

# Growth of online sports betting poses significant public health challenge—New study

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The new research from Dr McGee focuses on the real-world impacts of online sports gambling for young men. Credit: humonia

A surge in use of online sports betting platforms, and promotional tactics such as free bets to hook users in, pose a significant and growing public health challenge which needs urgent attention from policymakers,

according to the author of a new academic study.

Writing in the *Journal of Public Health*, Dr. Darragh McGee from the University of Bath highlights how a normalization of online sports betting over recent years has had detrimental impacts on the lives of young adult men.

His analysis describes a 'gamblification of sports' - whereby new mobile app technologies and a liberalization of regulations surrounding sports advertising have combined to broaden the appeal and entry-point of gambling. This has been promoted as something for [sports fans](#) to 'enjoy' alongside watching football, horse racing and an array of other sports, he explains.

Drawing on in-depth interviews carried out with 32 young men aged 18-35 engaged in online betting to some degree, four main themes emerge from his research:

Gambling has become a normalized aspect of being a sports fan for young men, many of whom increasingly view the casual wagering of money as vital to their enjoyment of sport. For Callum (27), interviewed as part of the research:

"Gambling has ruined sport because you can't watch it without thinking 'I should put a fiver on first goal'. All my mates can't watch it without having a bet anymore. When I was younger, I couldn't wait to get home from school to see Man United playing in the Champions League ... Now, I'm sat there thinking about what I should be betting on tonight. I can't remember the last time that I just watched the game like a real fan."

A perceived 'facelessness' of sports gambling platforms via mobile apps has increased people's inclination to engage in online betting. This

represents a distinct shift from an era when individuals had to go to a bookies' / betting shop to gamble on sports. Joseph (26) explained:

"Why would you walk across the street when it's all on your phone? It was so easy to pick up my phone and get going."

'Free bet' incentives and in-play promotions have played a significant role in enticing more people into online sports betting. Josh (23) said:

"It entices people in, definitely. And it encourages you to think bigger. Bet 365 were doing a 100% match bonus if you deposit £200. All of a sudden you think you have £400 credit to wager with. And you have to wager a certain number of times, but the offer has drawn you in by the time you realize."

Online sports gambling acts as a slippery slope to other gambling-related harms, including financial precarity, indebtedness, mortgage defaults, which in turn and in some cases is resulting in loss of employment, mental health struggles and family breakdowns. Tom (31) explained:

"I'm in debt to my eyeballs from payday loans. I'm blacklisted with them all. I'm in about £15,000 of debt just from them alone. All for gambling. It took over my life for a while. When my daughter was born, I used to sit on the computer continuous gambling for the day."

The study, which was carried out in Bristol (England) and Derry (Northern Ireland), comprised three phases of data collection: participatory focus groups, a 30-day gambling diary and semi-structured interviews.

Dr. Darragh McGee from Bath's Department for Health explains: "This study examined how the growth of online sports gambling has impacted on perceptions of, and participation in, gambling practices among young

adult men in the UK.

"It clearly highlights how the exponential growth of online sports gambling has wider social, economic and public health impacts beyond young men's leisure activities, with revealing and distressing insights from those involved in online gambling on a daily basis.

"And while the COVID-19 pandemic brought the sports gambling market to a temporary halt, the record-breaking viewing figures since the resumption of live sport in recent weeks may well have exacerbated its detrimental impacts for many young men."

"We urgently need to reframe debates around sports gambling, to recognize it as a public health issue that holds significant implications for individual, family and community wellbeing."

Reflecting on recent initiatives, including the remote gambling association's 'whistle-to-whistle' ban on adverts during coverage he adds: "It is paramount that reformatory interventions are developed independently of those companies or organizations who hold a commercial interest in the promotion of gambling products.

"Greater accountability should also be asked of key stakeholders within sport, including clubs, athletes, league associations and event organizers who benefit from revenue streams provided by gambling operators without due consideration for the public health implications on their fan base."

His conclusion highlights Luton Town FC's decision to reject gambling sponsorship and Everton FC ending of their partnership with SportPesa two years early as important ethical precedents for sporting organizations and athletes to follow in reviewing their sponsorship agreements with gambling operators.

Dr. McGee, who is one of BBC Radio 3—AHRC's New Generation Thinkers focusing on this topic, is now expanding this work by shining light on the increasingly global nature of the sports [gambling](#) market, the study inspired a new project, recently funded under the British Academy and Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) Youth Futures programme.

**More information:** D. McGee, On the normalisation of online sports gambling among young adult men in the UK: a public health perspective, *Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.puhe.2020.04.018](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2020.04.018)

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