

# knowledge snapshot



## Moving gambling harm prevention policies “upstream”: The role of policy makers and researchers

### What this article is about

A public health perspective towards gambling has garnered attention in the last two decades. However, policies to prevent gambling harm are still dominated by a “responsible gambling” (RG) approach. RG promotes the idea that it is the choice and the decision of individuals to gamble. In this approach, prevention policies are aimed at informing people about gambling to prevent misuse. However, there is increasing evidence that RG is insufficient to reduce the harm of gambling in society.

In this article, the authors argue that RG has enjoyed wide support because it is relatively simple to adopt as compared to more complex frameworks that aim to address the “root causes” of gambling. The authors discuss the role of two communities of actors that have driven the wide adoption of RG: policy makers and gambling researchers. The authors argue it is important to move prevention policies “upstream”. Such an approach will aim to address the social and environmental factors of gambling and the socio-economic inequalities that arise from gambling harm.

### What was done?

The authors discuss the characteristics of policy-making and research communities and the challenges of taking a broader socio-cultural approach towards harm prevention. The authors argue for a need to move prevention policies upstream. They also suggest improving communication of research as a means of influencing policies and actions.

### What you need to know

#### *Prevention policy*

The authors argue that public policies that can be categorised as preventive are relatively rare.

### Why is this article important?

A public health approach towards gambling harm prevention has garnered attention in the last two decades. Yet, policies to prevent gambling harm are still dominated by a responsible gambling approach. In this article, the authors discuss the characteristics of policy-making and research communities to explain why prevention policies have seen little changes over the last two decades. The authors argue for a need to move gambling harm prevention “upstream” to address the root causes of the problem. They also suggest improving communication of research as a means of influencing policies and actions.

Prevention implies the need to address the root causes of the problem. It means dealing with upstream factors that influence gambling, including gambling opportunities and marketing among other social and environmental factors.

However, the complexity of such policies make them challenging to implement and evaluate. The need to address multiple factors means the scale of the task may become overwhelming for policy makers. The timeframe also tends to go beyond electoral timeframes. Furthermore, other priorities on the public agenda and competition for resources may delay prevention actions. It is also difficult to measure the benefits of prevention policies. The professional culture of policy makers usually requires someone to be held accountable. If prevention policies are designed to address multi-level factors, responsibility may become blurred. This may lead to mistrust among government officials.

The extent to which policies address the root causes of gambling depends on the position of policy makers with regard to the notions of inequality and fairness. Factors other than scientific evidence, such as political debates and personal beliefs, can more strongly influence political decisions. The authors note that policy makers and researchers belong to distinct professional communities. Policy makers are “research consumers”. Thus, their view of scientific evidence is often different from researchers.

### Prevention research

The authors suggest the research community is another driver of the prominence of the RG approach. The most influential journals that publish gambling studies are from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, and medicine. Most studies that are published in these journals focus on individual behaviours. Furthermore, researchers who make use of the RG approach in their studies rarely challenge it.

The authors draw attention to the use of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) as a test of the reliability of prevention actions. RCTs are considered the “gold standard”, as they test the effects of an action on two different groups of people under the influence of the same set of factors. RCTs are based on quantitative methods of measurement. They are viewed by policy makers as a highly influential type of evidence.

However, the authors argue that there are reasons to move away from the “gold standard” catchphrase and treat RCTs in the same way as other social policy research techniques. The main reason is that the generalisability of their findings to real-life contexts is limited. The reliance on RCTs is not enough to understand the scope of policies and actions needed to address complex social issues like gambling.

The authors argue that policies to prevent gambling harm need to take a broader socio-cultural approach. Prevention policies need to address the inequalities arising from gambling harm, such as those based on age, gender, and socio-economic status. Environmental conditions can greatly affect health inequalities. These conditions may be direct results of or indirectly related to government policies.

The authors argue that researchers have a key role in moving gambling harm prevention policies upstream. But it requires improving communication of research results and collaboration between researchers and policy makers. The authors point to guidelines for engaging with policy makers that have been proposed in previous research.

### Who is it intended for?

This research is intended for policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders who have an interest in gambling harm prevention.

### About the researchers

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### Citation

Lakidain, A., & Fernández, H. (2022). Moving prevention of gambling harm upstream: Opportunities in social policy and research. *European Public & Social Innovation Review*, 7(1), 72-85.

<https://pub.sinnergiak.org/esir/article/view/179>

### Study funding

No funding was declared for this research.

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