

50 years on, UK betting shops lure new breed of punters

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Fifty years after legalisation, the UK's betting shops are attracting a new type of customer. This widening appeal may have harmful consequences in terms of problem gambling, argues initial research findings funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Betting shops today are virtually unrecognisable compared to the betting offices legalised by the 1961 Betting and Gaming Act. "Under the Act, the newly licensed betting offices were required not to encourage loitering," states researcher Professor Gerda Reith of Glasgow University. "Today's attractive, comfortable premises are a world apart from that. In particular, their touch-screen Fixed Odds Betting Terminals (FOBTs) that allow players to bet on the outcome of various games and events are encouraging new types of customers and new styles of play."

While older, working-class males used to make up the majority of punters, betting machines appear to be drawing first-time gamblers, particularly young males and [ethnic minority](#) groups into betting shops. "A proportion of older gamblers are also attracted to FOBTs, a change from their traditional bets," Professor Reith points out. These machines are now hugely popular. Profits from FOBTs, which were introduced in 2001, now outstrip profits from traditional over the counter bets on horseracing, greyhounds and football.

Professor Reith's research shows that both the types of betting as well as the clientele of betting shops are changing. Is this causing more individuals to become [problem gamblers](#)?

Says Professor Reith: "[Gambling](#) itself is not dangerous, it is how people deal with it that can cause harm. That said, some types of gambling are more risky than others and FOBT's seem to be one of the products most associated with harm at present. For example, we have evidence that some older betting shop customers who did not have problems with gambling in the past are more likely to develop problems when they start to use betting machines."

Betting machines are particularly risky in terms of [problem gambling](#) because of the enormous speed with which they take gamblers' money. "Compared with some forms of gambling such as horse races or even casino table games, betting machine games are extremely quick, the stakes are high and the losses can very quickly become higher," Professor Reith explains.

Findings from Professor Reith's earlier research shed light on the causes and paths of people's gambling behaviours. Individuals, her research shows, are not born gamblers but rather become gamblers (and problem gamblers) through complex processes of social interaction with their environment. Gambling as a behaviour – whether problem or not – fluctuates over the life course, sometimes to quite a high degree. Hence, 'problem gamblers' are not a discrete group. Rather, [gamblers](#) can move in and out of 'problem gambling' during their lives.

Understanding this dynamic, researchers suggest, is key to identifying effective interventions, and informing policy so that the harms associated with gambling remain at a minimum.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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