

Exploring how gambling becomes embedded in grassroots football culture in England

What this research is about

Gambling has increasingly become a normal part of how people engage with professional football. Besides watching professional football matches, many football fans also participate in grassroots football. But there is not much research on the link between gambling and playing grassroots football. Using an online survey, this study examined the prevalence of gambling behaviours and gambling-related harms among people who play grassroots football in England. The researchers further explored how gambling becomes embedded in grassroots football culture through in-depth interviews.

What the researchers did

The researchers first conducted an online survey to examine the prevalence of gambling behaviours and harms among people who play grassroots football in England. A total of six clubs agreed to distribute the online survey link to players aged 16 and older. In total, 119 players from these clubs completed the survey. The researchers recruited 24 youth aged 11–15 years from one football club. They also recruited 187 participants from the online platform Prolific. After removing incomplete and invalid responses, the survey responses from 270 participants aged 11–68 years were included in the analysis.

The survey questions captured the following information:

- Gambling behaviours, measured using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI).
- Self-reported monthly spending on gambling.
- Frequency of playing grassroots football and watching professional football matches.

What you need to know

This study examined the prevalence of gambling behaviours and gambling-related harms among people who play grassroots football. It further explored how gambling becomes embedded in grassroots football culture in England. The researchers surveyed 270 grassroots football players (ages 11–68 years) to assess gambling prevalence. They then interviewed 39 adult players, coaches, and club officials to explore the connections between gambling and football practices. The survey findings highlight a higher prevalence of at-risk and problem gambling among people who play grassroots football compared to the general population in Britain. During the interviews, participants shared the deep connections between gambling, social drinking, and football playing and watching. Social interactions between club members drive and normalize gambling as part of grassroots football culture, while the use of football knowledge (displayed through gambling wins) helps young players gain social status within the club.

- Demographics, including age, gender, nationality, and religion.

The researchers then interviewed 39 adults, who were recruited from the six grassroots football clubs that helped with distributing the survey. Participants included players, club officials, and coaches. The focus of the interviews was on everyday life as a footballer in the club, socialization with fellow club mates, watching professional football, and gambling.

What the researchers found

Survey findings: Most participants were male (80%) and in the 18–34 age group (71%). Participants were highly involved in football. Three-quarters (76%) played grassroots football, while four in five (80%) watched professional football on TV multiple times per week. Gambling was common. Three-quarters (75%) had gambled in the past month. Three in five (60%) had placed a football bet in the past month.

The researchers compared the prevalence of gambling risk to that of the general adult population based on the 2024 Gambling Survey for Great Britain. Around 69% of the participants were at risk of problem gambling, scoring at least 1 on the PGSI, compared to 14.5% of the general population. The rate of problem gambling (score of 8 or higher on the PGSI) was also higher, with 13% experiencing problem gambling compared to 2.5% of the adult general population.

In this study, men showed higher risk of problem gambling than women (16.4% vs. 6%). Male grassroots football players were more likely to experience problem gambling than the general population (16.4% vs. 3.3%). The same was true for female grassroots football players (6% vs. 1.8%).

Around one-third of participants (35%) aged 18–24 years had moderate-risk gambling, compared to 7% of the general population. Participants between 35 and 44 years had the highest overall prevalence of at-risk gambling: almost 80% were at risk compared to 20% of the general population.

Interview findings: Most interview participants regularly gambled (87%). Participants shared how the digitalization of gambling and use of technology allow them to sequence football playing, watching football, social drinking, and gambling. Social interactions between players, especially on weekends, drive and normalize betting. Socializing after playing football, which is often linked to social drinking, gives players an opportunity to talk about the outcomes of gambling. The use of mobile phone seamlessly connects football playing and watching with gambling without the need for a betting shop.

Knowledge about football is a cultural capital in the grassroots club setting, providing players with

elevated status. Gambling offers less experienced and young players the opportunity to show their football knowledge and gain status within the club.

At the same time, some participants mentioned feeling uneasy about the intensity of gambling marketing, which undermines the joy and cultural value of football. Participants also raised concerns about the social harms caused by gambling.

How you can use this research

Policy makers and gambling regulators can use this research to support tighter regulation of gambling sponsorship and marketing. Grassroots clubs can use this research to support moving away from gambling partnerships and raising awareness of gambling harms among staff and players.

About the researchers

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