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Weighing up the odds: Sports betting and young men

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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SUMMARY

The **Weighing up the Odds** study (Jenkinson, de Lacy-Vawdon, Carroll 2018) sought to understand the sports-betting motivations, attitudes and behaviours of young men aged 18–35 who watch or play sports (e.g. AFL, cricket, soccer, horse racing). Its findings suggest that sports betting has become normalised among this population of young men, facilitated by the growing accessibility of gambling and new technologies.



KEY FINDINGS

- One quarter (23%) of bettors reported being under 18 when they first placed a bet on sports.
- On average, participants reported betting on six different national and international sports during the previous 12 months. Half of the participants bet at least weekly on sports.
- Betting agency promotions were found to drive gambling uptake, with young men viewing those promotions as an appealing, low-risk or no-loss betting option.
- Participants reported having an average of four different accounts with online wagering companies.
- Alcohol featured prominently in betting behaviour, with 64% of young men saying they had bet on sports while drinking.
- Of all young men who bet on sport, 70% were found to be at risk of, or already experiencing, gambling harm.

Introduction

Research (Armstrong, Thomas, & Abbott, 2017) suggests that the gambling environment in Australia is changing. Participation in sports betting has grown substantially in recent years and is emerging as a significant contributor to gambling-related harm, especially among younger adult males.

Despite increasing community concern about the widespread accessibility of sports betting in Australia, as well as the saturation of advertisements, promotions and inducements in sports and sports-related media, little is known about young men's sports-betting behaviours and the contexts in which they bet, or about the role of wagering marketing, social media and new technologies in influencing sports betting awareness and participation in this population group.

The Weighing up the Odds study sought to address these gaps in knowledge and improve understanding of sports-betting motivations, attitudes and behaviours among young men who watch or play sports (e.g. AFL, cricket, soccer, horse racing). Findings suggest that sports betting has become normalised among this population of young men, often facilitated by:

- widespread wagering marketing
- offers of promotions and other inducements
- 24-hour online access to betting
- informal and formal peer-betting networks.

Young men who reported gambling weekly or more often were significantly more likely to spend more money on bets across more sports, use multiple online betting accounts, and be motivated by boredom and chasing losses – all warning signs of harm.

So there were days when I'd probably lose, like, \$100, \$200 and I could've stopped at \$50 but I chased it because you might've lost your money at race 5 at the races and you're still there for another three or four hours, so you wanna keep betting and you probably start to increase your stakes slightly to try to win back some of the money you lost. (Age 21)

Background

This was a mixed methods, Victorian-based project funded by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation (VRGF). It aimed to inform policy, practice and research by increasing understanding of:

1. betting motivations, attitudes and behaviours among young men who watch or play sports that involve exposure to gambling
2. the role of sports-betting advertising and new technologies in shaping gambling motivations, attitudes and behaviours in this group of young men.

We conducted 25 qualitative interviews and an online survey of 335 young men aged 18–35.

Target group

The most recent Victorian gambling prevalence study estimated that approximately 5% of Victorians placed bets on sport during 2014, and a further 20% bet on racing (Hare, 2015). Males were significantly more likely than females to report having participated in sports betting during the previous 12 months (8% and 2% respectively), and sports and events betting was more prevalent among 18–24 year olds (11%) and 25–34 year olds (8%), than among any other age group. For young Victorian men in these age groups, sports betting prevalence was estimated at 15% (aged 18–24) and 12% (aged 25–34), and race betting was estimated at 22% (aged 18–24) and 14% (25–34).

This study focused on young men aged 18–35 who reported having bet on sport (including racing) in the previous year. With an average age of around 25 years, most participants were employed either full-time or part-time, and many were university educated. All participants were securely accommodated and most lived in Melbourne.

About sports betting

Sports betting in Australia has grown substantially over the past two decades (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, 2012). It is the only form of gambling for which participation rates in Australia have increased during that time (Armstrong, Thomas, & Abbott, 2017; Hing, Gainsbury et al., 2014), facilitated by intensive marketing and rapid growth in the availability and use of new technologies to place bets (VRGF, 2013a, 2013b).

At least half of all sports betting is now conducted online (Gordon & Chapman, 2014), with constant availability, convenience, privacy and numerous betting options seen as key advantages of the online mode (Hing, Gainsbury et al., 2014; Gainsbury et al., 2014). Participants in the Weighing up the Odds study indicated that they place bets almost anywhere they use their smartphones: at home (86%), at work, school or university (55%), in licensed venues (56%), and at sporting events (50%).

Once upon a time you'd have to make the effort to go down to the TAB, you'd have to actually get in your car and drive down there. And to do that, it's almost as though, you know, you really have thought about what you're going to bet on and you really wanted to bet on it. So, you'd – it'd actually become an effort on your part. But now there's just, there's just zero effort. (Age 23)

Almost all bettors reported having online betting accounts (92%). The most popular sports to bet on were AFL (77% of bettors), horse racing (76% of bettors), English Premier League soccer (54% of bettors) and NBA Basketball (51% of bettors).

Motivations and behaviours

The most frequently reported motivation to bet on sports was 'I enjoy a punt' (77%). Other motivations included: it makes watching sport more interesting, I have a lot of sports knowledge, I enjoy the social aspect, for the adrenaline rush, to get ahead financially, the easy access to betting, boredom, and the advertisements and promotions.

On average, 60% of all bets were reported to be planned in advance of an event, 30% were placed on impulse prior to an event, and 10% were placed on impulse during an event.

Most bettors (81%) reported having used at least one form of betting promotion in the past 12 months, most commonly sign-up bonuses (58%), multibets (49%), stake-back offers (44%) and match your stake or deposit (29%).

When I was sort of looking for everything with everyone offering free bets and everything, there would be – at any one time you could have accounts with six, seven, eight different companies and I know a mate of mine who bets a lot is upwards of 10/15.' (Age 25)

Links between alcohol consumption and betting were also reported: 64% said they had bet on sports while affected by alcohol, 51% of these spent more money or placed more bets than they would have, had they not been drinking.

Like, I'd prefer to do \$10, \$20 bets. But if I'm having a good day and I've had a few beers and I'm not opposed to dropping a 50 and then you wake up the next day and you're like, 'Damn it. I shouldn't have dropped that 50, that was a stupid bet.' (Age 21)

Interview participants also indicated that friends and peers had a big effect on their betting behaviours. Participants suggested that friends often discussed betting odds together, shared tips with each other for 'good' bets, and encouraged each other to bet more generally.

I'm associated with um you know some guys that love the punt and that sort of stuff and we're – we're always talking odds and you know, who's giving what sort of value for money and that sort of stuff. So yeah, we're constantly talking about it. (Age 31)

While social media (e.g. WhatsApp groups, Facebook) appeared to be integral in these interactions and participants reported engaging in these conversations as a normal part of their weekly (and even daily) activities, some stressed that these mediums were typically used for tips and sharing wins, rather than losses, which meant they didn't necessarily have a good understanding of how often their peers were winning or losing.

I only talk to my housemate about betting ... unless I've had like, say a really good win, as everyone else probably does is, is you screenshot it, you put it on Facebook ... But you obviously don't put all the losses on there. (Age 27)

Frequency of betting

Bettors who gambled weekly or more often were significantly more likely to spend more money on bets across more sports, use multiple online betting accounts, and be motivated by boredom and chasing losses – all warning signs of harm.

Survey participants were classified as 'weekly bettors' (bet at least weekly on one or more individual sports; $n = 170$, 51%) and 'occasional bettors' (bet less than weekly on any individual sport; $n = 165$, 49%). Key findings and differences by betting frequency are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison between occasional bettors and weekly bettors

Past 12 months:	Occasional bettors	Weekly bettors
# sports bet on (mean)	4 sports	9 sports
# online betting accounts	1.8 accounts	5.5 accounts
average bet placed across all sports (\$ per day)	\$25	\$75
% of bets placed online via smartphone	54%	67%
% of bets placed at land-based venue	28%	12%
% used any wagering promotions	68%	93%
% who bet when affected by alcohol	55%	73%
% who bet on fantasy sports	16%	29%
% who bet on casino games	42%	61%
% classified as experiencing 'problem gambling' (PGSI)	5%	25%

Marketing of sports betting

While gambling operators now spend broadly on many forms of advertising, television advertisements remain the most popular (Sproston, Hanley, Brook, Hing, & Gainsbury, 2015). These advertisements are primarily targeted at young men, and have been found to employ strategies such as appeals to mateship, gender stereotypes, sporting rituals, sexualised imagery, power and control, and patriotism (Deans, Thomas, Daube, Derevensky, & Gordon, 2016; Sproston et al., 2015). They are typically fast-paced and upbeat, and focus on outcomes such as winning, adventure and happiness (Deans et al., 2016; Sproston et al., 2015). This was something that the men in our study noted as well.

There is a bit of saturation at the moment. The major corporates are definitely trying to normalise betting and make it blokey. (Age 22)

Sports betting operators are also heavily engaged in the sponsorship of sporting teams, particularly from popular sporting codes such as the AFL and NRL (Bestman, Thomas, Randle, & Thomas, 2015; Hing, Vitartas, Lamont, & Fink, 2014; Hing, Russell, Lamont, & Vitartas, 2017; MacNiven, Kelly, & King, 2015; Sproston et al., 2015). These sponsorship arrangements often result in sports betting branding on the jumpers and jerseys of popular sporting teams, which promotes recall and brand association. In particular, AFL and NRL team sponsors have been shown to be highly recognisable to children (Bestman et al., 2015).

The prominence has risen and you can't go to a sport or watch on TV without being, um, you know, really it is quite confronting ... it's very difficult to escape it ... And it's very difficult to just get the purity of the actual sport to be front and centre. (Age 23)

There is some agreement that sports-betting brands and promotions have persuasive appeal that leads to positive attitudes towards them (Hing et al., 2017). In particular, embedded promotions and the use of athletes in gambling promotions are reportedly seen by adolescents to align sports and betting and to foster positive attitudes towards gambling (Pitt, Thomas, & Bestman, 2016). There is also a concern that this saturation of marketing is likely to have the greatest effect on young men (Hing et al., 2017; Sproston et al., 2015). Within this study, some young men expressed concern that marketing is specifically designed to target younger people.

There is way too much marketing. I think all designed to get people in earlier. I hardly thought about putting a bet on when I was 18, now talk to any 18-year-old male, or even younger for that matter, and most of them would have had a bet in the last week. (Age 22)

While television advertising remains a prominent medium for marketing sports betting, online and social media platforms are increasingly being used. Social media, in particular, is used to promote brands and engage with customers. Both traditional and the newer online mediums typically target young males and both appear to lack responsible gambling messaging. Young men and those experiencing gambling problems are thought to be particularly vulnerable to the appeal of promotions, which have been shown to normalise gambling and predict sports-betting intentions (Hing, Vitartas et al., 2014; Hing et al., 2015; Sproston et al., 2015), while possibly being linked with higher risk gambling among sports bettors (Hing et al., 2017).

Gambling promotions

Having multiple betting accounts was also the norm for interview participants. Participants often reported having one or two preferred accounts but they would keep other accounts open to use if there was a promotion of interest or if a company was offering better odds than their preferred wagering operator.

I've got about seven or eight accounts and they're all active. Not all of them have got money in. Um, but I sort of wait for the promotions to come up. (Age 27)

Findings also showed that interview participants often perceived promotions as an appealing, low-risk or no-loss betting option. A number of participants noted that they would open new betting accounts if they saw a promotion that they liked.

If you haven't put money in a certain account, they will start ringing you or they'll message you and they'll email you. Over the [spring racing] carnival at least one of them will send you an email every day or send you a text message every Friday, Saturday, saying deposit money now – I'll give you this if you deposit money, so they're quite full on. (Age 33)

Harms

An alarming but not surprisingly high proportion (70%) of the 335 bettors who completed the survey were found to be at risk of, or already experiencing, gambling harm. Of these, 15% were considered to be over the threshold for 'problem gambling' as measured by the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), a tool for estimating a person's risk of gambling problems and, consequently, harm.

So I wouldn't say it affects my health too much. But it definitely affects my mood. The negatives are definitely a lot greater than the positives, 'cause when you get a win it's, I don't know, it's just like a – you don't – it doesn't really feel like much. You're just sort of like – oh yeah, I've won and it's more relief that you've not lost it. Rather than celebrating winning. Whereas when you lose, it sort of does put a real downer on the weekend. (Age 27)

Most participants noted that sports betting was too easily accessible – especially for those who might be experiencing harm – with smartphones and online platforms facilitating 24-hour-a-day betting.

Recommendations

Findings from the Weighing up the Odds project suggest that sports betting has become normalised among young men who are regular participants and viewers of sport, often facilitated by widespread wagering marketing, offers of promotions and other inducements, 24-hour online access to betting, and informal and formal peer betting networks. While most identified strategies for trying to control the amount of money or time they spent betting on sports, negative impacts on health and wellbeing related to sports betting were also reported.

Findings from the study could inform a range of policy and practical initiatives and help minimise the health, social and economic harms to affected individuals and communities. Recommendations include: limiting the availability of sports betting marketing; tailored and targeted health promotion messages built into sports-betting platforms; and strategies to assist sporting organisations to phase out sponsorship arrangements with wagering operators.

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