

Reframing gambling harms through the individual- and system-frame lens

What this research is about

The 'prevention paradox' in gambling suggests that the burden of gambling-related harms at the population level mostly comes from people who gamble but do not meet the criteria for problem or disordered gambling. However, there is a debate about what types of harm are considered "true" harms. Some researchers have argued that lower-level harms like reduced savings and less spending on other activities are typical of many hobbies besides gambling. Nevertheless, it is important to prevent harms among people who gamble at a lower-risk level. The author of this article argues that the i-frame/s-frame distinction proposed by Chater and Lowenstein can help public health efforts shift toward a greater use of systemic or structural solutions to prevent gambling-related harms.

What the researchers did

In this article, the author discusses the i-frame and s-frame distinction and why more s-frame solutions are needed to help prevent gambling harms at the population level.

What the researchers found

Chater and Loewenstein's i-frame/s-frame distinction contrasts interventions that focus on individual behaviour to those that focus on the systems. Individual-frame (i-frame) interventions focus on individual decision-making and self-control. Examples include providing feedback and voluntary limits on time and money spent gambling. In contrast, system-frame (s-frame) interventions involve restrictions and structural reforms at the

What you need to know

In this article, the author argues that efforts to prevent gambling-related harms should shift from focusing mostly on individual responsibility ("i-frame" approaches) towards a greater use of systemic or structural solutions ("s-frame" approaches). Lower-level gambling harms affect many people who do not meet the criteria for problem gambling, and most current prevention efforts rely on people to make informed decisions and exert self-control. Drawing on the i-frame/s-frame framework, the author argues that systemic reforms (e.g., restrictions on availability, design, and marketing of gambling products) are often better positioned to reduce gambling-related harms, as they do not depend on individual engagement and self-control. The author suggests that while i-frame interventions remain valuable, more attention and resources should be paid towards understanding, implementing, and evaluating systemic approaches that make gambling environments safer by design.

system level. Examples include restricting advertising and gambling product availability.

The need for s-frame solutions: I-frame approaches rely on people to make rational and informed decisions. But people are not perfect, can be misled, and make decisions based on biases and heuristics. Further, the gambling industry uses practices that range from being ethically questionable to exploitative. The features, design,

and marketing of gambling products can exploit thinking biases. To date, i-frame interventions have shown only modest and short-term benefits. There is not much evidence that these interventions result in continued reductions in monetary losses or gambling harms in the long term.

In contrast, s-frame approaches do not need to rely on people engaging with them to have an impact. They can ease environmental challenges without requiring people to demonstrate self-control. There is growing recognition that broad systemic factors, such as the placement of gambling venues, marketing, and political lobbying by the gambling industry, can contribute to personal risk of harms.

Some countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, have introduced strategies like global limits and restrictions on bonuses. These are examples of s-frame approaches. But the gambling field still emphasizes i-frame approaches. The author reviewed articles published in select gambling journals in 2025 to see whether there is a balance of i- and s-frame focused works, finding a predominance of the former. For instance, only 5 of 97 articles published in the *Journal of Gambling Studies* focused on s-frame topics.

Applying i-frame/s-frame distinction to gambling harm prevention:

The author argues that the i-frame/s-frame perspective provides a simple and practical way to classify gambling interventions. The language used in i-frame/s-frame distinction is intuitive and memorable. It allows for better clarity and communication of the different types of intervention approaches. It also emphasizes the opportunities lost by focusing on the i-frame and highlights why the gambling industry wants to keep the focus on the i-frame. By emphasizing individual behaviour, the industry can move away from regulatory changes that may impact profits.

Making the shift: The author argues for a greater research focus on systemic solutions. The author suggests that researchers consider drawing on methods and concepts from implementation science to understand how to effectively implement s-frame reforms. It should be acknowledged that i-frame research and interventions are valuable and still need to be undertaken. But it is important to not

over-invest in i-frame interventions. Instead, a combination of i-frame and s-frame interventions is needed. Adopting s-frame interventions does not mean people do not have to take some responsibility for their gambling behaviour. Rather, it recognizes that there is a power imbalance between consumers and commercial entities. There are concerns that emphasizing systemic reforms will affect the freedom and enjoyment of those who gamble safely. There are also political and economic barriers, such as industry opposition to structural reforms. These concerns and barriers will need to be addressed.

How you can use this research

This research can inform future studies that evaluate systemic approaches to gambling harm prevention. It can also inform policy makers in developing regulations to address structural factors that shape gambling-related harms at the population level.

About the researchers

Robert M. Heirene is affiliated with the Brain and Mind Centre in the School of Psychology at the University of Sydney in Sydney, Australia. For more information about this study, please contact Robert M. Heirene at robert.heirene@sydney.edu.au.

Citation

Heirene, R. M. (2026). Preventing lower-level gambling harms: Shifting from individual- to system-frame approaches. *Addiction*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.70467>

Study Funding

This study received no direct funding.

About Greo Evidence Insights

Greo Evidence Insights is an independent, non-profit organization specializing in research, knowledge mobilization, and evaluation in the health and well-being sectors. Greo transforms research and insights into actionable strategies to prevent and reduce harm related to gambling, gaming, technology use, and substance use. To learn more about funding for Research Snapshots visit [our website](#).

