



MEDIA RELEASE

Embargoed until: Thursday 10 September 2026

FROM SOCIAL ACTIVITY TO COPING MECHANISM: WHEN GAMBLING BECOMES HARMFUL

Gambling can shift from a social activity to a coping mechanism during some of life's most difficult moments, according to new research from the [Australian Gambling Research Centre](#) (AGRC) at the [Australian Institute of Family Studies](#) (AIFS).

The study found gambling often became deeply embedded in everyday life through family, friends, sport and social environments before becoming a source of escape during periods of grief, loneliness, relationship breakdown and other major life challenges.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 30 Australians who gamble regularly (at least once a month), the qualitative report explores participants' gambling habits, motivations, experiences of harm, help-seeking behaviours and views on gambling harm-minimisation measures. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65+ years, with two-thirds being classified as high-risk gamblers.

The study found gambling was commonly experienced as a normal and socially accepted part of Australian life, shaped by repeated exposure through family, friends, sporting culture, community venues, social media and online environments.

Participants described being exposed to gambling from an early age, whether through family outings to pubs and clubs, watching relatives gamble, sharing betting tips with friends, or encountering gambling promotions through sport and digital platforms. Together, these experiences contributed to a sense that gambling was simply part of everyday life, often long before potential harms were recognised.

Dr Kei Sakata, Theme Head at AIFS, said the research found, however, that the role gambling played in people's lives often changed during periods of stress and upheaval.

"Participants frequently identified major life events, including grief, relationship breakdown, loneliness and other stressful experiences, as turning points that changed the role gambling played in their lives. For many, gambling shifted from a form of recreation to a coping mechanism," Dr Sakata said.

"Understanding this shows where harm can emerge and why support and prevention efforts need to reflect the realities of people's lives," Dr Sakata said.

Dr Gabi Byrne, who has lived experience of gambling harm, said many of the themes identified in the research resonated with her own journey.

"Like many people, I believed gambling was just a harmless form of entertainment. I considered myself an intelligent and responsible person and never imagined gambling harm could happen to me. Looking back, I can see that the impact developed gradually and was difficult to recognise at the time," Dr Gabi Byrne said.

"That's why lived experience matters. It demonstrates that gambling harm can affect anyone and highlights the importance of prevention, early help-seeking and compassionate support for individuals and families."

The report also found many participants believed they could manage their gambling through personal rules and strategies, even when they were experiencing losses or harm. Common approaches included setting spending limits, gambling only with cash, or relying on personal judgement and experience to guide decisions.

Dr Sakata said these perceptions of control sometimes coexisted with ongoing gambling-related harms, making it difficult for people to recognise risk or seek support.

"Several participants believed they were gambling responsibly because they had rules around how much they spent or when they stopped. Yet the same people were also reporting financial stress and relationship difficulties. This demonstrates that people may not recognise gambling-related harm while they still feel they can manage their gambling." Dr Sakata said.

Many participants also reflected that if they had a better understanding of gambling risks, odds and harms earlier in life, they may have made different choices about gambling. They suggested that honest conversations about gambling, alongside education that starts before the legal gambling age, could help young people better understand the realities of gambling before behaviours become established.

"Many participants looked back and felt they hadn't fully understood how gambling works, the odds of winning, or the potential for harm when they first started gambling," Dr Sakata said.

These experiences and insights point toward the value of prevention approaches that begin early and continue across the life course.

Read the full report ***From Coping to Control: Understanding Gambling Experiences to Inform Harm Minimisation Policy***

Sensitive content warning: This research discusses gambling harm, addiction, self-harm, suicide, and domestic and family violence. Support services are available through Gambling Help Online, Lifeline, Kids Helpline and 1800RESPECT.

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