

Adolescent attitudes towards gambling: Some preliminary findings

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Adolescent gambling is a problem in the UK and is related to other delinquent behaviours. For instance, in the UK, a number of studies have consistently highlighted a figure of up to 5-6% level of pathological gamblers among adolescent fruit machine gamblers^{1,2}. This figure is at least two to three times higher than that identified in adult populations. On this evidence, young people are clearly more vulnerable to the negative consequences of gambling than adults. A typical finding of many adolescent gambling studies has been that problem or pathological gambling appears to be a primarily male phenomenon. Other factors that have been linked with adolescent problem gambling include working class youth culture, delinquency, alcohol and substance abuse, poor school performance, theft and truancy¹⁻³.

The main form of problematic gambling among adolescents has been the playing of fruit machines - many of which are legal for children to gamble on. Most research on fruit machine gambling in youth has been undertaken in the UK where they are legally available to children of any age. The most recent wave of the UK tracking study carried out by MORI and the International Gaming Research Unit (Nottingham Trent University)⁴ found that fruit machines were the most popular form of adolescent gambling with 54% of their sample of 8,017 adolescent participants. A more thorough examination of the literature summarizing over 30 studies¹⁻⁴ indicates that:

- At least two-thirds of adolescents play fruit machines at some point in their adolescent lives
- One third of adolescents will have played fruit machines in the last month
- That 10 - 20% of adolescents are regular fruit machine players (playing at least once a week) (17% in the latest 2006 MORI/IGRU survey)
- That between 3% and 6% of adolescents are probable pathological gamblers and/or have severe gambling-related difficulties (3.5% down from 4.9% in the latest 2006 MORI/IGRU survey)

All studies have reported that boys play on fruit machines more than girls and that as fruit machine playing becomes more regular it is more likely to be a predominantly male activity. Research has also indicated that very few female adolescents have gambling problems on fruit machines. So why do adolescents play fruit machines? This is not easy to answer as there are a host of possible reasons. However, research does suggest that irregular ("social") gamblers play for different reasons than the excessive ("pathological") gamblers.

Social gamblers usually play for fun and entertainment (as a form of play), because their friends or parents do (i.e., it is a social activity), for the possibility of winning money, because it provides a challenge, because of ease of availability and there is little else to do, and/or for excitement (the 'buzz')¹⁻³. Pathological gamblers appear to play for other reasons such as mood modification and as a means of escape.

Research has also shown there is a link between attitudes and behaviour in relation to adolescent participation on the National Lottery and scratchcards. A survey of 1195 adolescents between the ages of 11 and 15 years revealed that young people's attitudes are an accurate predictor of their gambling behaviour on these activities⁵. However, there has been little research investigating the attitudes of adolescents toward gambling more generally. Therefore the following study sought to examine the attitudes towards gambling and its consequences among a wide range of adolescents.

Method

2576 adolescents (1172 males and 1399 females; 5 not stated) from 29 educational settings from across the country participated in a short survey of attitudes toward gambling. The vast majority of the sample was aged between 11 years and 16 years ($n = 2562$) with an average mean age of 13.5 years. The educational settings were selected opportunistically but covered many parts of the country including Devon, Leicestershire, Yorkshire, Northumbria, Cumbria, Lancashire, Wiltshire, Scotland, Wales, the Isle of Wight and the Isle of Man. As all participants could write down as much or as little as they liked, many response sheets contained multiple answers.

Results and preliminary discussion

All participants were asked to write down a few words that came into their heads when they thought about the word 'gambling'. There was a very wide range of responses with the most reported being the winning of prizes or money (87%), the name of a particular type of gambling, e.g., roulette, lottery (84%), that gambling can lead to something bad, e.g., crime, homelessness, debt (41%), the name of a particular gambling venue, e.g., casino, betting shop, arcade (32%), a particular location associated with gambling, e.g., Las Vegas, Blackpool (15%), and the use of another word to describe 'gambling', e.g., betting, punt, a flutter (14%). It would appear that these 'free association' types of response are perhaps somewhat predictable but the wide range of responses demonstrates the multi-dimensional and complex nature of gambling.

Participants were also asked in a free recall context to name the types of gambling that they had heard about. Table 1 lists the top 14 responses and showed that card games (poker and non-poker) were the most reported. Given the very high UK media profile surrounding poker at present, this is perhaps not surprising. Most other popular types of gambling were reported including slot machine gambling, horse and dog race betting, casino gambling, playing the lottery, playing roulette, bingo and scratchcards. It may well be the case that those that were most reported may be the activities that the adolescents themselves were most likely to engage in or were participated in by someone close to them (such as a parent).

Newer forms of gambling (such as Internet gambling) were reported by a small number of participants and reflects that adolescents are not immune to these new technological advances in the field of gambling.

Table 1: The most common types of gambling named by adolescents (n=2576) in free recall

Poker	(48%)	Sports betting	(16%)
Non-poker card games	(44%)	Dog racing	(12%)
Horse race betting	(43%)	Arcade games (non-slots)	(7%)
Slot machines	(41%)	Bingo	(5%)
Casinos	(21%)	Internet gambling	(5%)
Lotteries	(21%)	Bookmakers	(3.5%)
Roulette	(18%)	Scratchcards	(3%)

Participants were asked at what age they thought people should first be legally allowed to gamble. The vast majority of participants thought it was an adult activity as the most popular responses for legal gambling were being 18 years old (62%), 18 years to gamble generally but 16 years old for lottery (19%) or 21 years old (8%). It is uncertain whether these responses were driven by social desirability effects or whether these views were genuinely what the adolescents thought. A minority of participants thought gambling should be legal for 16 years old (15%) or be legal at any age (5%).

Participants were asked what they thought the main reasons that people gambled were. By far the most popular response was to win money (68%) that was over three times as popular as the next nearest reason. The most popular lesser reasons as to why people gambled were for fun and enjoyment (21%), for excitement, the buzz or adrenaline rush (13%), because they are addicted (11%), because they don't have enough money (9%), and because they are bored (5%). These reasons are very similar to the reasons that gamblers give themselves^{1,2}. Participants were also asked the reasons why some people don't gamble. The most salient reason reported was to avoid debt (55%). The most popular lesser reasons included the fear of becoming addicted (23%), because it is too risky (14%), because it is a sin (9%), because gamblers are unlikely to win (8%), and because it is not enjoyable (4%).

When asked what they thought about people who gamble, participants reported a wide range of responses, many of which could be viewed as negative. The most popularly reported were that gamblers are stupid, e.g., confused, gullible, "dickheads" (23%), it's up to the individual, i.e., "It's their choice, who am I to judge?" (14%), they are bad people, e.g., liars, cheats, dossers (9%), they have exciting lives, e.g., live on the edge, they rock, they are cool (8%), that it's OK in moderation and if they are not addicted (7%), that they are OK or normal everyday people (6%), that they feel sorry for them (4%), and that they are wealthy (4%).

When asked about the possible problems gambling can cause, the most popular responses were somewhat predictable. These included debt and losing money (64%), addiction / obsession (27%), losing everything they have (22%), criminal activity (5%), and relationship problems (6%). All of these are indeed real consequences of problem gambling⁶ and indicate that the adolescents in this study appear to be generally well informed.

When asked how they would know if a friend had a problem with their gambling they reported a number of consequences such as their friend would always have no money and/or be borrowing money (55%), because their friend would always be gambling (30%), that their friend would suffer mood swings (7%), and that their friend would tell them (5%). Again, all of these types of reason are accurate according to the literature^{1,2}. As a follow up question, all participants were asked what they would do if they had a friend with a gambling problem. Suggestions included the blocking of gambling-related behaviours, e.g., freezing money accounts, self-exclusion at gambling premises, gambling blocking software on the Internet (28%), advising them to seek professional help (15%), engaging them in other non-gambling activities (15%), educating them about gambling (13%), giving them money (5%), telling someone like a parent or teacher (4%), and supporting and talking to them (4%). These are all very sensible and well-informed suggestions apart from the minority who suggested giving the gambler more money.

General discussion

The preliminary results presented here demonstrate that young people appear to have some well-informed, enlightened and strong viewpoints in relation to many aspects of gambling and problem gambling. In general, the responses across all questions asked seem to suggest that young people have a realistic and balanced opinions and attitudes about gambling. The consequences of excessive and problem gambling appear to be understood and recognised by at least a significant minority.

Given that previous research has shown attitudinal dimensions can lead to the behavioural intention to perform these behaviours⁵, the results presented here are of great interest. The next question is how could these attitudes be modified (if at all in some cases) to discourage under-aged gambling? Education clearly has a role to play. Ideally, youth education should be part of a school-based awareness program that would discuss gambling issues in general. This type of program could easily fit into school personal and social education (PSE) classes and would significantly aid informed choice. Indeed some UK schools already informally discuss some of these issues.

On a legislative level, factors that may appeal directly to under-aged people should also be removed (e.g., teenage pop icons being associated with gambling products) to minimise modelling effects. One way that the media could be used in a positive way would be to run adverts promoting responsible gambling, and raising public awareness of problem gambling. This is the case with some US and Canadian gambling operators (e.g. Ohio State Lottery, Loto Quebec). A government warning printed on all gambling products would also help more clearly define the pitfalls of these activities as gambling. A simple statement along the lines of '*Gambling is an activity that can sometimes lead to problems. Have fun, but don't spend too much.*' would be sufficient.

Evidence from related disciplines strongly suggests that fear or scaring strategies display an ineffective and insufficient way of yielding positive (behavioural) outcomes. Instead of labelling gambling as deviant, evil or even sinful, (gambling) prevention programs must offer young people a way to develop adequate personal skills and social competencies. One of the most important issues encompasses the concept of social inoculation that involves the idea of inoculating adolescents with the knowledge and skills necessary to resist social pressures with regard to risk behaviours to which they may be exposed⁷. Prevention models must (a) increase awareness of adolescent problem gambling, (b) enhance knowledge about youth problem gambling, (c) change attitudes toward gambling and adopt a more balanced view (d) teach effective coping and adaptive skills, and (e) correct inappropriate cognitions related to gambling activities (i.e. role of skill, illusion of control, gambler's fallacy, assessment the odds of winning)⁷. In the future, one of the main goals must be to connect research findings, theory, and prevention science, with practice. More research is needed that evaluates methods and materials of gambling prevention programs in order to support the effective implementation of empirically based practices.

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