

Unlicensed gambling among people who regularly gamble in Great Britain

What this research is about

Online gambling opportunities have increased worldwide. While many jurisdictions offer regulated gambling, there exists a large market for unlicensed, or offshore, gambling providers. In Great Britain (GB), unlicensed gambling is defined as providing gambling activities without obtaining an operating licence from the Gambling Commission.

A growing body of research suggests that unlicensed gambling represents a real threat to public health. Unlicensed gambling is not only linked to criminal activities but also a greater risk of problem gambling and gambling-related harms. This risk is heightened by the lack of regulatory oversight and the absence of safer gambling tools. For instance, unlicensed gambling websites are far less likely to include adequate age controls or the ability to self-exclude. Moreover, these sites tend to offer higher risk forms of gambling such as live betting and slots.

Despite these serious concerns, few studies have attempted to estimate the prevalence of unlicensed gambling in GB. The existing data indicate that the share of unlicensed gambling in GB is small; however, many people are not aware of what constitutes unlicensed gambling. As a result, current estimates may not be accurate.

Given this, the primary aim of this study was to examine the prevalence of unlicensed gambling in GB. To accomplish this, the researchers developed a questionnaire to assess the prevalence of unlicensed gambling among people who regularly gamble. They also examined the profile of people who have

What you need to know

The present study examined the prevalence of unlicensed gambling in Great Britain through a survey of 1,322 adults who regularly gambled on activities other than lotteries. It was found that 5.7% of participants had gambled on unlicensed sites. Compared to those who did not use unlicensed gambling sites, these participants tended to be younger and female, though men still outnumbered women. They were more likely to be from non-white backgrounds, be unemployed, and have children under the age of 18. The most common reasons for gambling on unlicensed sites were using cryptocurrency to gamble (54.7%) and avoiding self-exclusion (50.7%; unlicensed sites are not part of GamStop, a national self-exclusion scheme). Gambling on unlicensed sites to avoid self-exclusion was associated with more severe problem gambling. These results could be of interest to regulators and policy makers.

gambled on unlicensed sites and the association with problem gambling.

What the researchers did

Participants were recruited through the Ipsos Mori Knowledge Panel using random sampling. To be eligible for the study, participants had to be 18 years of age or older, and gamble at least monthly on gambling activities other than lotteries. Survey data from 1,322 people were collected in January 2024.

To capture unlicensed gambling, the researchers developed a questionnaire in consultation with the

Gambling Commission. The questionnaire had four questions asking about (1) gambling on a website not licensed by the Gambling Commission; (2) gambling using cryptocurrency (which is currently not licensed in GB); (3) using a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to gamble and the reason for doing so (any reason other than for privacy was considered unlicensed gambling); and (4) gambling on a website not part of GamStop, a national self-exclusion scheme. All licensed gambling providers in GB are required to be part of GamStop.

Participants completed the questionnaire on unlicensed gambling, questions on engaging in 18 different gambling activities in the past year, and the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). They also reported their sociodemographic information.

What the researchers found

Most participants were men (67.1%) and identified as white British (88.8%). A total of 5.7% of participants reported gambling using unlicensed gambling sites. Compared to those who did not use unlicensed gambling sites, these participants tended to be younger and female, though men still outnumbered women. They were more likely to be from non-white ethnic backgrounds, be unemployed, and have children under the age of 18.

Participants who gambled on unlicensed sites were more likely to engage in most forms of gambling, except for online sports betting; around 60% reported in-person casino gambling and 52% regularly gambled on 11 or more forms of gambling. Participants were more likely to be involved in unlicensed gambling if they regularly gambled at land-based casinos or regularly gambled on online casino products or electronic gambling machines. In contrast, online sports betting and gambling on online instant win products were associated with a lower likelihood of unlicensed gambling.

The most common reason for gambling on unlicensed sites was to gamble using cryptocurrency (54.7%). This was followed by using such sites because they were not linked to GamStop (50.7%). There were also various other reasons (38.7%), including wanting to use another currency than Sterling or cryptos to gamble (14.7%).

Gambling on unlicensed sites because these sites were not part of GamStop was associated with higher PGSI scores (i.e., more severe problem gambling). However, gambling on unlicensed sites because they allowed cryptocurrency was not related to higher PGSI scores.

How you can use this research

This study provides a thorough examination of the extent of unlicensed gambling in GB. The results could be of interest to regulators, policy makers, and researchers concerned with unlicensed gambling.

About the researchers

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