

CRITIQUE OF ‘SAFER’ AND ‘RESPONSIBLE’ GAMBLING

‘Safer’ or ‘Responsible’ gambling frameworks emphasise individual responsibility for gambling and consequent harm. Responsibility of gambling operators and regulators to limit harm is confined to enabling individuals to make rational informed choices.¹ Following widespread criticism the term ‘Safer Gambling’ has largely replaced the term ‘Responsible Gambling’. For example, the gambling industry now promotes a ‘Safer Gambling Week’. However, the two terms rest on the same model and are used interchangeably - noticeably by the Gambling Commission in 2020.²

Independent academic researchers and campaigners argue that the Safer/Responsible Gambling model undermines the international public health approach to the risks of gambling and is not only ineffective in reducing harm but also creates stigma and discrimination. It has been described by some researchers as a public relations ‘coup’ for the gambling industry.³

Safer/Responsible Gambling undermines a public health approach

- ‘Safer’ and ‘Responsible’ gambling fails to account for the risks posed by:
 - gambling products and market driven promotion: some gambling products carry risk of addiction as high as 50%⁴
 - availability (particularly 24/7 online access)
 - levels of awareness of risk and normalisation
 - correlation with socio-economic inequity

Failing to account for these risk factors is incompatible with a public approach. It is akin to trying to tackle the harm caused by tobacco without any mention that nicotine is an addictive drug or that tobacco advertising to children is inappropriate.

- Information and education provided by Safer/Responsible Gambling programmes is focused on promoting rational individual behaviours (taking breaks, ‘tapping out’, setting time or monetary limits, self-excluding). These fail to recognise that addictive behaviours are based on artificially induced behavioural ‘need’ rather than a rational or willing ‘choice’. They are therefore wholly inadequate in trying to reduce harmful gambling activities.
- The focus on individual responsibility obscures the central public health responsibilities of government to limit the widespread availability of addictive products, inhibit aggressive stimulation of the market, provide health information to citizens on the risk of harm, and deliver clinically robust treatment for psychiatric conditions such as gambling disorder.

¹ Jim Orford 2020: ‘The Gambling Establishment – Challenging The Power of the Modern Gambling Industry and its Allies’

² The Gambling Commission 2020: webpage on safer gambling <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/for-the-public/Safer-gambling/Safer-gambling.aspx>

³ Jim Orford, 2017: ‘The Gambling Establishment and the Exercise of Power’

⁴ NatCen, 2018: ‘Gambling behaviour in Great Britain in 2016: Evidence from England, Scotland and Wales’

Safer/Responsible Gambling frameworks are ineffective in reducing harm

Research indicates that approaches focussed on individual responsibility and the provision of advice on how to self-regulate behaviour are largely ineffective in changing behaviour or reducing harm:

- The much derided “When the FUN stops, stop” slogan has been shown to have no impact on reducing people’s betting.⁵
- There is limited evidence to support that ‘informed choice education’ has a significant impact on behaviour change.⁶
- There is limited evidence to support that voluntary pre-setting of time or spend limits significantly impact on gambling behaviour.⁷
- Evidence of the effect of industry advice to self-regulate product consumption in other industries shows similarly poor results in leading to harm reduction, notably from alcohol.⁸

Safer/Responsible gambling frameworks lead to stigma, blame and suicide

People with lived experience of gambling harm and academic researchers suggest that the Safer/Responsible Gambling narratives contribute to discrimination, stigma and further harm to mental health:

- Safer/Responsible Gambling narratives suggest personal weakness is at the heart of gambling disorder, when the evidence shows that anyone can become addicted to addictive products.⁹
- People recovering from gambling disorder report that stigma caused by a focus on individual responsibility increases lack of self- esteem, self-blame and suicidal thoughts. This view is supported by the evidence of suicide notes left to families.
- Academic researchers who investigated Responsible Gambling from the perspectives of those with a lived experience of gambling harm, found that participants perceived that Responsible Gambling discourses:
 - Contributed to both felt and enacted stigma.
 - Created norms related to personal control, which led to personal blame and shame.
 - Contributed to broader negative stereotypes that people who had developed problems with gambling were irresponsible and lacked self-control.
 - Had limited or no impact on their own gambling behaviours.¹⁰

⁵ P. Newall, L. Walasek, H. Singman & E. Ludvie (2019) ‘Testing a Gambling Warning Label’s Effect on Behaviour’

⁶ C. Livingstone & A. Rintoul (2020) ‘Moving on from responsible gambling: a new discourse is needed to prevent and minimise harm from gambling’

⁷ N McMahan et al (2019) ‘Effects of prevention and harm reduction interventions on gambling behaviours and gambling related harm: An umbrella review’

⁸ Royal Society of Public Health (2018) ‘Labelling the Point – Towards better alcohol health information’

⁹ K. Sundqvist & I. Rosendahl (2019) ‘Problem gambling and psychiatric comorbidity – risk and temporal sequencing among women and men: results from Swelogs case-control study’

¹⁰ H. Miller & S.Thomas 2017 The problem with ‘responsible gambling’ : impact of government and industry discourses on feelings of felt and enacted stigma in people who experience problems with gambling



Gambling with Lives (registered Charity no: 1184114) was set up by the families and friends of people who took their own lives as a direct result of gambling. The charity works to improve mental health and save lives through raising awareness of the risks to health of gambling; and to provide support to the family and friends of the victims of gambling related suicide and those suffering gambling disorder.