

# Exploring the relationship between addiction and debt:

## Initial scoping work

February 2022

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This document is structured in four parts:

- 1) Context for the work
- 2) Search terms used
- 3) Summary of key points
- 4) Further information about the research located (oldest to newest)

### 1) The context for the scoping work:

**Recommendation 2.** *The Welsh Government should commission expert research into the relationship between addiction and debt and report back to this Committee on progress. This research should cover addiction in all its forms including gambling, alcohol and other substance addictions and the Welsh Government should write to the Committee with an update on progress and timescales for completion and publication before the end of March 2022.*

### Accept in Principle

The links between addiction and an individual experiencing problem debt is considerable and the providers delivering specialist debt advice services through the Single Advice Fund have an established Action on Gambling Harm project that is improving advisor training helping them to identify people who show possible signs of gambling harm.

The importance of the undertaking research of all forms of addiction that serve as an underlying cause of debt is acknowledged. Officials in the Health and Social Services research team will collaborate with relevant policy colleagues in order to determine how long the research would take; what budget there is available to undertake it; if there is sufficient Knowledge Analytic Service resource to manage it; and how it fits with other priorities and commitments in evidence plans.

An update will be provided to the Committee before the end of March 2022.

### 2) Search terms used:

- Addiction debt / problem debt
- Addiction and debt / financial problems / financial harms
- Gambling and debt / problem gambling / gambling addiction / gambling harm / gambling disorder
- Alcohol / problem drinking and debt / financial problems / financial distress / financial loss / risky drinking
- Substance misuse and debt / substance use disorders (SUD) / social consequences
- Drug misuse and debt

### 3) Summary of key points

- Gambling is an ordinary pastime for some people (who experience any undue negative effects), but is associated with addiction and harmful outcomes/consequences for others. Moreover, gambling is associated with higher financial distress and lower financial inclusion and planning, and with negative lifestyle, health, well-being and leisure outcomes. Some factors that might make someone more likely to develop a gambling disorder include: drinking heavily or using illegal drugs, those who are struggling financially or are unemployed.
- The social consequences of pathological gambling such as financial loss are among some of the most concrete and obvious social consequences.
- In 2012, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported 'Good quality data on drug and alcohol misuse is sparse. The evidence that does exist, however, notes a relationship between addiction with poverty and social exclusion'
- Findings from one systematic review conducted in 2013 showed that (a) problem gambling has several adverse effects on individuals, families, and family functioning, and (b) family involvement in problem gambling treatment is linked with better treatment outcomes and improved individual and family functioning.
- In 2013, NatCen conducted an in-depth exploration of the relationship between money and gambling behaviour and found that although problem gamblers were more likely than non-problem gamblers to have forms of financial debt, just under two-thirds of problem gamblers (62%) reported having no debt.
- In 2013, a 5-year qualitative longitudinal study found that the impacts of specifically problematic gambling also cascaded through players' social networks in ways that affected the emotional and financial wellbeing of those closest to them. Also partners and spouses - typically wives – report the detrimental effects of gambling on household finances.
- In 2015, a study about gambling related harm found there was a clear identification of different levels of severity in terms of financial harm within the general harms category from loss of surplus/erosion of savings (first level), to financial harms related to the reduction or loss of ability to meet expenditure that had immediate consequence e.g. inability to purchase food, medication, inability to pay for heating and water (fourth level). The study concludes that 'It is important to caveat that the harms outlined in this study can occur due to engagement in other behaviours and can be exacerbated by the influence of comorbidities or existing dysfunction'.

- Drawing on a representative sample from England, one study found associations with problem gambling and mental health (anxiety, neurotic symptoms and substance use problems) and psychosocial maladjustment (suicidality, financial difficulties and social support).
- In 2016, researchers identified that although previous studies have examined different potential determinants of cannabis dependence, to their knowledge, a systematic review is lacking. The authors also reported that a deprived socioeconomic situation (low education, low social status, financial problems) is an important precursor of the development of cannabis dependence among youths and young adults. This is in line with other findings, where an excess risk of cannabis dependence was found for recent-onset users with a low family income and major financial problems.
- In 2019, Public Health Wales commissioned a piece of work to explore the impact of gambling and the project was led by Bangor University. The work identified debt as one of many gambling harms which can have adverse impacts upon the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities and society. Many of the harms experienced by gamblers extend to their families and friends. In line with definition changes, it suggests that Wales needs to broaden the scope of surveys and other data collection methods to explore levels of gambling harms across Welsh communities more accurately. Develop the evidence base of what works to reduce gambling harms in different settings.
- In February 2020, the National Audit Office reported that evidence on the causes and impacts of gambling problems is limited compared with other addictions, such as alcoholism, or consumer issues such as problem debt... government does not have the same level of evidence on gambling addiction compared with public health issues such as obesity and alcohol dependency. There is also a lack of longitudinal data to measure the impact of gambling problems.
- In September 2021, Public Health England published an evidence review on gambling harms. There was considerable evidence from the qualitative studies that gambling directly causes financial harms to gamblers and their close associates, particularly intimate partners. It reported gambling-related debt as a crucial harm that can lead to other harms such as relationship problems, physical and mental health problems, and crime. Overall, the evidence of harms is limited and the review sets out where further research is needed.
- In 2021, a narrative literature review was published about what is known about the impact of gambling-related harms on concerned significant others' (CSOs) wellbeing and identifies areas of future enquiry. The review identified

both knowledge and methodological gaps, including that relatively little is known about impacts to CSOs' subjective wellbeing.

- In January 2022, a REA was published about women's experiences of gambling and gambling harm. There are many findings reported such as around 7% of the population in Britain is negatively affected by someone else's gambling (equal to 4.5 million adults and children); affected others are generally women; and women are more likely to experience all the negative impacts of someone else's gambling. Also the evidence on the gambling harms experienced by women as affected others centres on financial harms (including economic abuse and criminal activity that causes financial harm) and personal relationship harms. Although the evidence base is thin, it nonetheless illustrates the far reaching impact of harms on partners, immediate family members and wider social networks. This evidence review identifies seven important gaps in knowledge where further insight is needed.

#### **4) Further information/context below about the research located (oldest to newest)**

##### [Foresight project Brain Science, Addiction and Drugs \(March 2005\)](#)

- Various science reviews published e.g. - Problem gambling and other behavioural addictions ([summary](#)) – 'Many types of harm are associated with gambling, including financial damage from losses and lost employment, harm to families and close relations, and the commission of crime to support a gambling habit'

##### [The Biopsychosocial Consequences of Pathological Gambling \(nih.gov\)](#) - 2005

- This article reviews the consequences of pathological gambling and aims to familiarize mental health clinicians with this psychiatric disorder.
- The social consequences of pathological gambling, such as financial loss, increased crime, lost time at work, bankruptcies, and emotional hardships faced by the families of gambling addicts, are the most concrete and obvious.

##### [poverty-culture-behaviour-full.pdf](#) – June 2012

- 'general patterns of drug use and alcohol consumption exhibit little correlation with poverty or social class. But these average statistics do not deal with the extremes in the population: alcohol misuse and the incidence of problematic drug users (PDUs) are much higher among marginal groups such as the prison population, young offenders, and homeless people'.

- 'Good quality data on drug and alcohol misuse is sparse. The evidence that does exist, however, notes a relationship between addiction with poverty and social exclusion'

[Toula Kourgiantakis MSW RMFT, Marie-Christine Saint-Jacques PhD & Joël Tremblay PhD \(2013\) Problem Gambling and Families: A Systematic Review, Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions, 13:4, 353-372.](#)

- This review identified and analyzed 30 empirical studies conducted between 1998 and 2013 examining the effects of problem gambling on families, the impact of family involvement in problem gambling treatment, or both.
- The literature shows that (a) problem gambling has several adverse effects on individuals, families, and family functioning, and (b) family involvement in problem gambling treatment is linked with better treatment outcomes and improved individual and family functioning. Implications for research and clinical practice are discussed.

[NatCen Social Research](#) – Gambling and Financial Management, 2013 (a number of publications are available for this project – various briefings, [academic paper](#) etc.)

- Aim of the study was to understand the relationship between money, debt and/or financial hardship and gambling and the different pathways into gambling-related debt and/or financial hardship.
- Although problem gamblers were more likely than non-problem gamblers to have forms of financial debt, just under two-thirds of problem gamblers (62%) reported having no debt.
- The analysis identified four kinds of gamblers: 'controlled gamblers', 'uncontrolled gamblers', 'uncontrolled spenders' and 'chaotic spenders'.
- We propose an ecological model which captures the different factors that influenced people's financial decisions, including cognitive factors, control and compulsion, normative spending, resource and financial management, and the credit environment.

[NatCen Social Research](#) – 2013

This research aims to increase understanding of gambling and problem gambling by focusing on the social and environmental influences that drive behaviour change across a lifetime.

[University of Glasgow - Schools - School of Social & Political Sciences - Research - Research in Sociology - Research projects - Understanding Gambling 2013](#)

- [The briefing paper](#) presents findings from a [five year qualitative longitudinal study](#) that was designed to explore changes in gambling behaviour over time,

as well as the impacts of gambling on both players and those in their wider social networks.

- Found that the impacts of specifically problematic gambling also cascaded through players' social networks in ways that affected the emotional and financial wellbeing of those closest to them.
- Partners and spouses - typically wives – report the detrimental effects of gambling on household finances.

[Addictions Research Group | University of South Wales](#) – was established in 2015

[Langham, E., Thorne, H., Browne, M. \*et al.\* \(2015\) Understanding gambling related harm: a proposed definition, conceptual framework, and taxonomy of harms. \*BMC Public Health\* 16, 80](#)

- This work aims to facilitate the understanding of gambling related harm from a much broader perspective than is currently implied by the use of inadequate proxy measures and one that is consistent with moving towards a public health approach to gambling.
- Data regarding harms from gambling was gathered using four separate methodologies, a literature review, focus groups and interviews with professionals involved in the support and treatment of gambling problems, interviews with people who gamble and their affected others, and an analysis of public forum posts for people experiencing problems with gambling and their affected others.
- Harms from gambling are varied and diffuse, unlike the more direct and tractable harms caused by physical illnesses or even substance abuse.
- There was a clear identification of different levels of severity in terms of financial harm within the general harms category – loss of surplus/erosion of savings (first level), activities undertaken (e.g. additional employment or accessing more credit) to manage short term cash flow issues by either the person who gambles or an affected other (second level), financial harms related to the reduction or loss of ability to meet expenditure that had a non-immediate consequence e.g. opting out of insurance, non-essential repairs (third level), financial harms related to the reduction or loss of ability to meet expenditure that had immediate consequence e.g. inability to purchase food, medication, inability to pay for heating and water (fourth level).
- The paper concludes that 'It is important to caveat that the harms outlined in this study can occur due to engagement in other behaviours and can be exacerbated by the influence of comorbidities or existing dysfunction'.

[Cowlshaw S, Kessler D. Problem gambling in the UK: implications for health, psychosocial adjustment and health care utilization. \*European Addiction Research\* 2016; 22\(2\): 90-98](#)

- This study examines the associations involving problem gambling and indicators of mental and physical health, as well as psychosocial adjustment and health care usage, in a representative sample from England.
- Data were derived from the 2007 Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, which is a representative study of adults (n = 7,403).
- There were associations with problem gambling and mental health (anxiety, neurotic symptoms and substance use problems) and psychosocial maladjustment (suicidality, financial difficulties and social support).

[Psychosocial Determinants of Cannabis Dependence: A Systematic Review of the Literature - FullText - \*European Addiction Research\* 2016, Vol. 22, No. 3 - Karger Publishers](#)

- The authors write that many studies have examined factors associated with the first onset of cannabis use and abuse. Currently, there is relatively little research regarding conditions under which cannabis dependence is more likely to emerge. Although previous studies have examined different potential determinants of cannabis dependence, to our knowledge, a systematic review is lacking.
- A deprived socioeconomic situation (low education, low social status, bad financial situation) has been reported to be an important precursor of the development of cannabis dependence among youths and young adults. This is in line with other findings, where an excess risk of cannabis dependence was found for recent-onset users with a low family income and major financial problems.
- Cannabis dependence has been linked to greater levels of impairment (financial, familial and psychopathological) and correlated with using other illicit drugs.

[Wardle, H., Reith, G., Best, D., McDaid, D. and Platt, S. \(2018\) Measuring gambling-related harms: a framework for action. Documentation. Gambling Commission, Birmingham, UK.](#)

- The full costs to society of gambling-related harm will be substantial, although not all of these costs are easy to measure in monetary terms. They include the personal impacts faced by individuals who have experienced problems in gambling, as well as associated impacts on family and friends. Examples can include declining health, the breakdown of family relationships, social ostracism and the consequences of dealing with unmanageable debts.
- Having consulted a wide range of British-based evidence about the impacts and experiences of gambling on people's lives the report proposes a definition of gambling-related harms - resources (e.g. debt), relationships and health.

[Schema Modes and Personality Disorder Symptoms in Alcohol-Dependent and Cocaine-Dependent Patients - FullText - European Addiction Research 2018, Vol. 24, No. 5 - Karger Publishers](#)

- Substance abuse is a very common disorder worldwide; it is associated with great economic costs, and emotional, social and financial problems.

[Dr Heather Wardle, University of Glasgow](#) has published extensively on the topic of gambling

- In 2019, GambleAware commissioned a project on 'Gambling-related suicide' – Wardle et al., published a [Scoping Current Evidence and Evidence-Gaps in Research on Gambling-Related Suicide](#)
- The report identifies where more research data is needed - it is important to understand both risk and protective factors that will impact on the relationship between gambling and suicide/ suicidal behaviours, as well as, explore mediators, confounders, moderators and covariates. Factors, such as debt, sleep and spirituality, were mentioned specifically by participants. Both survey and routinely collected linked data could explore these factors.

[Framing a public health approach to gambling harms in Wales: Challenges and opportunities \(bangor.ac.uk\)](#)

[Gambling-as-Public-Health-Issue-Wales.pdf \(bangor.ac.uk\)](#) 2019

- This report was commissioned and funded by Public Health Wales and led by Prof Robert Rogers, Bangor University. It provides an overview of gambling as a public health issue in Wales.
- Debt is identified as one of many gambling harms which can have adverse impacts upon the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities and society.
- Many of the harms experienced by gamblers extend to their families and friends. These include relationship breakdown, stress, anxiety and financial pressures.
- Certain groups in society can be more vulnerable to gambling harms such as people in debt.
- The report highlights what Wales could do to prevent gambling harms, for example - adopt a broader definition of gambling harms as 'adverse impacts upon the health and well-being of individuals, families, communities and societies'. In line with definition changes, broaden the scope of surveys and other data collection methods to explore levels of gambling harms across Welsh communities more accurately. Develop the evidence base of what works to reduce gambling harms in different settings.

[Public-Health-Approach-to-Gambling-in-Wales-ENG.pdf \(bangor.ac.uk\)](#) 2019



- This report was commissioned and funded by Public Health Wales and led by Prof Robert Rogers, Bangor University. The report consists of nine chapters.
- Chapter 3 - reviews the benefits of moving away from clinical conceptions of gambling problems (as essentially an addictive illness) towards the consideration of broader patterns of harms accruing to individuals, families and communities.
- Chapter 8 - provides a geo-spatial risk-index map to illustrate the likely distribution of vulnerable groups across Wales; using four case studies (Cardiff, Pontypridd, Rhyl and Brecon) to illustrate how risk is driven by different factors in different places.
- Overall, in the 2007 Adult Psychiatry Morbidity Survey, 8% of English adults had experienced debt but, among problem gamblers, this number spiked to 38%. Problem gamblers (7%) use of short-term and payday loans credit was more than double that of non-problem gamblers (3%).

#### [August 2020 - Gambling review and reform Towards a new regulatory framework](#)

- This report puts forward a series of policy recommendations ahead of the Government's anticipated review of the 2005 Gambling Act. It builds on the body of evidence contained in recent reports published by the [House of Lords Select Committee Inquiry](#), the [National Audit Office](#)\*, [the Public Accounts Committee](#) and [the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Gambling Related Harm](#)
- A range of different factors are related to the wider experience of gambling-related harm, including: experience of bankruptcy and/or debt.
- \* February 2020 report - Evidence on the causes and impacts of gambling problems is limited compared with other addictions, such as alcoholism, or consumer issues such as problem debt... government does not have the same level of evidence on gambling addiction compared with public health issues such as obesity and alcohol dependency. There is also a lack of longitudinal data to measure the impact of gambling problems.

The National UK Research Network for Behavioural Addictions (NUK-BA) was set up in 2020 – [www.nukba.co.uk](http://www.nukba.co.uk)<sup>1</sup>

[The Gambling Policy & Research Unit | The Behavioural Insights Team \(bi.team\)](#) – launched in September 2021

[Double-or-nothing-March-2021.pdf \(smf.co.uk\)](#) - March 2021 –

This report assesses the economic impact of gambling.

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<sup>1</sup> No access to this website on the WG laptop.

There are a number of frameworks conceptualising and categorising gambling-related harms all of which highlight the following five broad themes:

1. Financial costs (includes debts, asset losses and financial hardship)
2. Health costs
3. Work or study costs
4. Relationship or family costs
5. Criminal costs

[Landmark report reveals harms associated with gambling estimated to cost society at least £1.27 billion a year - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) – press release September 2021

- In 2019, the Department of Health and Social Care commissioned Public Health England (PHE) to undertake [a review of the evidence on gambling harms](#).
- The evidence review was carried out to inform what action is needed as part of a public health approach to gambling-related harms in England.

**Financial harms** (from the [summary](#) September 2021)

- Financial harms were examined in 31 studies. One high quality study reported that an increase in the number of electronic gaming venues in a local area increased the number of personal bankruptcies in that area. There was also considerable evidence from the qualitative studies that gambling directly causes financial harms to gamblers and their close associates, particularly intimate partners.
- PHE identified gambling-related debt as a crucial harm that can lead to other harms such as relationship problems, physical and mental health problems, and crime.
- The financial difficulties and debt experienced by gamblers and affected others were often severe. Several studies reported that gambling led to bankruptcy and housing problems including homelessness. Financial harms also affected the children of gamblers.
- The most socio-economically deprived and disadvantaged groups in England have the lowest gambling participation rates, but the highest levels of harmful gambling and they are also the most susceptible to harm.

The [summary](#) also identifies research gaps and states 'Until relatively recently, research on gambling has focused on people who experience severe problems, and there are clear gaps in the evidence base for the harms experienced by affected others and wider society'.

They found that the evidence of harms was limited...examples of further research needed are:

- a systematic review of longitudinal studies of risk factors in adults
- longitudinal studies on if or how community and societal factors can influence harmful gambling
- longitudinal quantitative studies on harms, including harms to affected others and societies

[The association between gambling and financial, social and health outcomes in big financial data - PubMed \(nih.gov\) - 2021](#)

- Gambling is an ordinary pastime for some people, but is associated with addiction and harmful outcomes for others.
- Gambling is associated with higher financial distress and lower financial inclusion and planning, and with negative lifestyle, health, well-being and leisure outcomes.
- Gambling is persistent over time, growing over the sample period, and has higher negative associations among the heaviest gamblers.

[How gambling harms the wellbeing of family and others: a review: International Gambling Studies: Vol 0, No 0 \(tandfonline.com\) – 2021](#)

- This narrative literature review presents what is known about the impact of gambling-related harms on concerned significant others' (CSOs) wellbeing and identifies areas of future enquiry.
- The review identified both knowledge and methodological gaps, including that relatively little is known about impacts to CSOs' subjective wellbeing. What is known, is confounded by different methods of identifying CSOs across studies, and the use of predominantly small, non-representative, and treatment-related samples.

[Women's experiences of gambling and gambling harm: A Rapid Evidence Assessment – January 2022](#)

- Grant funded by GambleAware and carried out by researchers at University of Bristol
- The purpose of this Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) was to understand (1) what is known about the drivers of gambling participation and gambling harms among women and (2) what good might look like in terms of support and treatment for women harmed by their own gambling or someone else's.
- The evidence indicates that in Britain more men participate in gambling than women (43.6% of men compared with 40.5% of women, according to the

most recent survey data), although the gender gap seems to be narrowing; and online gambling is increasing among women and men.

- Gambling practices differ between men and women but also between different groups of women, with evidence that younger women are diversifying to gamble on multiple products. This highlights the importance of understanding the dynamic and changing nature of women's gambling practices and guarding against outdated gendered stereotypes.
- In terms of financial drivers, women may see the potential financial gains of gambling as a way of contributing to the household finances; a means to escape abusive relationships; a route out of poverty; or a means of gaining some financial independence.
- The evidence suggests that most people in Britain gamble without experiencing harm. However, for those who do experience harms from gambling, the effects can be severe and enduring.
- In Britain, women experiencing high levels of gambling harm are much more likely to be younger (aged 18-34), and to be from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background, than women generally.
- Women experience multiple and inter-connected harms from gambling – particularly financial, relational and mental health harms.
- Around 7% of the population in Britain is negatively affected by someone else's gambling (equal to 4.5 million adults and children); affected others are generally women; and women are more likely to experience all the negative impacts of someone else's gambling.
- The evidence on the gambling harms experienced by women as affected others centres on financial harms (including economic abuse and criminal activity that causes financial harm) and personal relationship harms. Although the evidence base is thin, it nonetheless illustrates the far reaching impact of harms on partners, immediate family members and wider social networks.
- This evidence review identifies seven important gaps in knowledge where further insight is needed e.g. Gambling pathways and harm trajectories: while there is some qualitative evidence about women's gambling pathways and harm trajectories, this is mainly from outside Britain/UK and is necessarily retrospective (e.g. asking women about how past experiences influence present practices). Longitudinal research would provide insight into how women come to experience harm and routes out of harm; as well as experiences of harm over the lifecycle and intergenerationally. There is a lack of evidence on gambling harm related to productivity and performance generally; and cultural harms.

[Gambling disorder in the UK: key research priorities and the urgent need for independent research funding - The Lancet Psychiatry – February 2022](#)

- Although many people gamble recreationally without undue negative effects, a sizeable subset of individuals develop disordered gambling, which is associated with marked functional impairment including other mental health problems, relationship problems, bankruptcy, suicidality, and criminality.
- In this Health Policy paper, the authors outline the status of research and treatment for disordered gambling in the UK (including funding issues) and key research that should be conducted to establish the magnitude of the problem, vulnerability and resilience factors, the underlying neurobiology, long-term consequences, and treatment opportunities.

Gambling disorder | Royal College of Psychiatrists (rcpsych.ac.uk) sets out a list of risk factors

- Anyone can develop a gambling disorder. However, it is known that for some people the problem may be more likely to develop. Some factors that might make someone more likely to develop a gambling disorder include: drinking heavily or using illegal drugs, those who are struggling financially or are unemployed.
- People with a gambling disorder are more likely than other people to experience the following harms: e.g. financial harms including overdue utility bills, borrowing from family, friends or loan sharks...

Added in March 2022:

The Social Market Foundation (SMF) published the case for a statutory gambling levy - [The Case for a Statutory Gambling Levy - Social Market Foundation](https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/the-case-for-a-statutory-gambling-levy). ([smf.co.uk](https://www.smf.co.uk)) link [here](#) for the briefing paper