

knowledge snapshot



The class-based distribution of gambling and gambling harm

What this article is about

This article is a response to the 2017 article “Gambling is not a capitalist conspiracy” by Delfabbro and King, which is a critique of gambling research written by a number of scholars from sociological, geographic, and political economy perspectives. In the article, Delfabbro and King argue that gambling harm is not distributed based on social class. The authors of this article show that Delfabbro and King’s critique is based on a misunderstanding of social and class processes in society. They discuss the link between gambling and socioeconomic disadvantage, and the agency of gamblers. They then explain how research may play a role in the reproduction of gambling harm.

What was done?

The authors responded to the critique by Delfabbro and King (2017). They reviewed current evidence and social theories to support their argument. The authors argue for perspectives from social science to be used more broadly in gambling research, and against the focus on individuals’ actions as the cause of harm.

What you need to know

Gambling, inequality and social classes

Delfabbro and King agree that electronic gambling machines (EGMs) tend to be located in poorer neighbourhoods. But they suggest that population prevalence surveys have shown that some middle-class groups spend more on gambling than the poorest. The authors argue that data on EGM location and spending come from administrative data from authoritative licensing databases. On the other hand, prevalence surveys are usually run via telephone and are limited in their ability to sample people who live in

Why is this article important?

This article is a response to a critique of gambling research written from a sociological, geographic or political economy perspective. It has been argued that this body of research creates an impression that there is a conspiracy driven by a large and unified global gambling industry to exploit the working classes. The authors show that such a critique is based on a misunderstanding of how social classes work in society. They then discuss the influence that the gambling industry has had on government policies and research.

poorer areas and those who belong to marginalized groups. Thus, when there is a mismatch, the administrative data should be considered more credible than the prevalence studies.

Delfabbro and King (2017) argue that a class-based perspective creates an impression that there is a conspiracy driven by a large and unified global gambling industry to exploit the working classes. The authors argue that such a critique is based on a misunderstanding of how social classes work in society. It is not true that groups of individuals can only exploit other groups through intentional and organized ways. This idea incorrectly attributes individual characteristics to socioeconomic structures.

Socioeconomic structures (e.g., free markets) can lead to social outcomes that are independent of, and may even be contrary to, the intentions of individual actors. To compete with others, a gambling operator may locate a venue to areas with lower real estate prices or where there will be less regulatory obstacles. Those areas are often where working class people

live. The authors argue that gambling is a big industry, comparable to the tobacco and drug industries, and has used similar tactics to maximize profits.

While the government has the responsibility to prevent gambling harm, it may be unwilling to limit gambling if limiting is seen as a threat to employment or consumer freedom. The issue is complicated if the government receives tax revenues from gambling. Also, large corporations have resources to lobby against government measures that can threaten their profits. All these processes occur without the need of a conspiracy. But the outcomes are the concentration of harm among the working classes and the transfer of wealth to large corporations and shareholders.

The agency of gamblers

Delfabbro and King argue that some scholars have not granted gamblers sufficient agency in their role as consumers. Their view dismisses the constraints under which gambling decisions are made, especially for problem gamblers who experience loss of control. The authors question the focus on individual characteristics rather than the social circumstances which allow these characteristics to be expressed.

The influence of the gambling industry

The gambling industry has had great influence on government policies and research agendas. In some cases, this is achieved by funding research. Many psychological studies are of poor quality. Problems include small sample sizes, selective reporting, and results that cannot be replicated. The idea of “Responsible Gambling” has been used to blame gamblers for their problems and to distract from the harmful nature of gambling products. The narrow view of psychology focused on individual behaviour ignores a wealth of other possible approaches to the issue.

Who is it intended for?

This article is intended for gambling researchers, policy makers and others who drive research programs. It argues for interdisciplinary studies that consider social, political, economic, geographic and cultural perspectives.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Gambling, political economy, anthropology, sociology, social science

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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