



Playing Social Roulette: The Impact of Gambling on Individuals and Society in Ireland

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Summary

This scholarly research study explored gambling behaviour in Ireland, specifically the issue of problem gambling and its impact on the individual, the gambler's relationships with social connections, and the wider impact of problem gambling behaviour on community and society. The project followed an exploratory, ethnographic approach to enable participants to express themselves fully from their perspective, to facilitate in-depth understanding of gambling behaviour, and to provide a foundation for future research projects in this area. The research was conducted as four work packages, involving data collection with critical stakeholders:

- 1) Addiction Service Providers,
- 2) Gamblers,
- 3) Gamblers' Social Connections, and
- 4) the Gambling Industry.

Problem gambling not only affects the individual who participates in gambling opportunities, but also that person's family members, friends, and wider community. There are multiple areas where stakeholders' needs can be facilitated, including regulation and policy development to protect those vulnerable to negative outcomes associated with gambling. Importantly, collaboration among all stakeholders should be initiated. Findings suggest that development of a regulatory framework and a social policy framework is urgently needed. A national strategy for service provision is essential. Further research into gambling behaviour and approaches and services is urgently needed in Ireland.

Introduction

Gambling is an activity which may be summarised as involving participation in games of chance for money. With gambling available in varied venues, ranging from the Internet to casinos, game machines in pubs, and scratch cards in shops, opportunities to gamble are many. However, while access to gambling is widespread, a precise picture of how and why people gamble in Ireland requires exploration.

Estimates of the numbers of individuals for whom gambling becomes a problem vary. It is generally considered that while many may take part in gambling as a pastime, a relatively small cohort may find that participation in gambling leads to addiction. International research studies have suggested that single men under age thirty-five are at greatest risk of problem gambling (e.g., Analytical Services Unit DSD, 2010; Wardle *et al.*, 2011). GamblingAware.ie (IRGB Gamble Aware, 2015) has estimated that between 28,000 and 40,000 people in Ireland suffer from a gambling disorder. The Irish Institute of Public Health (2010) has reported that adolescent gambling is two to three times greater than for adults, in particular as a consequence of online gambling; the UK Prevalence Studies (Wardle *et al.*, 2007; Wardle *et al.*, 2011) and Forrest and McHale (2012) have reported that adolescent gambling is up to two to four times greater than for adults.

Problem gambling can lead to complete social breakdown, with devastating financial losses, property losses, and alienation of family and friends. Often problem gambling is a behaviour conducted in

secret, becoming known to the gambler's social network only when negative financial and social difficulties arise. With the addition of casino, mobile phone and Internet gambling to the more traditional forms of gambling (e.g., lotteries, scratch card tickets, horse and dog racing, bookmakers' shops, etc.), gambling opportunities, both publicly and covertly, can be easily accessed.

Purpose of This Study

This project investigated the social phenomenon of gambling in Ireland and its impact on the lives of those who participate, as well as on their families and friends who form their social network, i.e., their social connections.

Project Objectives and Research Questions

Because the nature of the project was exploratory, a wide and inclusive approach to discover social issues surrounding a problem with gambling was taken. Project objectives were as follows:

- To explore gambling behaviour in Ireland
- To understand characteristics of problem gambling behaviour in Ireland
- To explore services available in Ireland to help individuals affected by gambling, i.e., the gambler's family and friends
- To explore the relationship between problem gambling and covert behaviours
- To investigate the impact of gambling on the gambler and on the gambler's relationships with social connections
- To understand the wider effect of gambling behaviour on community and society

- To identify potential measures not only to treat, but also to help prevent gambling problems

Several research questions were designed to explore different facets of gambling in Ireland:

1. Who gambles in Ireland?
2. How and why do people engage in gambling in Ireland?
3. What are the main characteristics of problem gambling?
4. What role does secrecy play in the development of problem gambling?
5. What are the social outcomes of gambling, in particular problem gambling?
6. What services are currently available to help gamblers overcome their addiction and to families and friends affected by gambling?
7. What additional social actions could cause positive social change for gamblers and their social networks?

Alignment with the Irish Research Council's SPRIA Funding

The Irish Research Council (IRC) funded this project through its Research Project Grants (RPG) Social Protection Research Innovation Awards (SPRIA), which have financial support for various projects of social interest and impact from the Department of Social Protection (DSP). In the case of this project, the DSP and the Department for Justice and Equality (DJE) have liaised with the researcher to support this research. Projects under this area of RPG - SPRIA grants are intended to "inform the future development of social protection policies in line with the Programme for Government and the Europe 2020 Strategy" (Irish Research Council, 2013). Gambling was identified by the DSP as a "core challenge" for which research was needed to inform policy and practice development and to

“inform the Department’s goals of ‘promoting active participation in society through the provision of income supports, employment services and other services’ including its role in supporting Government and EU commitments” (Irish Research Council, 2013).

In particular, the Government has introduced the General Scheme for the Gambling Control Bill 2013, which provides for an updated and more comprehensive licensing and regulatory framework for gambling in Ireland. The proposed legislation also provides for the creation of a Social Fund which will support treatment services, research, and education. The grant for this project was specifically provided to "fund an exploratory study on the social impact of gambling, focusing on problem gambling" (Irish Research Council, 2013).

In keeping with the revised action approach of the DSP, the project aimed to provide insight into gambling behaviour and its social outcomes in Ireland. The project outcomes may, in turn, be used to help shape social policy for protection of those who are vulnerable in problem gambling situations, as well as to indicate areas of future research.

Method

This project followed an exploratory, ethnographic approach to facilitate an in-depth understanding of gambling, in particular problem gambling, from the perspectives of people affected by gambling in Ireland and to identify areas for future research in this area. Exploratory research is undertaken where evidence surrounding a particular phenomenon is lacking. Because this study was the first in Ireland to probe for public perceptions of gambling at a national level, an exploratory research approach was necessary.

Work package 1: Interviews with Addiction Service Providers

Addiction Service Providers referred to volunteer and for-profit counsellors and programmes, through which there was direct interaction with gamblers and/or family and friends affected by gambling to resolve issues arising from problems with gambling.

10 Addiction Service Providers from around Ireland participated in in-depth interviews.

Work package 2: Interviews with Gamblers

22 gamblers participated in in-depth interviews. All were all at different stages of recovery for a problem with gambling. While the study was open to everyone in the Republic of Ireland, inclusive of gender, age, location, and type of gambler (i.e., social, disordered or other form of gambler), only gamblers who had experienced a problem with gambling came forward. While alternative explanations of this self-selection may be possible, one of the reasons that emerged from discussions with prospective participants who reported gambling with varying intensities was that participation in a study about gambling might put an unwanted focus on the individual's gambling, potentially revealing a problem.

The gamblers in this study were largely men (eighty-six per cent), with fourteen per cent women. These figures are consistent with studies documenting gender in problem gambling (e.g., Analytical Services Unit DSD, 2010; Wardle *et al.*, 2011; Moore *et al.*, 2013; McCormack *et al.*, 2014); while it is possible that fewer women may become problem gamblers (e.g., Gainsbury *et al.*, 2014; Wardle *et al.*, 2011; Analytical Services Unit DSD, 2010), it is possible that gambling is even more secret for women than men because of social stigma related to gender.

Work package 3: Interviews with Families & Friends

22 social connections, i.e., family members and friends, participated in in-depth interviews. In nearly all cases, a family member agreed to participate in the study. Isolation of the problem gambler from family was the primary reason for including a friend. The social stigma of a gambling problem was also felt by family and friends. Even where a gambler's family unit had remained intact, the stigma of problem gambling influenced family members' willingness to engage with anything to do with gambling, including a study.

The family members and friends who participated had known their matched gambler for several years. From adult children who had known their parents all their lives to friends of many years, the relationships between matched pairs of participants were long term. Even where couples had been married for only a few years, they reported a friendship with the matched gambler for a long period of time before the marriage. Nearly half of social connections were the partner or spouse of a gambler.

Work package 4: Focus Group with Gambling Industry

Researchers and analysts from gambling organisations covering the different gambling sectors in Ireland were invited to attend a research focus group. A range of seven industry representatives took part in the focus group. All gambling sectors were invited to send two representatives from different organisations to maximise coverage of the gambling industry as well as gambling organisations.

Findings

Types of Gambling

Four main categories of gambling emerged from interviews:

- Social gambling
- Problem gambling
- Compulsive or pathological gambling
- Professional gambling

Gambling Characteristics & Behaviours

Gamblers and their social connections were asked to describe the gambling behaviour of themselves/the gambler they knew. The gamblers in this study were all recovering gamblers. Although at different stages of recovery, gamblers shared common behavioural experiences. They often described their gambling behaviour as something they felt drawn to or compelled to do. They frequently spoke of the buzz associated with gambling. They also noted the need to rationalise their gambling behaviour, to explain away losses and unpaid bills, and to control the people and environment around them so that they could continue to gamble. They acknowledged the selfishness of their behaviour. As a problem with gambling progressed or became evident, family and friends described the gambler as becoming agitated, erratic, moody, secretive, and uninterested in daily life, family, or taking care of themselves. The gambling behaviours described by gamblers and their social connections were aligned with the gambling behaviours noted by Addiction Service Providers when describing the reported and observed behaviours of gamblers who had sought help.

The Impact of Technology

Technologies associated with gambling spanned a range of machines and online gambling facilities. Technologies cited included the Internet, computers, mobile phones, slot machines, casino games and machines, virtual races on screens at betting shops, television, social media, and tablet computer applications (apps). Smart mobile devices, such as iPhones, were considered particularly convenient, providing an opportunity to engage in gambling in any setting, including meetings, etc., because of the ubiquity of these devices in society. The mobile phone was noted by nearly all social connections as a favourite tool used by the gambler they knew, and family and friends believed that advanced technologies, such as smart mobile phones, have deepened the impact of gambling. Most importantly, family and friends believed the mobile phone facilitated covert gambling; because of the embeddedness of mobile phones in Irish society, the gambler could gamble unnoticed by others who might be similarly preoccupied with mobile devices. Of all gambling forms, the online environment was perceived as a gateway to secret, hidden gambling activities.

Social Impact

The social impact of gambling was felt where excessive and uncontrolled gambling occurred. Addiction Service Providers reported that by the time a gambler or social connection requested help, the gambler and their family were nearly always in crisis. Money would usually be depleted. Marriages would have been broken to some degree. Connections with friends may have been severed by the gambler's requests to borrow money. Trust levels among family and friends might be very low or non-existent for gamblers. In some cases, problem gamblers may have reached a point of desperation where they felt

compelled to commit crime to resolve their situations.

Problem gamblers often started gambling as teenagers. Addiction Service Providers reported ages from nine years and up as common starting points for gambling. Gamblers in this study frequently noted being present at gambling events and establishments as adolescents or teenagers, often attending the gambling event or establishment with a family member or friend. Many also began to gamble when they were young, starting as under-aged or between their teens and early twenties. Initial gambling participation might involve betting for pennies, e.g., on card games, coin tossing, the "odd pound" in a poker machine, placing bets for a relative, a flutter on the Grand National horse race, etc. Because problem gamblers often ask for help in their late thirties to early forties, they may have spent a significant amount of time gambling before they seek treatment.

Gamblers' and Social Connections' Perceptions of Service Provision

Gamblers reported using counselling services including group and one-to-one therapies. Residential services provided intensive therapies, during which gamblers might be introduced to Gamblers Anonymous as part of ongoing fellowship. Gamblers also found Gamblers Anonymous on their own. Some gamblers reported finding help through health services, including their family doctor, private counsellors, and the general health care system. These services helped connect gamblers with other services, such as financial services, to assist them with problems in other areas of their lives caused by their problem with gambling.

Social connections, however, did not always seek or access help. Those who sought help did so, because they had noticed a negative

impact on their immediate families. They wanted help for themselves, as well as for the gambler they knew; these social connections considered their situations to be desperate and seeking help was their only alternative. Social connections who did not seek help gave several reasons, for example, that finding help was the responsibility of the gambler, that they did not feel they needed counselling, or that help was geographically or financially inaccessible. For some social connections, participation in Gam-Anon, a service for families and friends developed through Gamblers Anonymous, helped them develop constructive coping mechanisms which helped them overcome feeling disempowered. Family members may also participate in residential programmes as part of the gambler's recovery, but many expressed a need for counselling services and supports which address how gambling has affected them as well.

Social Actions

Participants repeatedly explained the value of openly talking about addiction as a means of prevention, alongside providing a network of the necessary supports and directly addressing gambling as a social issue. Public awareness was equated with education. Participants suggested that advertising could be used successfully to help educate people and create awareness, similar to recent campaigns to increase public awareness and understanding of social issues, such as mental health. In addition, participants identified the community as taking a role in understanding and alleviating issues, such as underage gambling. For instance, communities could play a role in ensuring that young people were engaged socially, so that gambling is not their focus. Access to counselling in rural areas was also identified as an area for development to ensure equal access to treatment.

Responsibility for Services & Supports

Addiction Service Providers, gamblers and their social connections named two bodies that they considered should be responsible for providing funding for treatment and prevention programming: the Government and the gambling industry. Participants suggested that monies from the gambling industry could be raised through levies and licensing fees.

Policy & Research Implications

This research study explored the issues around gambling in Ireland, in particular from the perspectives of people affected by gambling. Because this study was a first of its kind, the scope of the investigation was wide in order to be inclusive. The resulting rich data has yielded multiple findings. This final section of the report provides major implications for policy and research development.

Findings suggest that service provision in the country requires appropriate support to enable Addiction Service Providers not only to address the perceived growing number of people requesting treatment for issues around gambling addiction, but also, critically, to create a framework that focuses on prevention as opposed to treatment alone. A range of suggestions for social action arose from discussions with participants:

Development of a Regulated & Responsible Gambling Environment

- A National Gambling Strategy is needed.
- The passage and implementation of updated gambling legislation are essential. Legislation and policy development on a range of topics concerning gambling are urgently

needed to protect those affected by gambling and to address the perceived growth in problems with gambling in Ireland.

- Standardised responsible gambling measures need to be put in place across the gambling industry and all outlets for distribution of gambling information. The nature, extent, and enforcement of these measures should be determined by government.

Improvement of Social Understanding of Gambling

- Problem gambling needs formal recognition in Ireland.
- The stigma around gambling must be addressed through open dialogue. Openness to discussion of gambling in Irish society needs to be fostered at multiple levels of society.
- Education of the public is needed to mitigate negative effects of gambling. All stakeholders, including educators, families, and addiction experts need to be included in development and implementation of strategy and programmes.
- The Social Fund included in the *General Scheme of the Gambling Control Bill 2013* should provide significantly for public education about gambling.

Services for the Treatment & Prevention of Problem Gambling

- An appropriate national strategy for service provision, encompassing the various government and private bodies which address cause and outcomes of problem gambling, is required.

- The strategic development of services focused on problem gambling is required. These services should consider particular groups of people affected by gambling and their specific needs.
- The Government could take the lead in the collection and distribution of funds to treat and prevent problem gambling. The collection and distribution of funds in support of treating and preventing problem gambling could be governed by a neutral body.

- Development of addiction services to address gambling addiction in Ireland is urgent and critical. This includes a unified approach to training and development for counsellors to international accreditation, as well as for health care workers generally.
- Cross organisation coordination and collaboration among volunteer organisations and service providers is critically needed, including those who deal directly with addiction, as well as organisations that provide additional supports.
- Addiction services for gamblers and their social connections should be located in multiple locations in the Republic of Ireland to facilitate those seeking help.

- Services should be independent and neutral.
- An equitable, transparent, and consistent funding model for services is needed.

- Funding of service provision, including Addiction Service Providers as well as secondary services, is needed to support individual service providers, as well as a coordinated framework of supports. Funding to support prevention and treatment of problem gambling should come through channels, such as gambling licensing fees and gambling taxation.
- A national assessment tool for assessing gambling addiction is needed.
- Families and friends affected by gambling require services focused on their needs.
- Services for friends and families need to be provided across the country to enable wider participation geographically.
- Services for individuals affected by gambling should be made accessible to everyone.
- Although a service focused on helping families and friends affected by addiction exists, additional services which are directed at the *needs* of the families and friends of gamblers are urgently needed across Ireland.
- Although services which support gamblers do exist, further investment in focused services is needed.
- Although limited services to help young people with gambling disorders exist, further services to assist younger gamblers are needed throughout the country.
- Although limited services to help women with gambling disorders exist, further services to assist women gamblers are needed throughout the country.

Research on Gambling Issues in Ireland

- Research is urgently needed to understand gambling fully in the Irish context.
- Gambling involves a variety of issues, from health to regulation. Research should cover the full range of issues surrounding gambling.
- This research should be funded and managed through the Irish Research Council to achieve international standards of research outcomes and research ethics.

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