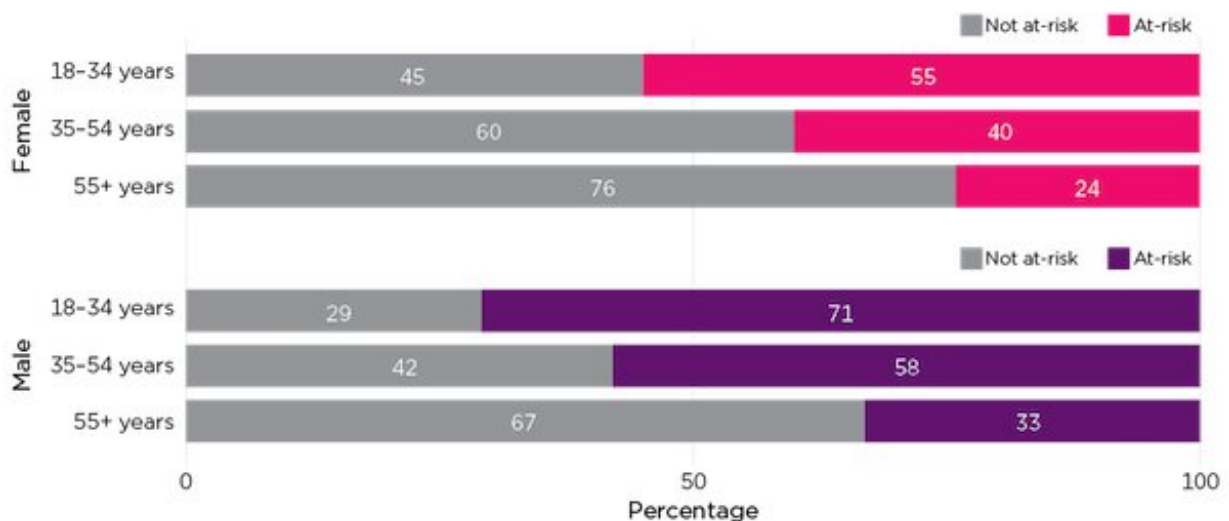


Opinion: Sports are being used to normalize gambling—we should treat the problem just like smoking

May 19 2023, by Charles Livingstone



Proportion of Australian adults who gambled and were classified as being at risk of gambling harm in the past 12 months. Credit: [AIFS](#), [CC BY](#)

Turn on the TV and you're [four times more likely](#) to see a gambling ad during a sports broadcast than during other programming.

The number of [gambling](#) ads on TV has grown from [374 a day](#) in 2016 to [948 in 2021](#). The Australian Football League and National Rugby League have an "official wagering partner", whose logo is displayed

prominently. Individual clubs have sponsorship deals with gambling companies, displaying their logos on team jerseys.

It's something Prime Minister Anthony Albanese agrees is "[annoying](#)", after Opposition leader Peter Dutton [proposed a ban](#) on gambling ads an hour before and after [sports](#) matches.

At present, [a voluntary code governs](#) when these [ads can be shown](#). Generally this means they are not allowed until after 8:30pm. But as any parent will tell you, this won't stop [sports-mad kids](#) seeing them.

Children are regularly, and heavily, exposed to these ads. Parents are alarmed at the changing way their children view sports. It's not just about the game, or the players, or the teams any more. Now children recite [bookmaker brands](#) and the odds as they discuss the weekend's sports.

Normalizing harmful behavior

As with cigarette marketing in decades past, sports sponsorship and advertising has been the primary mechanism for the aggressive "normalization" of gambling. It presents betting on your team (especially with your mates) as the mark of a dedicated supporter.

Associating a product with a popular pastime, and with sporting or other heroes, is a clear tactic of harmful commodity industries from tobacco, to alcohol, fast food, and gambling.

[Alarming evidence](#) is emerging that shows how [young people](#) are [influenced by this marketing](#). This includes evidence that [young people's exposure to gambling ads](#) is linked to gambling activity as adults.

Gambling ads are effective in persuading people to make specific bets, and to [encourage their friends](#) to sign up.

Young men are particularly susceptible. More than 70% of [male punters aged 18 to 35](#) are at risk of harm, according to the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

What other countries are doing

These concerns have now lead to multiple countries prohibiting gambling ads altogether.

[The Netherlands](#) will ban all TV, radio, print and billboard gambling ads from July, with strict conditions on [online advertising](#). A ban on club sponsorship will come into effect in 2025.

[Belgium](#) is going further, ban gambling ads online as well from July. It will ban advertising in stadiums from 2025, and sponsoring of sports clubs in 2028.

[Spain](#) imposed a blanket ban on gambling advertising in 2021, and Italy in 2019.

In the UK, the Premier League last month agreed to [ban bookies' logos](#) from player match shirts, though critics argue this barely addresses the scale of the problem.

How to denormalize harmful behavior

"Denormalization" was a key strategy of [tobacco control efforts](#) in Australia. These are now seen as a massive public health success, with smoking and associated disease rates dropping dramatically.

There are at least two aspects to denormalizing harmful products.

The first is to reduce the avenues through which the product can be promoted. With [tobacco](#) this includes even regulating the packaging. For gambling, getting rid of all forms of gambling promotion during sporting events is the obvious first step.

It's also important to have counter-marketing. When Victoria banned tobacco sponsorship in 1987, it established the [Victorian Health Promotion Foundation](#) , funded by tobacco taxes, initially to support teams that had lost sponsorship.

If gambling ads were banned, it would be logical to replace at least some of the bookies' ads with messaging that helps people avoid a gambling habit, or get help if they already have an issue.

What needs to be done

If the current [parliamentary inquiry into online gambling](#) makes recommendations in line with submissions from concerned citizens and non-government organizations, we can expect an extension of current restrictions. This should include banning ads in line with Peter Dutton's suggestions.

It would also make sense to go further than just more restrictions on broadcast ads, to include online and social media promotion.

Even though gambling companies spend most of their marketing dollars on television, use of [social media](#) is increasing, with alcohol and gambling ads that deliberately [target young people](#). This is despite platforms like Facebook saying it [doesn't allow targeting](#) for online gambling and gaming ads to people under the age of 18.

A program of successive marketing restrictions, moving towards total prohibition, can give the broadcast industry, and the sporting codes, time

to line up new sponsors.

There is a need for national uniformity, with a national regulator to replace current clunky arrangements. And only the [federal government](#) has any hope of making social media adhere to regulation.

We gained enormous benefits from removing tobacco advertising from our TV screens and billboards. We have the opportunity to protect a new generation from further serious, avoidable gambling harm.

No one can say Australian sports is worse off without tobacco ads.

Providing a clear timeline for the end of gambling ads will give our professional sports organizations the incentive they need to find an ethical solution that avoids entrapping a new generation in gambling harm.

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