

# knowledge snapshot



## A scoping review of measures used to block offshore gambling websites

### What this article is about

Offshore gambling refers to online gambling on websites that are not regulated or are illegal in certain regions. Offshore online gambling markets are hard to regulate as they are geographically located beyond the reach of national regulators. One strategy that has been used by regulators is to try to block access to unauthorized gambling websites. Another strategy is to block financial transactions.

There are different types of blocking measures that target offshore online gambling. Website blocking refers to preventing internet users from accessing unauthorized gambling websites. Payment blocking blocks payments made to or from such websites, or blocks requests made to payment intermediaries. But there is not much known about how well these strategies work. This scoping review examines the research literature on the blocking of offshore gambling websites and their payment services.

### What was done?

The authors conducted a literature search. They searched four databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. To be included in the review, studies had to be focused on addressing the effectiveness and challenges of implementing online gambling blocking measures by regulators. This meant that research on individual use of blocking programs or applications to prevent the use of gambling websites was excluded. Studies also had to be focused mainly on blocking measures.

Included studies had to be original empirical work and case studies. Discussion, opinion, and review papers were excluded. Included studies had to be available through the University of Helsinki Library services. The

### Why is this article important?

Offshore online gambling markets are hard to regulate. Regulators can use blocking to prevent access or financial transactions to unregulated gambling sites. But there is not much known about how well these strategies work. This scoping review found 14 publications focused mainly on blocking measures. The authors identified four main themes: implementation, effectiveness, risks, and alternatives. Overall, there is not much empirical research on the effectiveness of blocking measures. There is not much research on payment blocking in particular. The effectiveness of blocking measures depends on how they are implemented, particularly technically. The authors argue that more evidence with respect to the technical, legal, and commercial implications of blocking is needed.

authors did not exclude articles based on publication years or geographic contexts.

The initial search results found 146,283 hits across the four databases. The researchers only included the first 50 hits for each database (sorted by relevance). The authors reviewed these articles by title and removed duplicates or articles that were clearly not relevant. They then reviewed the abstracts and excluded articles based on the inclusion criteria. The authors reviewed the full text of the remaining articles. Then, they added 7 additional articles based on full-text article assessment and their own knowledge. Six of the additional articles focused on regulators' experiences with using blocking measures. A total of 14 studies were included in the review.

## What you need to know

There are seven country case studies, three legal analyses, three studies on effectiveness and implementation, and one political analysis. The authors noted that there is not much research on the effectiveness or functionality of blocking measures. The authors summarized the findings into four topics.

**Implementation:** Blocking offshore online gambling websites can be done through blocking internet protocol (IP) address, domain name system (DNS), or uniform resource locator (URL). Each method needs a blacklist to be created and updated. DNS blocking is the cheapest and easiest. It is also the most widely used. IP blocking can be effective, but its challenges involve the risk of ‘over blocking’, where legitimate websites are unjustly blocked. URL blocking is more precise but requires internet service providers (ISPs) to monitor communication. This can be problematic because of privacy rights. It is also often more complicated. There is little research on the implementation of payment blocking.

**Effectiveness:** Blocking does not prevent all offshore gambling because skilled users can find a way around the blocks. The flexibility of offshore providers (e.g., being able to quickly change blocked IP addresses) influences the effectiveness of blocking. The resources of regulators (e.g., willingness and capability) also influence the effectiveness. Website blocking can be improved by using landing pages. Landing pages are websites that people trying to reach blocked gambling sites are redirected. Landing pages are important as they inform people why they did not reach the desired website. There are no studies examining the effectiveness of payment blocking. It is suggested payment blocking is complicated because of the use of foreign payment services and digital wallets.

**Risks of blocking:** The main concerns expressed about blocking are related to privacy, data protection, and censorship. With the possibility of over blocking, there is also risk related to the freedom of trade (i.e., risk that private business interests are violated).

**Alternatives to website and payment blocking:** Some scholars have suggested how to improve existing

measures (e.g., targeting a wider network of ‘payment systems’). There are also alternatives to blocking measures. For example, some countries (Denmark and Spain) also use whitelists and official labels for licensed providers. Another suggestion is to target the wider production chains of online gambling, including, e.g., software providers and advertising companies.

## Who is it intended for?

This review can guide future research on the technical, legal, and commercial implications of blocking measures.

## About the researchers

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