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Challenges in regulating the online gambling sector: A scoping review

What this research is about

Online gambling is on the rise globally and is considered more harmful than land-based gambling. The purpose of this scoping review was to identify and summarize the current evidence base on the effects of legal interventions intended to reduce online gambling harms. A secondary aim was to identify and summarize specific challenges faced by such legal interventions.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted a scoping review as part of a broader systematic review. They followed the PRISMA Sc-R reporting guidance for scoping reviews. A wide range of databases were searched in 2024 to identify relevant articles for the systematic review. The researchers filtered out the primary search results to identify a subset of evidence related to online gambling for the current scoping review.

The researchers followed the PICOST inclusion/exclusion criteria. They included primary research articles, research protocols, review articles, and book chapters. Included studies had to evaluate legal interventions for reducing online gambling harms. Articles were excluded if they were commentaries, editorials, letters to the editor, conference abstracts, or opinion pieces. The initial number of articles identified was 4,144. After screening, a total of 27 data sources were included in this scoping review.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified two categories of evidence: (1) challenges of regulating online gambling, and (2) efficacy of laws and regulations intended to reduce online gambling harms.

Challenges of regulating online gambling

Overall, there is an agreement that online gambling poses distinct challenges to laws and regulations. One challenge is that many large online gambling operators are located in small, offshore jurisdictions. These operators also provide services across a number of borders, making it hard to regulate and tax them. Another challenge is that people can use anonymous payment methods (e.g., bitcoin) to sidestep payment blocking by banks. Also, online gambling platforms are available 24/7 and offer a wide range of products, including those that pose a higher risk for harmful gambling.

What you need to know

The purpose of this scoping review was to identify and summarize the current evidence base on the effects of legal interventions intended to reduce online gambling harms and the challenges faced by such legal interventions. After screening, a total of 27 data sources were included in this scoping review. The researchers discussed two main themes: (1) challenges of regulating online gambling, and (2) efficacy of laws and regulations intended to reduce online gambling harms. Specifically, the researchers noted that current online gambling harm reduction efforts often rely on an individual approach instead of a systems approach. They also noted that not many studies have addressed the health equity and/or equality effects of laws and regulations.

There are challenges to regulating online gambling advertising. Online gambling operators use social media to target advertising to specific groups, such as young people and sports fans. Moreover, social media allows for user-generated content and peer-to-peer advertisement. This creates a blurred boundary between editorial content and advertisement. In-game advertising is also common.

Loot boxes in video games provide randomized rewards and can be purchased for real money. Research has found that people who spend more money on loot boxes are also more likely to report harmful gambling. Challenges in regulating loot boxes arise from significant differences in consumer protection measures available across countries and the lack of compliance with regulation, if one exists.

Scholars agree that inadequate legal and regulatory frameworks have led to a higher prevalence of online gambling harms. There are two explanations: (1) rapidly evolving online gambling technologies have made it hard for regulators to respond fast enough, and (2) pro-innovation legal frameworks have enabled the online gambling sector to grow.

Efficacy of laws and regulations

There is less research on the efficacy of laws and regulations intended to prevent or reduce online gambling harms. Regulations are often framed at an individual-level instead of systems-level. Voluntary or self-regulation regulations, framed as non-binding good practice guidance, have long been found to be ineffective.

Stronger rules for licensed online gambling markets may impact the unlicensed sector. Reducing access to unlicensed online gambling sites using blocking mechanics raises challenges related to compliance and enforcement.

Not many studies have addressed the health equity and/or equality effects of laws and regulations intended to reduce online gambling harms. There has been some research on the impact of age restrictions and advertising restrictions.

Overall, the researchers call for further research on laws and regulations related to online gambling. They suggest it is important to also examine how legal interventions may create or worsen health inequalities for subgroups of populations.

How you can use this research

Researchers can use this review to guide future studies. Policy makers could use these findings to support the development and evaluation of online gambling regulations.

About the researchers

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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.

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