Gambling research in Canada

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Professor Fiona Nicoll from the University of Alberta and Professor Kate Bedford from the University of Birmingham delve into gambling research in Canada, emphasizing the need to widen the lens

The gambling landscape has changed radically in Canada, as in many other countries around the world. Gambling is no longer a spatially and temporally bound activity: it is available anywhere, anytime, on a mobile device. In light of growing concerns about the harms associated with liberalizing online gambling and sports betting, there is an urgent need to take stock of recent developments and debate the next steps comprehensively, using the full range of research into gambling harms.

In 2021, with the passage of the Safe and Regulated Sports Betting Act (Bill-C 218), Canada's Criminal Code was amended, allowing provinces to provide and regulate single sports betting. This reform came after similar liberalization of online sports betting rules in the U.S. Canada's law aimed in part to deter Canadians from playing on illegal online sites, and to capture revenues for provinces as brick-and-mortar casinos struggled to compete with online providers.

Those two aims – of channelling play to authorized sites, and generating revenue for provinces – have largely been achieved: the Canadian Gaming Association estimates that the sports betting market is worth about CAN $1.4 billion annually in Ontario alone. However, as Pascale St-Onge, Minister of Canadian Heritage, notes in this volume, there has been growing public and political concern at the costs generated by this rapid proliferation of gambling. Having unleashed online sports betting with limited regulation in 2021, Canada's leaders are now playing catch-up.

A National Framework on Advertising for Sports Betting Act

In response, earlier this year, the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario introduced new regulations on sports betting advertising in sports coverage and on social media, including prohibiting celebrities and athletes from appearing in advertisements for betting companies. Federally, politicians are still debating a National Framework on Advertising for Sports Betting Act (Bill S-269) introduced in 2021. This would identify measures that could limit sports betting advertising (such as controlling the scope, number, or location of ads), support research and inter-governmental sharing of knowledge about gambling harm, and establish national standards for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of gambling harm.

The lens on gambling must be wider

These proposed measures are welcome, if belated. However, the lens on gambling harm needs to be wider, and a broader range of experts needs to be included.

Gambling studies have long been dominated by research on how individual propensity to addiction might be reduced via 'responsible gambling' (RG) tools that are often co-produced with the gambling industry. RG not only enables gambling businesses to avoid outside scrutiny and regulation; it also consistently places the onus of responsibility on individual gamblers.

While player education was, for many decades, the central pillar of RG provision, its efficacy is not well supported by academic research. Along with many other academics, we have been committed to supporting more rigorous research on gambling harm that includes a wider range of disciplines and perspectives.

Critical Gambling Studies (CGS)

In 2018, to help diversify the academic base of gambling research globally, we launched Critical Gambling Studies (CGS), an Open Access journal available free to readers all over the world. Our editors and editorial board members come from 14 different countries – spanning Europe, North America, Africa, and the Asia- Pacific – and contribute insights from a diverse range of disciplines, including history, sociology, cultural studies, law, economics, public health, philosophy, political science, anthropology, architecture, and computer science.

In addition to peer-reviewed academic studies of gambling, we feature a blog aimed at the general public and commentary sections that enable those with professional expertise and lived experience as well as those in the Global South to make timely and focused contributions to the knowledge base.

Alongside publishing special issues of the journal for early career researchers, we have a strong focus on Indigenous gambling in North America where state-federal agreements often shape broader political and economic landscapes.

Preventing, diagnosing, and treating gambling harm

Recent editions of the journal feature international research in four areas that could inform Canada's current drive to establish national standards for the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of gambling harm.

Firstly, the contemporary gambling industry is characterized by rapid technological innovation and deep integration with various forms of entertainment and finance, including video gaming and cryptocurrencies. Policymakers need to better understand the extent of this integration to predict, prevent, and address harms to communities and individuals. Besides in-play betting on broadcast sporting competitions and celebrity gambling promotions, examples of integration between gambling and other entertainments include 'sticky' videogames like Fortnite and gambling mechanics such as

lootboxes; gambling on esports and 'skins'; and sponsored slot promotions on social media platforms. Gambling is deeply entangled with multiple other forms of popular culture: unless this is understood, key areas of harm will escape regulatory attention.

Secondly, there has been considerable research in other jurisdictions from which Canada can learn, including on the role of advertising, sponsorship, promotional deals, and branding.

In particular, critical research on marketing is vitally important for understanding gambling's shift from an often-stigmatized form of behaviour to a normalized and everyday cultural practice, especially among generations Y and Z, who often form the target market for providers.

Recently, CGS has featured articles on how gambling sponsors are finding loopholes to reach young people at football games in the UK, and how a Swedish gambling provider is using nationalist imagery in advertisements to frame gambling as fun and patriotic.

Thirdly, a range of new gambling harm prevention tools are being developed in different countries, and some research is emerging on their potentials and downsides. AI-powered tools to assist players to self-regulate their gambling are being enthusiastically promoted as the latest evolution of RG. In some jurisdictions (including the UK), data generated by players is being gathered to identify potential or actual patterns of harmful play through big data analytics correlated to location, average income and other characteristics considered salient.

Lastly, rather than centring the perspectives of the gambling industry in law and policy discussion, to comprehensively understand gambling harm, we must include other expertise. For example, blogs and commentaries in CGS have invited videogamers with lived experience to identify elements of historical distortion as well as moral panic in representations of youth gaming as a 'gateway' to gambling addiction.

CGS is also providing new insights about the changing profile of gamblers and addressing the stigma that continues to attach to those harmed by gambling. The lived experiences of women, in particular, have been addressed in CGS articles on topics from women harmed by others' gambling to poker memoirs.

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