

# research snapshot

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## Experiences of harm by children of parents who regularly gamble

### What this research is about

Recent research has found that children's wellbeing can be affected by parental problem gambling. Children exposed to parental problem gambling may experience psychological and parent-child relationship problems. They may also experience physical abuse, verbal abuse, and neglect. But research studies have not focused on the first-hand accounts of people who experienced parental problem gambling as children, including how gambling harm had emerged and manifested in their lives. In this study, the researchers explored in depth the experiences of people who were negatively affected by their parents' gambling as children.

### What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 20 participants from a larger online study of 211 adult children of parents who regularly gambled. Participants of the larger study were invited to complete an interview if they experienced harm due to parental gambling. Harm was assessed using a short online questionnaire adapted from the U.S. National Alcohol's Harm to Children screening tool. The adapted screening tool was called Gambling Harm to Children.

Most of the participants (80%) were female. Participants were between 19 and 48 years old. They reported one or more gambling harms due to parental gambling while they were under the age of 18 years.

Participants provided their demographic information, including age, state of residence, gender, Indigenous status, relationship status, country of birth, and highest educational qualification. Most participants (80%) were currently employed. Most participants (90%) were married or in a relationship. Just under

### What you need to know

Children's wellbeing can be affected by parental problem gambling. In this study, the researchers interviewed 20 adults who reported one or more gambling harms due to parental gambling while they were under the age of 18 years. Overall, the results are consistent with previous research on impacts of parental problem gambling. Participants mentioned experiencing a range of harms, including distress or upset, being left unsupervised, not having enough money, relationship problems, and abuse. Some participants had to take on parental roles by taking care of their siblings, household chores, and finances. These childhood experiences made it challenging for the participants to complete formal education. Such experiences might also contribute to ongoing difficulties in adulthood.

half of the participants (40%) indicated that both of their parents gambled (instead of just one).

The researchers interviewed the 20 participants over the phone. They asked questions about their home life and childhood experiences of parental gambling. They also asked about the ways that parental gambling resulted in the specific harms that the participants reported in the online survey.

### What the researchers found

The most common harms reported were distress or upset (90%), being left unsupervised (70%), and not having enough money (65%). Many participants experienced relationship problems with the gambling parent. Many participants also witnessed violence and/or experienced abuse (verbal or physical).

The researchers identified how harms, such as family conflict, child abuse, and neglect, appear because of parental gambling. For example, most participants (75%) witnessed family conflict, which was often due to money issues, the gambling parent's absence, and their lack of effort in looking after the home and children. Most participants (70%) experienced verbal abuse due to parental gambling. Four participants experienced physical abuse. Most participants (80%) were left without adult supervision so that their parent(s) could gamble. Sometimes, this meant that they were left with other children or unsafe adults. This led to consequences such as feeling unsafe and scared, antisocial behaviours, and other harms.

Many participants (75%) described not having enough money due to their parent's gambling, including living in poverty, lack of nutritious food, and missing out on educational activities and materials. Participants explained that their families experienced parental unemployment. Some participants also described how experiencing the financial shock from sudden material losses (e.g., losing the family home) made them feel uncertain and anxious about the future.

Most participants (90%) felt emotional distress. Psychological impacts of parental gambling were connected to financial impacts, family conflict, abuse, and neglect. These impacts could continue into early adulthood. Half of the participants mentioned experiencing at least one mental health problem, mostly during adolescence or when transitioning into adulthood. Six participants struggled with their own gambling problems in the past, with two participants still experiencing current gambling problems. Participants mentioned taking on parental roles. For example, they were responsible for household chores, younger siblings, and finances. These roles, in addition to financial strain, meant that participants found it hard to complete formal education.

Many participants also described a lack of desire to gamble because they witnessed their parents' destructive gambling behaviour. These negative attitudes towards gambling helped them break the intergenerational transmission of problem gambling that was common in their families.

## How you can use this research

The findings highlight opportunities for the development and implementation of supports and intervention for children exposed to gambling harm.

## About the researchers

**Aino Suomi** and **Megan Bailey** are affiliated with the Centre for Gambling Research at the Australian National University in Canberra, Australia. **Nina Lucas**, as well as Aino Suomi, is affiliated with the Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University in Australia. **Nicki Dowling** is affiliated with the School of Psychology at Deakin University in Australia. **Paul Delfabbro** is affiliated with the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide in Australia. For more information about this study, please contact Aino Suomi at [aino.suomi@anu.edu.au](mailto:aino.suomi@anu.edu.au).

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