

Academics call for radical overhaul of UK gambling laws

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Academics are calling for a radical overhaul of the UK gambling laws including a tax on the industry to prevent gambling harms and support those with gambling problems, in a paper published today.

As [gambling](#) is increasingly being recognised as a public health issue, the academics say major investment is needed to alleviate the growing [economic burden](#) on society.

A paper—"Gambling and [public health](#): we need policy action to prevent harm"—published today in the *BMJ* says the extent and cost of gambling has been significantly underestimated in Britain.

In 2017/18, less than £1.5m was spent on prevention activity in Britain, for a population of 65 million. In contrast, New Zealand has an annual budget of over £9.3m for prevention for a population of 4.7 million. The academics – from England, Scotland, Wales and Australia, say there is no government-owned strategy for preventing gambling harm and there is a critical need to increase the level of funding available for prevention if harms are to be reduced.

They are calling for three main policy and funding changes including:

- Revise the 2005 Gambling Act
- Enact a compulsory levy on industry to generate funds
- Shift responsibility for gambling from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport to the Department of Health

and Social Care

The paper says: "Gambling encompasses a broad range of activities ranging from the National Lottery to casino games, slot machines and online betting. Around 58 percent of adults in Great Britain gambled on at least one of these activities in the past year."

According to the paper there are now 33 million active online gambling accounts in Britain. While the prevalence of online gambling has increased from less than 1 percent in 1999 to 9 percent in 2016. The paper also points out that 14 percent of children aged 11-16 have gambled in the past week, with around 55,000 reporting problems from their gambling behaviour.

Professor Gerda Reith, the University of Glasgow's Professor of Social Sciences and an author on the paper, said: "As a society we need to face up to the broad environment that gambling harm is produced in – the role of the industry, as well as the policy climate that they operate in.

"Gambling doesn't just affect an individual. The impacts ripple out beyond them to their family, friends, communities and society.

"Not only does this have major implications for our health services but is also a social justice issue. Gambling harms disproportionately affect poorer or more vulnerable groups in ways that can exacerbate existing inequalities. We urgently need a marked change in approach, and one that is long overdue."

Dr. Heather Wardle, Assistant Professor at London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, the paper's lead author, said: "Gambling harms have been vastly underestimated. It is placing major burdens on resources, relationships and health.

"The time now is for action to reduce harms which is going to require a much more significant level of funding than is currently available. We believe that a compulsory levy on industry is the only way to achieve this."

Gambling is associated with wide ranging harms that go beyond individuals to harm families, communities and societies, the paper says. These effects include financial problems, relationship breakdowns, abuse or neglect of partners and children and adverse childhood experiences that disturb relationships and educational progress & learning.

In Australia for example, the burden of these harms caused on health and wellbeing is estimated to be of a similar magnitude to major depressive disorders or alcohol misuse and dependence.

In Britain, conservative estimates of social costs range from between £200m and £1.2bn a year which the paper says is "likely to be considerable underestimates."

It costs societies more to not address gambling harms than to do so, the paper adds. In Victoria, Australia, tax revenue from gambling is \$AUS 1.6 billion; social costs are \$AUS 6.97 billion—a net deficit of \$AUS 5.4 billion.

More information: Heather Wardle et al. Gambling and public health: we need policy action to prevent harm, *BMJ* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.11807](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.11807)

Provided by University of Glasgow

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