

RESEARCH REPORT

Gen bet: a plain English summary of research into gambling and young people

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The authors declare no conflict of interest in relation to this report or project.

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Our vision: A Victoria free from gambling-related harm



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INTRODUCTION

The current generation of children and adolescents are growing up during a time of record levels of gambling advertising, and a rapidly increasing array of gambling options.

Gambling promotions are delivered across multiple media platforms and have become heavily embedded in sport, with a proliferation in advertising and sponsorship links between gambling companies and sporting codes, teams, and media organisations. Alongside the increased marketing of gambling products, technological advances such as the development of smartphones have made gambling more accessible than ever before.

On top of this, there has been a growing convergence between the gaming and gambling worlds, including video games simulating gambling activities; video games becoming monetised in ways that enable external gambling; and the presence of gambling within competitive gaming events (King 2018).

This is the first generation to be exposed to saturation marketing of online betting products.

When they watch live sport, betting company logos dominate stadium signage and players' shirts. On TV, commentators refer to the odds and a barrage of gambling ads show the fun, social side of having a bet.

In 2020, gambling companies spent \$271 million nationally on advertising, plus an additional unknown amount on sponsorship. Foundation-funded research revealed there were an astonishing 136,918 gambling advertisements on Australian free-to-air TV in 2016 – an average of 374 per day (O'Brien & Iqbal 2019).

Mobile apps mean you can bet on sports anywhere, anytime. While these apps are illegal for young people under 18, almost one-in-five adolescents who have gambled have done so online (Freund et al. 2019).

The result of this pervasive marketing and rapid technological advancements is that gambling has become normalised for vast numbers of young people. The dramatic rise in sports betting amongst young adults, particularly young men, points to a cumulative impact of exposure to gambling during adolescence.

Through rapid changes in the nature of gaming, young people are also being exposed to gambling content in more subtle forms. The proportion of gamers exposed to loot boxes rose from just 5.3 per cent in 2010 to 71.2 per cent by 2019 (Zendle, Meyer & Ballou 2020), and preliminary evidence points to a strong link between spending on these items and problem gambling severity (Zendle, Meyer & Over 2019).

While the long-term effects of early exposure to gambling are unknown, evidence from other areas of public health, such as alcohol and tobacco, indicate it is likely to be harmful for young people and create long-term problems.

Our community, including policymakers, parents, teachers and coaches, needs to be vigilant to the risks posed to young people by this pushier, more pervasive gambling environment. We must educate our children to develop healthy and informed attitudes towards gambling.

This discussion paper draws on findings from the relatively new field of gambling research. We thank the researchers who are contributing to an emerging body of evidence that informs the Foundation's work.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE GAMBLE

Three key factors influence young people's attitudes and behaviour when it comes to gambling:

- The gambling environment
- Gambling marketing
- How family and friends view and participate in gambling

Of course, individual psychological and biological differences also affect attitudes and behaviour, however, these are less relevant from a public health perspective.

The changing gambling environment

GAMBLING REGULATION

For some forms of gambling, regulation has been fairly consistent over recent years.

Pokies in Victoria have sat at just below 30,000 machines at nearly 500 venues for more than a decade (Queensland Government 2016) and will remain capped at this level until at least 2042 (Willingham 2017). Opening hours at clubs and hotels remain at a maximum of 20 hours per day (subject to the venue's liquor licence) while Crown casino operates 24 hours per day. This means young people have been exposed to a high level of accessibility throughout their childhood and adolescence.

Regulation of betting products, however, has changed dramatically.

In 2008 a High Court decision ruled that state governments may not restrict betting providers based in other states or territories from operating or marketing products in their state (Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation 2008). As a result, the number of providers operating in Victoria increased significantly. Extensive marketing by these providers, especially through live sporting events, has coincided with greater participation in gambling.

Rates of sports betting have increased steadily over the past decade, rising from 3.96 per cent of Victorian adults in 2008 to 4.82 per cent in 2014 (Hare 2015) and 5.8 per cent in 2018 (Rockloff et al. 2020a). Findings among adolescents have been less consistent. A 2010 study found that up to 20 per cent of young Australians aged 15 to 17 had bet on sports in the past 12 months (Purdie et al. 2011), however a 2016 study involving Australian teens aged 16 to 17 found 6 per cent of boys and 3 per cent of girls had done so (Warren & Yu 2019). Findings from a Victorian study indicate around 11–12 per cent of adolescents have bet on sports at some time in their lives, with 3.6 per cent having done so in the past month (Freund et al. 2019).

Nonetheless, the effects of normalisation of sports betting among young people over recent years can be seen in the dramatically increased participation by young adults. While the rate of sports betting increased by around 20 per cent in the overall adult population between 2014 and 2018, it more than doubled in the 18 to 24-year-old age group, rising from 9.2 per cent to 21.9 per cent. In particular, the proportion of males aged 18 to 24 who reported gambling on sports increased from 14.6 per cent to 31.9 per cent (Rockloff et al. 2020a).

ONLINE GAMBLING

While online gambling on pokies, casino games and some other products is illegal in Australia, online gambling on betting products is permitted. These products are also heavily marketed online. A 2018 study on the prevalence of gambling in Victoria found more than three-quarters (78.1 per cent) of people who had bet on sports used the internet to place bets in the previous 12 months (Rockloff et al. 2020a).

A study involving Victorian adolescents aged 12 to 17 found 18 per cent of those who had ever gambled had done so online (Freund et al. 2019), while a New South Wales study involving young people in the same age group reported a figure of 24.9 per cent among those who had gambled in the previous 12 months (Hing et al. 2020).

MOBILE GAMBLING

The emergence of smartphones has provided unprecedented opportunities to gamble. A recent survey found 95 per cent of adolescents have access to a smartphone, with almost all having sole access to the device (Hing et al. 2020).

Online betting operators increasingly use apps that include features like personalised notifications about promotions and special offers (also known as inducements). Such offers have been found to encourage riskier bets, increased expenditure (Hing et al. 2018a), and more impulsive betting (Hing et al. 2018b). Sports bettors have noted that the growing accessibility and pervasive advertising of online betting facilitated by smartphones is problematic, particularly for those at risk of harm (Jenkinson, de Lacey-Vawdon & Carroll 2018).

It is unclear how many young people are using betting apps, given by law they can only be accessed by people over 18. However, studies have consistently shown that some young people bet on sports online.

CONVERGENCE OF GAMING AND GAMBLING

In recent years there has been increasing concern about a blurring of the lines between gaming and gambling activities. A range of gambling-like features have become embedded in the gaming world, most of which have no age restrictions. Researchers have identified a number of gambling-like activities available to young people.

Demo games

Some online gambling sites enable players to practice gambling using virtual currency (Delfabbro & King 2020). A concern with this activity is that the odds of winning in these simulated settings may not reflect real-world conditions, which may give players an inflated expectation of success when playing with real money. Evidence suggests that exposure to simulated gaming with high rates of return leads players to persist longer in the face of subsequent losses.

— WHY YOUNG PEOPLE GAMBLE

Video game modules

Several video games feature highly realistic gambling simulations, in which young people can enter virtual casinos and engage in various forms of gambling (Delfabbro & King 2020). Concerningly, almost all of these games are rated suitable for purchase by people under the age of 18 (King et al. 2012).

Social casino games

Social casino games are gambling-like games found through social media sites such as Facebook. These games are usually available for free, however it is possible to purchase additional credit. As players cannot win money, these games are not classified as gambling, and can be legally provided to those aged under 18. However, they provide the opportunity for young people to spend time and money gambling in realistic settings (Delfabbro & King 2020).

Rather than being determined purely by chance, the outcomes of social casino games are shaped by algorithms designed to enhance player enjoyment, meaning that players may win more than they would when playing for real money (Kim 2017). Therefore, as with demo games, players may develop an inflated sense of their skills and the probability of winning with real money.

Foundation-funded research suggests social casino games may 'normalise gambling as a socially acceptable, enjoyable and risk-free activity' (Gainsbury et al. 2015a p. 11). Findings suggest that around one in four adolescents have played social casino games in the past 12 months (Gainsbury et al. 2015b, King et al. 2016). Research suggests that a small proportion of adolescents who gamble on social casino games also tend to engage in commercial gambling activities (Delfabbro & King 2020), and that the use of such simulated products tends to precede monetary gambling (Hayer et al. 2018, Kim et al. 2017).

Loot boxes

Loot boxes are virtual containers that can be opened to reveal random game-related features. These may be functional (e.g. a weapon) or cosmetic (e.g. skins) and vary greatly in value.

While loot boxes can be earned through skilful play, players can also pay real money to purchase them. In the sense that loot boxes involve staking money on an outcome determined by chance, they are very similar to gambling. Furthermore, in some cases, the virtual goods can be transferred to other players, either in-game or in secondary markets, including for the use of gambling. Loot boxes are regulated as a form of gambling in some countries (e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands), but this is not the case in Australia (Russell et al. 2020).

Loot boxes are common features within modern games, with exposure increasing dramatically in recent years. A study of the most popular games on the platform Steam found that the proportion of gamers exposed to loot boxes rose from just 5.3 per cent in 2010 to 71.2 per cent by 2019 (Zendle, Meyer & Ballou 2020).

A recent Australian study (Rockloff et al. 2020b) found that:

- of the 82 best-selling video games, 62 per cent, (n=51) incorporated loot boxes
- of the games with loot boxes, 59 per cent (n=30) allowed these to be purchased via in-game currency that had first been bought using cash

- eighty-four per cent (43) of games with loot boxes allowed the skins or other items to be sold for cash or traded for other items with a monetary value (e.g., other skins, in-game currency, etc.)
- during the previous 12 months, almost all (93.2 per cent) survey respondents had played at least one video game incorporating loot boxes and 69.4 per cent had opened a loot box
- approximately one-third (32.9 per cent) of respondents who played games with loot boxes within the last year had purchased a loot box, with a median monthly spend of \$50 for adolescents and \$72 for young adults
- of the players who had obtained rewards from loot boxes, 6.8 per cent had sold at least some of their rewards on for cash
- both adolescents and young adults who had either opened, bought or sold loot boxes within the last 12 months were more likely to have: 1) gambled in the last 12 months (young adults), 2) gambled more frequently (young adults), 3) spent more money gambling (young adults), 4) suffered more gambling problems (adolescents and young adults), 5) suffered more gambling-related harm (young adults), and 6) endorsed more positive attitudes towards gambling (adolescents and young adults).

A 2019 survey of adolescents aged 16 to 18 found that problem gambling severity scores among gamers who pay to open loot boxes were more than twice as high as those who do not. Adolescents who met the criteria for problem gambling spent more than five times as much money on loot boxes than non-problem gamblers (Zendle, Meyer & Over 2019). A large-scale international study of adult gamers also found a link between the amount spent on loot boxes and the severity of problem gambling. The link between spending on loot boxes and problem gambling was stronger than for buying other in-game items (i.e. those not determined by chance), suggesting that the gambling-related features of loot boxes are an important determinant of spending (Zendle & Cairns 2018).

The results of these studies do not allow us to determine whether loot boxes lead to problem gambling. It may be that problem gamblers are attracted to the chance-related feature of loot boxes. Regardless, loot boxes are potentially very harmful: either acting as a gateway to future gambling harm, or exploiting the existing vulnerabilities of customers in order to make profits (Zendle, Meyer & Over 2019).

In a 2018 submission to the Australian Government, the Foundation recommended:

1. Games containing loot boxes be classified more stringently.
2. Games in which loot boxes are purchased must send notifications immediately to the account holder along with a note about the dangers they can create.
3. Odds of loot boxes containing any prizes on offer should be available, visible and accessible.
4. Players should be able to put a limit on the number of loot boxes made available to them, the number that they open and the amount that can be spent over a given time period.
5. Players should be made aware and able to easily opt out of offers of loot boxes for a time they determine, including permanently.
6. Advertising of loot boxes should be restricted, particularly in relation to misrepresentations of chances of winning high value rewards.

— WHY YOUNG PEOPLE GAMBLE

Esports

Esports is a type of sport competition in the form of competitive video gaming. Esports viewers are regularly exposed to gambling advertising, which makes up a large proportion of esports revenue (Russell et al. 2020). The audience is predominately young and male (Greer et al. 2021; YouGov 2018), with esports gamblers tending to engage in a higher number of other gambling activities (Gainsbury, Abarbanel & Blaszczynski 2017; Greer et al. 2021), and experience greater levels of gambling harm (Greer et al. 2021; Rockloff et al. 2020a).

The use of skins for gambling provides greater opportunities for those aged under 18 to bet on esports. Hing et al. (2020) found that while only 1.4 per cent of adolescents reported esports betting with money, 6.2 per cent bet with in-game items. Concerningly 15.1 per cent of survey respondents reported intending to bet on esports in the future, well above the current prevalence figures among young adults (Hing et al. 2020).

A recent Foundation-funded study of esports betting and skin gambling found little evidence that engaging in these activities while underage (< 18 years) leads to greater gambling involvement or experiences of gambling-related harm during adulthood. However, esports bettors and skin gamblers who participated in esports cash betting, and skin gambling on games of chance prior to the age of 18 had higher problem gambling severity scores during adulthood than those who first participated as adults (Greer et al. 2021).

SUMMARY OF HARMS

Russell et al. (2020) identified six factors inherent to converging gaming/gambling technologies that increase vulnerability to harm:

- Young people are exposed to these activities early in life, with early exposure to gambling increasing the risk of subsequent gambling-related problems and harm.
- Simulated forms of gambling introduce players to how gambling products work, but operate on different rules to regulated gambling activities (e.g. different return-to-player percentages). They may mislead young people into developing a false sense of confidence in their ability.
- Young people are able to play some of these emerging forms (e.g. skin gambling) due to lax age verification standards.
- These activities can be accessed via personal mobile devices, making parental supervision and monitoring more difficult.
- Many of these activities provide opportunities to socialise with and compete against peers, providing both a sense of belonging and peer recognition.
- As emerging forms of gambling involve electronic cash or non-cash items (that may still have a monetary value, such as skins), the cost of taking part may be obscured.

Early exposure through marketing

Gambling advertising has expanded significantly over the past decade due to a highly competitive market. Nielsen Media Research found that between 2011 and 2020, spending on gambling advertising in Australia tripled, rising from \$89.7 million to \$271.3 million. This excludes sponsorships and in-program content, such as during live sport broadcasts (Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation 2021).

Among Victorian adolescents, the most frequently reported exposure to gambling promotion in the last month was through ads on television (73 per cent), followed by ads on social networking sites (38 per cent), on scoreboards or signage at sporting events (36 per cent), and ads on the radio (35 per cent) (Freund et al. 2019).

TRADITIONAL MARKETING

A Foundation-funded study found that during 2016 there were 136,918 gambling advertisements on Australian free-to-air TV, an average of 374 per day. This is approximately five times the number of alcohol advertisements found on TV in other research (O'Brien & Iqbal 2019). Two-thirds of gambling ads aired between 6am and 8:29pm, a period when large numbers of children are watching television. This was reflected in the finding that children aged 0 to 11 years had the greatest exposure to gambling and betting advertising when watching TV, followed by young adults (18 to 24 years) and adolescents (12 to 17 years).

When factoring in the relative amount of sport vs. non-sport TV, there was on average four times as many gambling advertisements during sports programmes than in others. AFL had the greatest number of gambling or betting adverts (8,866) in 2016, representing a 55 per cent increase on the 2015 figure. This was followed by NRL (4534), cricket (1888), horse racing (1571), motor racing (1372), and tennis (1301). Children and young people's exposure to gambling advertising was greatest when watching the AFL, NRL, cricket, and tennis (O'Brien & Iqbal 2019).

Ads for betting products are not permitted during TV programs classified G or lower from 6 to 8.30 am and 4 to 7 pm, or in programs directed at children between 5 am and 8.30 pm. Until 2018, sport was exempt from these restrictions. Since then, between the hours of 5am and 8.30pm, betting advertising is no longer permitted on Australian TV or online between 5 minutes before the start of a live sports (non-racing) event and 5 minutes after its completion.

However, it is unclear as to whether this has led to a reduction in advertising during sports coverage, or simply greater clustering of ads during the pre- and post-match coverage. Preliminary evidence suggests the latter may be the case. Despite the TV ban being enacted in March of 2018, betting firms spent 15 per cent more in the 12 months to July of that year than in the 12 months prior (AdNews 2018). In any case, as large numbers of children and young people watch sport beyond 8.30pm (Thomas et al. 2018), they will still be exposed to extensive gambling advertising during this time. Further, in addition to advertisements, live sporting broadcasts also feature other forms of gambling marketing, like sponsorships, venue signage and in-program content.

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News, current affairs and sports programming aside from live sport (e.g. replays, highlights, discussion shows) are exempt from restrictions. There are also no regulations restricting gambling advertising on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook (Thomas et al. 2018). While the gambling industry is not deliberately targeting adolescents, the many campaigns aimed at people aged 18 to 24 will also influence teens, who are very close in age and interests to young adults.

DIGITAL MARKETING

Advertising in the digital sector is also expanding rapidly. Spending from January to August 2015 increased by 64 per cent on the corresponding period in 2014 (Le Grand 2015). In the UK in 2017, gambling companies spent £1.2 billion (approximately A\$2.2 billion) marketing online, five times more than on television ads (GambleAware 2018). The gambling industry uses Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, often posting content not easily recognisable as advertising, such as humorous videos, and strongly linking gambling to sport (Thomas et al. 2015).

In 2017, more than a third of young Victorians reported exposure to gambling ads on websites and/or social networking sites in the previous month (Freund et al. 2019). A 2015 study found 42 per cent of adolescents had seen promotions of gambling on social media and 15 per cent had engaged with operators via social media. Around one-in-ten reported that social media promotions had increased how much they gambled (Gainsbury et al. 2015b). One in ten 11 to 16-year-olds in the UK follow gambling companies on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram (Gambling Commission 2017).

MAKING SPORTS BETTING SEEM A NORMAL PART OF LIFE

Some forms of gambling, like betting on races, are already normalised in the Australian community. For gambling to be normalised, it must be seen as natural, acceptable or embedded in Australian culture. Until recently, betting on sports was uncommon.

In a 2015 study, adolescents were asked about the effect of sports betting marketing on their peer groups (Sproston et al. 2015). Participants said marketing had increased how much friends and family talk about sports betting (18 per cent), how interested friends or family are in sports betting (18 per cent), how much friends and family would like to bet on sports (18 per cent), and how much friends or family actually do bet on sports (17 per cent). Those who said marketing had increased interest or participation in sports betting among their family and friends tended to gamble regularly on sports and racing.

For some adults, 'gambling has become both symbolic of Australian mateship and an important aspect of the traditionally masculine leisure activities of drinking and watching sport' (Thomas & Lewis 2012, p. 36). In a study of Australian male sports bettors aged 18 to 35, participants reported that sports betting had become normalised amongst young men, facilitated by pervasive marketing, offers of promotions and other inducements, technological advancements that enable 24-hour online access to betting, and informal and formal peer betting networks (Jenkinson, de Lacey-Vawdon & Carroll 2018).

Adolescents also tend to feel an increasing alignment between gambling and watching sport (Pitt et al. 2016a). Around a third of young people think betting on sports is normal, with a similar proportion reporting that gambling ads have increased their knowledge of gambling options. Almost one-in-six consider that knowing the odds is part of following sport and that knowing the odds makes sport more exciting (Hing et al. 2020).

A Foundation-funded study of 152 children aged between 8 and 16 years (Thomas et al. 2016) found that over two-thirds recalled the name of at least one sports betting brand. Around one in five could identify three or more sports betting brands. Children could also match teams with shirt sponsors – almost two-thirds identified at least one team-sponsor relationship. Further research that drew on this study reported three-quarters of children thought sports betting was becoming a normal part of sport, and 92 per cent of children attending AFL matches had seen promotions for sports betting (Pitt et al. 2016b). A more recent study involving 111 young basketball fans aged 11 to 16 found more than 80 per cent were able to name at least one betting brand, with most able to distinguish between their unique characteristics such as colours and promotional strategies (Nyemcsok et al. 2018).

The influence of family and friends

Although the effect of gambling marketing on young people has received considerable attention, it is clear the most influential exposure to gambling occurs when young people see family and friends doing it.

ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOUR OF FAMILY MEMBERS

Young people are exposed to the gambling behaviour, attitudes and beliefs of parents and siblings. Family attitudes may mean young people receive no negative feedback about gambling. Children in families that approve of gambling are more likely to gamble themselves (Delfabbro & Thrupp 2003).

One study found adolescents living in households where one or both resident parents had gambled in the previous 12 months were around 1.5 times more likely to gamble than those living in households where no parent did so (Warren & Yu 2019). In another, 51 per cent of adolescents who had bet in the past month reported that a parent/caregiver had also done so, compared to 21 per cent of those who had not gambled during this period (Freund et al. 2019).

In one Australian study of poker playing among young people, only one-in-10 young players had parents who disapproved of their gambling, and two-in-10 had received parental approval. This study also showed almost two-thirds of the players received no substantial adult feedback on their behaviour. Their parents either did not know they were playing or, if they were aware, offered no response to it (Kalé 2011).

Some parents assist young people to gamble, for example, by buying them lottery tickets or scratch cards (Valentine 2008). In a study of Victorian adolescents, half of those who had ever gambled reported that a parent or guardian had purchased/played for them (Freund et al. 2019). This may normalise gambling for young people and encourage later take-up.

— WHY YOUNG PEOPLE GAMBLE

When an adult in a family has a gambling problem (especially the male parent), this can transmit problems to the children. However, it may not always be due to the example the adult is setting. Problems with gambling may arise in children in response to the pressures of living with an adult who has a gambling problem (Dowling et al. 2010).

EXPOSURE TO GAMBLING VENUES

Early exposure to gambling may extend beyond witnessing parental gambling. Young people may see gambling in a positive light through taking part in other activities at pokies venues, such as dining or 'family days'. Promotions of venues as 'family friendly' may act to normalise gambling and encourage gambling behaviour later in life (Bestman et al. 2016).

Freund et al. (2019) found a higher proportion of adolescents who have gambled during their lives had visited a club (18 per cent), TAB (11 per cent), or racecourse (10 per cent) in the last month, compared to those who had never gambled (12 per cent, 5 per cent and 4 per cent respectively).

FRIENDS AND GAMBLING

Gambling is often a social activity for young people. Around six-in-10 young people who gamble say they gamble with at least one other person, usually a friend (Purdie et al. 2011).

This social aspect means the attitudes and behaviour of friends are an important influence on young people's gambling. Young people who believe their friends are frequent gamblers, or whose friends approve of gambling, are themselves more frequent gamblers (Delfabbro & Thrupp 2003). A UK study involving young people aged 11 to 24 found that those with a close friend who gambles were six times more likely to be a current gambler than those without (Ipsos Mori 2020).

A Foundation-funded study found that, compared to non-gamblers and non-problem gamblers, low- and moderate-risk gamblers were more likely to associate with other gamblers, and with people who experience gambling-related harm. It is unclear whether the findings reflect social influence (where gambling becomes normalised), social selection (where people choose to associate with others who share their interests), or a combination of both (Russell et al. 2018).

GAMBLING PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Even though it is illegal for people under 18 to gamble, research shows large numbers of young people have gambled at some point.

A review of 13 Australian studies of youth gambling published from 2003–2016 found rates of past-year gambling ranging from 15.3–81 per cent (King, Russell & Hing 2020). The differing results are explained by the fact that many of the studies are not representative and some had small samples, while they also differed in the age range used to define young people and the locations of participants. It is also important to note that, as with any survey, participants may not respond accurately, for example, because they have forgotten relevant information, or they want their responses to reflect well on them. Young people may interpret questions differently from adults, including what constitutes gambling, and this may produce artificial results. When surveyed in classrooms, they may also give misleading responses if they become bored or frustrated. Nonetheless, in 8 of the 13 studies, more than 50 per cent of young people took part in at least one gambling activity in the past year, most commonly in the form of lottery and scratch tickets (King, Russell & Hing 2020).

Studies published since 2016 have produced smaller results however – one found just one-in-six Australians aged 16 to 17 had gambled in the past year (Warren & Yu 2019), and another found 30 per cent of New South Wales adolescents had done so (Hing et al. 2020). Importantly, in a large-scale and representative survey of Victorian secondary school students funded by the Foundation, only 31 per cent of adolescents reported that they had gambled at some time in their lives (Freund et al. 2019). This included around one in five boys and one in eight girls.

It is possible that these recent findings reflect a declining rate of youth gambling participation, and there is some international evidence to support this. For example, UK research found that the proportion of 11 to 15-year-olds who had gambled in the previous week fell by half between 2011 and 2017 (Wardle 2018). It may be that participation rates are being impacted by the increasing convergence of gaming and gambling activity discussed earlier. Hing et al. (2020) found that in 2019, more adolescents engaged in simulated gambling and purchased loot boxes than engaged in traditional forms of gambling. However, further research with large and representative samples, and consistent definitions of youth and gambling are needed to draw firm conclusions.

It is important to note that only a small proportion of those who gamble do so on a regular basis. Freund et al. (2019) found just six per cent of Victorian adolescents had gambled in the past 30 days. Another Australian study found that less than five per cent gambled once a week or more on the gambling activities measured, with the exception of footy tips and sweeps (Purdie et al. 2011).

Some young people are more likely to gamble than others. For example, boys are more likely to gamble than girls, and older adolescents are more likely to gamble than younger adolescents (Freund et al. 2019).

— GAMBLING PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Types of gambling

Among Victorians aged 12 to 17 who have gambled, the most common activities are horse/dog races (54 per cent), raffle tickets (51 per cent), sports betting (38 per cent), card games (37 per cent) and scratchies (37 per cent). The relatively high rates of race and sports betting may be facilitated by family members and other adults. Of those who have gambled, 51 per cent reported a parent/guardian had purchased/played for them, 16 per cent said another relative, 9 per cent a friend, 6 per cent a brother/sister and 7 per cent someone else (Freund et al. 2019). Purdie et al. (2011) found that 36.4 per cent of young people aged 15 to 17 had had someone else place a bet for them.

Despite the apparently strict age restrictions, 20 per cent of those who had ever gambled reported playing casino games while 17 per cent used poker machines (corresponding to around 6 per cent and 5 per cent of all adolescents, respectively) (Freund et al. 2019). These figures are broadly consistent with findings from other research. For example, Purdie et al. (2011) found 6.3 per cent of 15 to 17-year-olds had played card games at the casino. They also found 8.8 per cent had played poker machines, while Delfabbro et al. (2009) reported a figure of 7.5 per cent among 13 to 17-year-olds.

HARM FROM GAMBLING

Young people may be particularly vulnerable to gambling harm as their ability to assess risk is still developing (Defoe et al. 2015, Willoughby et al. 2013). For adolescents, gambling is one of many risky activities, including sex, drinking alcohol and drug-taking, that may cause harm.

A systematic review of international studies found 0.2–12.3 per cent of young people meet the criteria for problem gambling, with most figures around 2–4 per cent (Calado, Alexandre & Griffiths 2017). Australian figures have generally ranged from around 1–5 per cent (King, Russell & Hing 2020), however, as with the gambling participation findings, a lack of large-scale, representative research means these findings should be interpreted with caution.

The 2017 survey of Victorian secondary school students found that 1.4 per cent of 12 to 17-year-olds met the criteria for problem gambling. This figure increased to 5.4 per cent among those who had ever gambled, and one-in-eight (13 per cent) of those who had gambled in the previous month (Freund et al. 2019). A recent New South Wales study found a figure of 1.5 per cent (Hing et al. 2020), although a small sample means the findings should be interpreted with caution. Findings consistently demonstrate that young males are more likely to experience gambling problems than females (Riley et al. 2021).

These rates are higher than the rate for problem gambling in adults, which was 0.7 per cent among Victorian adults in 2018 (Rockloff et al. 2020a). Rates of problem gambling are not directly comparable between adolescents and adults, as different measures are used and behaviour not considered problematic in an adult may be considered problem gambling in a young person. Nonetheless, the higher rates of problem gambling are a cause for concern.

A Foundation-funded study found low and moderate-risk gamblers also experience harm as a result of gambling (Browne et al. 2016). This means many more young people may be experiencing harm, which could include poor academic performance, absenteeism from school, early school dropout and disrupted relationships with family and friends.

As with adult gamblers, these consequences may not be recognised as related to gambling.

Gambling problems combined with other conditions

The relationship between gambling problems and a variety of other conditions, including mental illness, suicidal thoughts and substance abuse, is complex. An adolescent with a gambling problem is more likely to have depression or think about suicide, and to have lower self-esteem, than a young person without a gambling problem (Hardoon & Derevensky 2002). They are also more likely to engage in risky or antisocial behaviour, such as alcohol and drug use, theft and graffiti (Freund et al. 2019; Purdie et al. 2011; Warren & Yu 2019).

It is not always clear whether these conditions are caused by gambling problems or are present before they develop. It is likely issues such as mental illness or substance use are risk factors for problem gambling, and also worsened by it. But regardless of whether it is a cause or an effect of broader issues, harmful gambling often signals other problems exist.

— HARM FROM GAMBLING

Young people and seeking help

Many people who experience gambling problems do not seek help, and this includes many young people. Most adolescents with gambling problems do not recognise they have a problem, which means they do not seek appropriate help (Splevins et al. 2010).

Even when people are aware of problems, stigma can be a barrier to getting help. Young adults are particularly resistant to seeking professional and non-professional help because of shame, pride and wanting to solve the problem on their own (Hing, Nuske & Gainsbury 2011). For adolescents, the fact that their gambling is illegal would be an additional obstacle.

Young people may also be less likely to know where they can seek help (Purdie et al. 2011). If they have seen ads for Gambler's Help counselling services, they may not realise the services cover all ages, not just adults.

Long-term consequences of early exposure to gambling

Research tells us people who begin gambling at a young age are at greater risk of developing gambling problems as an adult (Burge et al. 2004). Many adults with gambling problems began gambling when they were under-age (Hare 2009). In a study of young adult male sports bettors, 23 per cent reported that they were under 18 when they placed their first bet (Jenkinson et al. 2018).

However, research also shows young people's gambling behaviour varies over time and problems with gambling during adolescence may not lead to continued problems in adulthood. A South Australian study that followed young gamblers over time found those who gambled at age 15 or 16 were not more likely to gamble at age 21 (Delfabbro, King & Griffiths 2014; Delfabbro, Winefeld & Anderson 2009). Those with signs of problem gambling at 15 or 16 were also not more likely than others in the study to have signs of problem gambling at 21.

These contrasting patterns of involvement in gambling suggest that for some young people it may be part of the risk-taking of adolescence, while for others it may lead to a lifetime of problems.

Therefore, while it is likely gambling at a young age is linked to future problems, experiencing gambling problems as an adolescent may not be linked to problem gambling as an adult.

YOUNG ADULTS AND GAMBLING

As today's adolescents become young adults and legally able to gamble, the effects of early exposure to gambling will become even more apparent.

It is well understood people aged 18 to 30, particularly men, are at higher risk of experiencing gambling harm than other adults. In 2018, almost twice as many 18 to 24-year-olds met the criteria for either moderate-risk or problem gambling than the overall population (5.9 per cent vs. 3.1 per cent), with these figures higher amongst young men (8.1 per cent) (Rockloff et al. 2020a).

Young adults aged 18 to 24 are more likely than other adults to participate in some forms of gambling, including sports betting, which they participate in at rates more than twice those of the overall population (Rockloff et al. 2020a). As previously mentioned rates of sports betting doubled within this age group from 2014–2018. This suggests that while young adults are a target for sports betting advertising, their gambling may also be the effect of exposure to marketing in adolescence. As with teenagers, young adults often have a high tolerance for risk. Gambling may be one of a number of risky behaviours, including drinking alcohol, that become synonymous with watching sport. Peer groups are another important influence, with some young men gambling to 'fit in' (Deans et al. 2016).

Playing casino games is also more common among this group than other adults. Visiting the casino is seen as a rite of passage into adulthood for some young people. Its strong link with alcohol consumption may heighten the risk of short-term harm from casino games.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGE

It is clear gambling is a significant issue for young people.

We need to respond with targeted approaches that reduce gambling harm for adolescents, and for the adults they will become. And we need to back this work with robust research.

Our responses must also be directed towards parents and young adult peers or siblings, who may model potentially harmful gambling behaviour for young people. Teachers and sporting coaches are another target group, as they can influence young people's attitudes.

The Foundation's social marketing campaigns challenge gambling industry messages and promote informed and balanced attitudes towards gambling.

The Foundation's Sporting Club Program and School Education Program, developed in 2013, have been key to our work in countering the normalisation of gambling.

LOVE THE GAME

Love the Game works with elite and local clubs to create healthy club environments and reduce the exposure of young people to gambling, especially through sports betting advertising.

We are partnered with 15 elite Victorian sporting clubs, including all 10 Victorian AFL clubs, Big Bash cricket clubs and Melbourne Victory, as well as state and peak community sport bodies and local sporting clubs.

As at February 2021, over 550 sporting clubs were signed up to the program.

For more information, see: lovethethegame.vic.gov.au

SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAM

Our School Education Program aims to help young people navigate the new gambling environment and develop informed attitudes towards gambling.

It includes professional development sessions and curriculum-based resources for teachers, including VCAL Numeracy, Literacy & PDS, VCE Health & Human Development, Health and Humanities units; workshops for secondary school students (Years 7–12); and information sessions and materials for parents.

We also provide information and resources for parents and teachers online, including strategies for talking to young people about gambling.

For more information, see: beaheadofthegame.com.au

GAMBLER'S HELP YOUTHLINE

The Foundation's Gambler's Help Youthline offers specialist telephone support for young people who may be experiencing harm because of their own or someone else's gambling.

For more information, see: gamblershelp.com.au/get-help/under-25s/

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