

knowledge snapshot



Countering industry influences to promote a public health approach to gambling regulations

What this article is about

Gambling is increasingly recognized as a public health concern in the UK. In 2020, the UK government launched a review of the Gambling Act 2005. This provides an opportunity to make policy changes to better address gambling harms. In this article, the authors identify current ways of talking about and representing the UK gambling regulations. By doing so, they seek to challenge common arguments used by the gambling industry to prevent or delay stricter regulations. The authors also outline some aspects of a public health approach to gambling. They define a public health approach as being based on collective action to promote health, equity, and social justice.

What was done?

The authors identify and challenge common arguments used to prevent or delay stricter gambling regulations. They then outline what a public health approach to gambling will need to consider.

What you need to know

Countering industry influences

According to the authors, gambling regulations in the UK have long been dominated by a focus on the individual. Gambling is portrayed as an enjoyable activity that people can freely choose to engage in. Furthermore, gambling is seen as being harmful to only a small number of people. These representations of gambling are reproduced in a lot of research and industry responses. A consequence is that they turn attention away from how gambling environments and products contribute to harms. They also help to promote self-regulation and partnership between the gambling industry and regulator as standard practices.

Why is this article important?

The UK government has recently launched a review of the Gambling Act 2005. This provides an opportunity to make policy changes to better address gambling harms. However, there is no guarantee that a meaningful public health approach will take place. In this article, the authors challenge common arguments used by the gambling industry to prevent or delay stricter regulations. By doing so, they seek to prompt the debate on gambling regulations and shift the focus towards protecting public health. The authors also outline some aspects that will need to be considered as part of a public health approach.

Similar to the tobacco and alcohol industries, the gambling industry has advanced arguments to maintain regulations that are in its interests. The gambling industry cites the evidence pointing to the harmful effects of its products as being uncertain. It also seeks to impose extremely high standards of proof. However, gambling harms are complex and difficult to measure. Harms can take on many forms and extend beyond individuals to families and communities. This complexity is exploited by the gambling industry to argue against stricter regulations. While interventions that can threaten industry profits have to meet unrealistic standards of proof, industry-sponsored interventions tend to be accepted without question. Yet, the evidence to support these interventions is generally weak.

The gambling industry has argued that stricter regulations can push people to gamble on illegal sites.

This argument is present in the debate surrounding the UK gambling regulations. While illegal gambling certainly poses risks, it should not distract from the risks associated with regulated gambling. The authors argue that an effective approach to reduce harms will need to address all kinds of gambling opportunities.

Another argument is that the gambling industry contributes to taxes, charitable causes, and the economy (e.g., as employers). The authors argue that the gambling industry is a 'rent-seeking' industry that does not create wealth. Rather, it redistributes wealth from the poor to the very rich. Also, a public health approach does not mean there will be mass job losses. It may actually create jobs in other sectors when people turn to other leisure options. Both the gambling industry and the government have argued for a need to balance the prevention of harms and the enjoyment of gambling as a leisure activity. According to the authors, a public health approach emphasizes social justice. It does not simply weigh the benefits and harms to society as a whole, especially when the harms mostly affect vulnerable people.

Aspects of a public health approach

The authors suggest that a public health approach will need to consider the wide range of gambling products and industry practices. Regulations need to be adaptive, and attend to changes in the market and products. Also, regulations should not be informed by the prevalence of problem gambling only. Prevalence rates are estimated on the basis of an entire population. The rates are different if they are estimated on the basis of people who gamble. The authors suggest that gambling regulations need to be guided by principles of health, social justice and equity, and the best available evidence. The wider health community and the public should have a voice in shaping policies. There is also a need to address ethical issues related to industry influence on political decision making and conflicts of interest.

Who is it intended for?

This article could be useful to gambling regulators, policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders.

About the researchers

May C. I. van Schalkwyk and **Martin McKee** are affiliated with the Department of Health Services Research and Policy at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in the UK. **Mark Petticrew** is with the Department of Public Health, Environments and Society at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and the SPECTRUM Consortium at Edinburgh University in the UK. **Rebecca Cassidy** is with the Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths at the University of London in the UK. **Peter Adams** is with the School of Population Health at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. **Jennifer Reynolds** is with the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University in Canada. **Jim Orford** is with the School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham in the UK. For more information about this research, please contact May van Schalkwyk at may.vanschalkwyk@lshtm.ac.uk.

Citation

van Schalkwyk, M. C. I., Petticrew, M., Cassidy, R., Adams, P., McKee, M., Reynolds, J., & Orford, J. (2021). A public health approach to gambling regulation: Countering powerful influences. *Lancet Public Health*. Advance online publication. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00098-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00098-0)

Study funding

No study-specific funding was reported.

About Greo

Greo has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. Greo is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization with almost two decades of international experience in generating, synthesizing, and mobilizing research into action across the health and wellbeing sectors. Greo helps organizations improve their strategies, policies, and practices by harnessing the power of evidence and stakeholder insight.

Learn more about Greo by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.

