

# Adolescent gambling in Great Britain

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*This article briefly overviews some of the latest research into adolescent gambling and looks at the recent 2005 Gambling Act in relation to adolescent gambling measures. The new Gambling Act came into force on 1 September 2007, and replaces existing law on gambling in England, Scotland and Wales. Based on the most recent findings and the fact that adolescents can still legally gamble on fruit machines in seaside arcades and family leisure centres, it is argued that adolescent gambling is still a cause for concern in Great Britain, particularly as problem gambling among adolescents is four to five times more prevalent than adult problem rates (i.e. 3.5% of adolescents compared to 0.6% of adults).*

## Legislation

Currently, children of any age can enter a bingo club as long as they do not take part in the game. From the age of 16 years, young people may bet on the football pools and from 18 years they may enter a betting shop, place a bet and work there. At the age of 18 years they may also enter any premises where gaming takes place, for example, a casino. As a general rule, gambling is considered to be an adult activity, although the UK is unusual in that there is no law preventing children and adolescents gambling on fruit machines in seaside arcades and family leisure centres (see below). Gambling in relation to the National Lottery remains separate and young people may play and sell National Lottery tickets and Scratchcards from the age of 16 years. The new Act does not change any of the above age limits in relation to gambling. However, those under 18 years are permitted to enter non-gambling areas of regional casinos to access leisure, cultural or sporting facilities.

The rules for gaming machines have also recently changed. Those under 18 years are able to play

them (there is no legal minimum age restriction but operators can sign up to a voluntary code to exclude under 16 or 18 years) but only for a maximum prize of £5 (in cash or in kind) and a maximum stake of 10p (or 30p if the prize is not cash). The Act contains a provision for the Secretary of State to create an age limit for gaming machines (and associated offences) after consultation with the Gambling Commission, representatives of the gambling business and those who have knowledge of social problems relating to gambling.

Part 4 of the new Act concerns the protection of children (those under 16 years) and young people (16 to 18 year olds). This part contains offences to protect children from being invited to gamble, or gambling; from being invited to enter, and entering, premises where gambling takes place; and from employment in gambling environments. Penalties for commission of these gambling offences by young people carry a £1,000 fine.

The 2005 Act established a new independent Gambling Commission to license and

regulate commercial gambling through casinos, bingo, betting, pool betting, larger charity lotteries and remote technologies such as the Internet. The new licensing objectives are:

- To prevent gambling from being a source of crime and disorder, being associated with crime or disorder or being used to support crime.
- To ensure that gambling is conducted in a fair and open way.
- To protect children and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling.

## Prevalence of adolescent gambling and associated factors

Adolescent gambling is a prevalent activity. The most recent 2006 national survey carried out by MORI and the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University (MORI/IGRU, 2006) reported the following participation rates for various types of gambling among 8,017 adolescents aged 12 to 15 years of age.

**Table 1:** Lifetime participation in gambling activities

Fruit machines	54%
Placing a private bet for money (e.g., with friends)	37%
Scratchcards	28%
Lotto (the bi-weekly National Lottery draw)	16%
Bingo	15%
Betting shops	13%
Any other National Lottery games (e.g., <i>Thunderball</i> )	9%
National Lottery Instant Win games on the Internet	3%
None of the above	26%
Have ever gambled	73%

The 2006 survey highlights that some groups are more likely to gamble than others. Overall, seven in ten young people (73%) say they have ever gambled. This figure is higher among boys than girls (77% compared with 68%); increasing in line with age (66% of those aged 12 compared with 78% of those aged 15); and increasing in line with the amount of money earned or received in the last week (67% of those who have up to £10 compared with 84% of those who have in excess of £30 per week).

Overall gambling participation rates are lower amongst young people from Asian backgrounds (58%, compared with 76% from black and 74% from white backgrounds). However, this lower incidence is largely due to lower participation in playing fruit machines. Young people of Asian background are more likely to be heavily involved in National Lottery draw-based gambling than their white counterparts, as are those from black backgrounds. There are few regional differences and they show no definite pattern overall. There appears to be no significant difference between overall participation in gambling by young people from coastal and non-coastal areas (74% compared with

72%). Those who have truanted in the past year are more likely to have gambled than those who have taken illegal substances (88% compared with 81%). However, young people who have done one or the other are more likely to have gambled than young people who have not participated in either.

As found in previous surveys, boys are more likely to have spent money on gambling in the past week than girls (34% compared with 19%), both on National Lottery games and Scratchcards (13% of boys played either or both compared with 7% of girls) and on non-National Lottery games such as fruit machines and private betting. Young people of black ethnic origin are more likely than average to have spent money on gambling in the past

week (37% compared with 26% overall), both on National Lottery games (12% compared with 8%) and non-National Lottery games. Interestingly, those of Asian origin are more likely than white people to have played all the National Lottery games (the Lotto, Scratchcards, National Lottery on the Internet and other National Lottery draw games) but are no more likely to have gambled on any other type of game or to have gambled generally.

The prevalence of gambling increases among those on higher incomes: 41% of those earning more than £30 have gambled in the past week, compared with 21% of those receiving £10 or less and 13% of those who received no money at all. This ties in with the higher prevalence of gambling among boys and young people of black ethnic origin, both of whom tend to have slightly higher incomes than young people on average. However, and perhaps surprisingly, the prevalence of past week gambling does not increase with age, despite older children's higher incomes. In fact, Year 8 pupils are as likely as Year 10 pupils to have gambled in the past week. Other illegal behaviours appear to be linked to gambling. Young people who say they have

**Table 2:** Past week participation in gambling activities

Fruit machines	17%
Placing a private bet for money (e.g., with friends)	10%
Scratchcards	6%
Lotto (the bi-weekly National Lottery draw)	5%
Bingo	2%
Betting shops	3%
Any other National Lottery games (e.g., <i>Thunderball</i> )	6%
National Lottery Instant Win games on the Internet	1%
Any other gambling	2%

taken an illegal substance or truanted from school in the past year are more likely than average to have gambled in the past week (36%). Those living in single parent households are slightly more likely than those living in two parent households to have gambled in the past week (31% compared with 25%). The findings also suggest that young people living in coastal areas are slightly more likely than those living inland to spend money on fruit machines (19% compared with 17%) but are slightly less likely to play National Lottery games (6% compared with 8%). This may be indicative of greater numbers of fruit machines being available to young people in coastal areas.

### **Prevalence of problem gambling and associated factors**

There are many definitions of problem gambling, although most agree that the consequences compromise, disrupt and/or damage family, occupational, personal and/or recreational pursuits (Griffiths, 2007). The latest British Gambling Prevalence Survey found that 0.6% of the British adult population are problem gamblers (approximately 275,000-325,000 people) (Wardle *et al*, 2007). The problem gambling rate in adolescents is four to five times higher in adolescents, particularly as a result of problematic fruit machine gambling which is legally available to children and adolescents.

The most widely used screening instrument for measuring problem gambling behaviours in youth (DSM-IV-MR-J) includes a set of nine criteria. A person who meets four or more of these criteria is identified as a problem gambler.

The criteria are that the young person:

- Is preoccupied with gambling
- Needs to gamble with increasing sums of money in order to achieve the desired excitement
- Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down on gambling
- Gambles as a way of escaping from problems or relieving depression
- Returns – after losing money gambling – another day in order to get even
- Lies to family members or others to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling
- Often spends much more money on gambling than intended
- Has committed antisocial or illegal acts, such as using their school fare or dinner money, or stealing from family or others, in order to finance gambling
- Has fallen out with family, truants from school, or has disrupted schooling because of gambling.

The 2006 survey by MORI and the International Gaming Research Unit (MORI/IGRU, 2006) also screened for problem gambling behaviours. In total 3.5% from the sample were problem gamblers (2.8% fruit machines; 0.3% Scratchcards; and 0.4% fruit machines and Scratchcards combined), down from 4.9% in the previous survey in 2000 (Ashworth *et al*, 2000). The survey found that these young problem gamblers were more likely than other young people to exhibit other addictive behaviours (i.e., to have smoked cigarettes, drunk alcohol and taken illegal drugs in the past week), confirming other large-scale UK studies (e.g.,

Griffiths & Sutherland, 1998). Although these can be shown to be associated with problem gambling, they are not necessarily causal factors.

Parental gambling and attitudes were also important factors. The parents of the children identified as problem gamblers were twice as likely to have gambled on all the different commercial gambling games than had the parents of other children. They were also more likely than other children to report that their parents approved, or did not mind, if young people their age spent money gambling on fruit machines or National Lottery products.

Further research has shown that young problem gamblers are also more likely to be male, to have begun gambling at an early age, to have had a big win early on and to be from a lower social class (Griffiths, 1995; 2002). In addition to the risk factors based on personal characteristics, the social and physical environment in which young people gamble and the gambling activity also play a part (Griffiths & Parke, 2003). Research has indicated that the most addictive gambling activities are those (such as slot machines) that involve high event frequencies, a short interval between stake and payout, near miss opportunities, a combination of very high prizes and/or frequent winning of small prizes, and a suspension of judgment (Griffiths, 1993; 1999; Parke & Griffiths, 2006; 2007).

Like other potentially addictive behaviours, fruit machine addiction causes the individual to engage in negative behaviours such as truanting in order to play the machines, stealing to

fund machine playing, getting into trouble with teachers and/or parents over their machine playing, borrowing or the using of lunch money to play the machines, poor schoolwork and, in some cases, aggressive behaviour (Griffiths, 2002; 2003). One study (Yeoman & Griffiths, 1996) demonstrated that around 4% of all juvenile crime in one UK city was slot machine-related, based on over 1,850 arrests in a one-year period. Furthermore, fruit machine addicts also display bona fide signs of addiction, including withdrawal effects, tolerance salience, mood modification, conflict and relapse (Griffiths, 2002). Some young people learn to play fruit machines as a means of coping with everyday stresses and problems (avoidance) and as their playing becomes more problematic so their problems, such as debt, increase and consequently their need to gamble also increases. This therefore creates a vicious circle whereby gambling behaviour is experienced as both a problem and as a strategy for dealing with problems (Griffiths, 1995).

### Identifying the problem

Gambling has often been termed "the hidden addiction" (Griffiths, 2002). This is because:

- There are no observable signs or symptoms like other addictions (e.g. alcoholism, heroin addiction, etc.)
- Money shortages and debts can be explained away with ease in a materialistic society
- Adolescent gamblers do not believe they have a problem or wish to hide the fact
- Adolescent gamblers are exceedingly plausible and become adept at lying to mask the truth

- Adolescent gambling may be only one of several excessive behaviours.

Griffiths (2002) reports there are a number of possible warning signs to look for, although individually many of these signs could be put down to adolescence. However, if several of them apply to a child or adolescent it could be that they will have a gambling problem. The signs include:

- No interest in school highlighted by a sudden drop in the standard of schoolwork
- Unexplained free time such as going out each evening and being evasive about where they have been
- Coming home later than expected from school each day and not being able to account for it
- A marked change in overall behaviour (that perhaps only a parent would notice). Such personality changes could include becoming sullen, irritable, restless, moody, touchy, bad-tempered or constantly on the defensive
- Constant shortage and borrowing of money
- Money missing from home (e.g., from mother's purse or father's wallet)
- Selling personal possessions and not being able to account for the money
- Criminal activity (e.g., shoplifting in order to sell things to get money for gambling)
- Coming home hungry each afternoon after school (because lunch money has been spent on gambling)
- Loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Lack of concentration and a "couldn't care less" attitude

- Lack of friends and/or falling out with friends
- Not taking care of their appearance or personal hygiene
- Constantly telling lies (particularly over money).

However, many of these "warning signs" are not necessarily unique to gambling addictions and can also be indicative of other addictions (e.g., alcohol and other drugs).

### Conclusion

Adolescent gambling is still a cause for concern with a small but significant minority of adolescents having a severe gambling problem. Furthermore, the prevalence of problem gambling in adolescents (3.5%) is four to five times higher than that in adults (0.6%). Following the full implementation of the Gambling Act, the newly established Gambling Commission will need to further monitor young people's gambling behaviours. This should help to identify whether age restrictions should be imposed on gaming machines, and examine the extent to which the gambling offences in relation to young people have been used. Young people's access to the leisure and cultural facilities based in regional casinos needs to be researched to see whether this normalises gambling as a social activity. Are young people attracted to gambling venues such as arcades in order to gamble, or are they hanging out there because it provides a warm and dry place for them to meet their friends away from home?

Although there are clear gaps in the literature, there are many studies all showing that a small but significant minority of children

and adolescents have a gambling problem. However, there is a lack of evidence of how current social support systems assess and respond to young people's problem gambling behaviours. Further research is also needed into the adequacy of treatment and support for young people who are problem gamblers, as very few adolescent problem gamblers turn up for treatment (Griffiths, 2001; Griffiths & Chevalier, 2004).

## Resources

Recently, the *Responsibility in Gambling Trust (RiGT)* commissioned *Tacade* and the *International Gaming Research Unit* to produce education materials on youth gambling to be used in schools and other youth education settings. This led to the publication of two sets of comprehensive resources (*You Bet!* and *Just Another Game?*).

*You Bet! Gambling Educational Materials For Young People Aged 11-16 Years*. pp.84-101. Tacade: Manchester (ISBN: 1-902-469-194)

*Just Another Game? Gambling Educational Materials For Young People Aged 13-19 Years*. pp.80-83. Tacade: Manchester. (ISBN 1-902469-208).

Both of these resources can be obtained free of charge via the Tacade website (<http://www.tacade.com/>)

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