this is an issue for individuals that they work with
- Practitioners will be used to working with the mental capacity act, and guidance on best interests decision making can help if it is assessed that an individual lacks the mental capacity to make their own decisions regarding gambling

# Gambling and Homelessness

- Research on gambling and homelessness has shown the same harm paradox as with poverty, namely that gambling prevalence is lower in those seeking help with homelessness, compared to the general population. Conversely, harmful gambling is much higher (Vandenberg et al, 2022)
- Research in the UK has shown that homeless individuals may use gambling venues for other reasons- betting shops, for example may provide venues which are safe and warm and allow lengthy periods of respite from the street (Sharman et al, 2015)

# Gambling and Older People

- A body of research exists on the subject of older people and gambling. For those who are isolated gambling can provide a valued social activity, in venues such as bingo halls, or group trips to casinos
- However there are also particular risks. An important age-related risk factor that appears to result in greater vulnerability to disordered gambling is the loss of a partner and living alone
- It has been found that greater problem gambling in older adults is predicted by loneliness, amotivation, or a smaller and less satisfying social network, whilst qualitative analysis with older female gamblers also identifies 'filling a void' as a core theme (Sharman et al, 2019)

# Risk Factors

- It is increasingly recognised that trauma in its various forms, is at the root of a range of mental health problems and addictions. Some have suggested that trauma is one of the urgent public health problems of our time (Van Der Kolk, 2015)
- Trauma has also been shown to be a significant issue in the aetiology of gambling for many individuals. A recent review found that all sub types of childhood trauma were associated with later gambling disorder as an adult, with physical neglect being the most significant (Horak et al, 2021)

*“When I was 15 my brother was killed in a car accident and I became severely depressed after that. I got to 18 and discovered gambling. I loved it immediately. It helped me take my mind off things. Initially I only spent a few quid at a time. However with more wins came the urge to spend more and more . Before I knew it I was putting everything I had into roulette machines”- Kevin, expert by lived experience*



# Risk Factors

- Certain co factors are highly correlated with and may increase the risk of problem gambling:

- - Mental Health problems, including depression, anxiety conditions, or personality disorders

Debates remain over the temporal sequencing ( which comes first)

Sundqvist and Rosendahl (2019) found that for men, the gambling was more likely to come first, with depression and suicidality a result; for women, the mental health problems were more likely to come first

- - Other addictions, such as to drugs or alcohol

In the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions 73.2 % of individuals identified as pathological gamblers also had an alcohol use disorder ([Petry et al. 2005](#)) which is about 8 times higher than the 8.5 % population estimate in that data-set.

## Gaps in knowledge

- Prevalence of gambling problems in disadvantaged groups/communities
- Gambling by those who lack mental capacity
- Gambling and suicide

# Useful sources of help for gamblers

## Self Exclusion

When it is difficult to control urges and there are high levels of ambivalence about a behaviour, anything which can make access to the opportunity more difficult may help to reduce the behaviour. A number of initiatives have developed which allow gamblers to exclude themselves from gambling venues such as casinos or betting shops, and/or websites and apps

Gamstop is a national scheme in the UK. Details can be found at this website :<https://www.gamstop.co.uk/>

# Useful sources of help for gamblers

## Blocking software

With the rapid increase in the use technology in our lives, the nature of gambling has also rapidly changed and online gambling, via computers and/or smart devices has overtaken other forms as the most likely source of problems (Gambling Commission,2020). A number of forms of blocking software are now available for those who struggle to control their use of online gambling. These vary in level of sophistication and cost, with some freely available and others requiring a subscription

One widely used example is Gamban, which requires a subscription after a free seven day trial. However, those who contact the national gambling helpline can get a free licence for the Gamban blocking software as well as access to the Gamstop self exclusion scheme

For details see : <https://gamban.com/talkbanstop>

## Sources of help- GamCare



ers Helpline 0808 8020 133

Netline Chat room and online forums (peer support)

<https://www.gamcare.org.uk/>



## Sources of help - CAB

- Clearly, one of the more common consequences of problematic gambling is debt.
- The Citizens advice service (CAB) have developed expertise in this area
- In 2014 they were commissioned and developed a Gambling Support Service, with CAB offices in all regions of England and Wales offering specialised advice and support. They have also developed and been commissioned to offer training on issues of gambling, debt and other gambling related harms. This training has been delivered to staff in a number of local authorities
- For current CAB advice see:
- <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/debt-and-money/get-help-with-gambling-problems/>

## Sources of help - NHS clinics

<https://youtu.be/2WxT8uFBqE4>

**NHS Northern Gambling Clinics – Leeds, Sunderland, Manchester** <https://www.leedsandYorkpft.nhs.uk/our-services/northern-gambling-service/>

**NHS – National problem gambling clinic – London -**  
<https://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/services/mental-health-services/addictions-and-substance-misuse/national-problem-gambling-clinic>

# National Gambling Treatment Service

National Gambling Treatment Service -Advertised as a service that works with, and alongside, the National Health Service.

It is free at the point of delivery, provides telephone, online and face-to-face treatment for individuals and groups, across Great Britain. The Freephone 24-7 National Gambling Helpline is :[0808 8020 133](tel:0808 8020 133) .

More details including the live chat access point can be found at: <https://www.begambleaware.org/ngts>

## Sources of help - Gamblers Anonymous

- 120 meetings every week, across the country
- Since lockdowns, many more online meetings
- <https://www.gamblersanonymous.org.uk/>



# Gamblers Anonymous

- The GA philosophy is not for everyone
- Professionals are sometimes sceptical about 12 step programmes
- However, a recent review of 25 years of evidence have suggested that *'these (twelve step) programmes appear to be an effective clinical and public health ally that aids addiction recovery through its ability to mobilise therapeutic mechanisms similar to those mobilised in formal treatment, but is able to do this for free over the long term in the communities in which people live'* (Kelly, 2017).



## Sources of help : Gordon Moody Association

- **Gordon Moody Association** Residential treatment programmes and a retreat and counselling programme for women only. They also now have a new programme for individuals with cross addictions or multiple addictions. <https://gordonmoody.org.uk/>

# Training

- The Royal Society of Public Health have developed several useful resources.
- Firstly, a free online course - Understanding and responding to gambling harms: A brief guide for professionals. This has been designed to help people to understand and identify risks and harms related to gambling disorders, and equip them to provide brief interventions to help address these harms. It is aimed at professionals who do not specialise in the treatment of gambling disorder and may be most suitable to those working in social and criminal justice settings. The RSPH suggest that social workers are one of the professions who may particularly benefit from the course.

# Training

- Also, a 'Bet You Can Help' Programme was developed by and has also been accredited by RSPH
- It uses a First Aid approach to addressing and supporting those experiencing gambling-related harms, similar to the widely used Mental Health First Aid Programme. This 6-hour training programme is relevant for anyone working with individuals affected by harmful gambling and gambling-related harms, and has been attended by staff in health, social care, education, criminal justice, housing, and youth work settings
- The course develops a number of the themes which are discussed in this guide and enables individuals to more easily identify and signpost affected individuals to sources of reliable information, advice, and guidance
- For details, see : <https://www.rsph.org.uk/>

## More information.....

- For further details and the full list of references, see the forthcoming guide to be published via Community Care Inform (Adults)
- A separate guide is planned in relation to children, gambling and gaming

