

## **Gambling and Intimate Partner Violence**

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# **Gambling and Intimate Partner Violence**

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## Gambling, gambling-related harm and crime

The widespread availability of opportunities to gamble in the UK has led to growing concern regarding the harms that may result from such activities. Indeed, the increased convenience and intensity of online and offline gambling products and services has raised fears of higher rates of gambling problems, associated morbidities and gambling-related harm in society. Gambling-related harm not only affects individuals who gamble but extends to family members, friends, and others, and takes a number of forms, impacting finances, relationships, emotional/psychological wellbeing, health, work and/or study, cultural activities, and crime and victimisation (Langham et al., 2016).

Previous research examining gambling-related crime has highlighted how gambling problems can lead to individuals engaging in offences – typically fraud or acquisitive crime – to support their gambling or meet shortfalls in finances that result from gambling (Banks and Waugh, 2020). Early research studies did, however, often fail to consider the relationship between gambling problems and acts of violence. More recent studies have indicated that gambling problems are linked to crimes against the person, including the perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV), whilst gambling-related violence more broadly may be understated in official data (Adolphe et al., 2019). Notably, Roberts et al.'s (2016) survey of a nationally representative sample of men reported that gambling problems were associated with an increased likelihood of the perpetration of IPV.

Responding to the lack of qualitative research into the dynamics underpinning the link between gambling problems and IPV, our study (Banks and Waters, 2022), in part, explores the coercive and controlling behaviours used by men with gambling problems and the effects on female



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partners. We considered intimate partners' experiences of gambling problems, gambling-related harm, coping, help-seeking and support, through semi-structured telephone interviews with 26 female research participants. We did not set out to speak only with women – and recognise that IPV committed by women against men is an under researched area – but our sample does point toward the gendered nature of IPV and gambling problems. Adopting a grounded theory methodological approach to explore, explain and theorise why gambling-related violence may occur in intimate partner relationships, our research participants' narratives illustrate that coercive and controlling behaviour is often instrumental in nature.

## Gambling problems and intimate partner violence

The women we spoke with talked about how coercive and controlling practices were employed by intimate partners with gambling problems in three principal ways.

First, coercive and controlling behaviour was used by men to access money for gambling. Some women reported having little access to money or control over how it was used. Other women noted that whilst they retained some control over household finances, this would often represent a 'battleground', as their partner would seek to access household or personal funds for gambling after he had spent his own money. In such cases, verbal, emotional and sometimes physical violence would be adopted to coerce and intimidate women into relinquishing control of household finances. Economic abuse was frequent in the narratives of the women we spoke with, with the theft or misuse of household money and items - which were typically sold - occurring. Some women reported being coerced into applying for credit cards and loans, whilst one woman was made to work two jobs to cover the shortfall in family finances that resulted from her partner's gambling. The consequences of this economic abuse included women having no money to purchase food, hygiene products or utilities, whilst it also impeded their ability to leave the relationship.

Second, coercive and controlling behaviour served to hide men's problematic gambling behaviours from family members, friends and others. Men used verbal abuse and the threat of physical attacks to isolate or restrict the time their partner would spend with family and friends. Intimidation was also mobilised by men to ensure that their partner remained complicit in lies and efforts

to hide his gambling behaviour. Such abuse, compounded by the shame women felt for being both a victim of IPV and their partner's gambling, prevented them from seeking help from family and friends or formal support services.

Third, coercive and controlling behaviour was employed by men with gambling problems to justifying their problematic gambling and abusive behaviours, apportion blame to their partner for their gambling and violence, and assuage their guilt. Verbal attacks and manipulation operated to deny their partner victim status and construct men's gambling - and abusive behaviour - as a consequence of the women's needs or failings. For example, one woman was told by her husband that he gambled in an effort to make money to provide her with the home, holidays and other items she craved, whilst another woman was led to believe that her husband gambled because of her failings as a wife and a mother.

## Conclusions and recommendations

That the stigma and shame associated with their partner's gambling and being a victim of IPV inhibits formal and informal help-seeking was prominent in the narratives of many of the women we spoke with. Reducing the stigma and shame associated with gambling problems through public health campaigns that educate, raise awareness and encourage help-seeking by both individuals who gamble and affected others is a priority. Such help-seeking must be met by community services with visible contact points and practitioners attune to coercive and controlling behaviour. By recognising that gambling problems can be a contributory factor in causing and exacerbating IPV, practitioners will be better placed to provide women with the help and support they need.

Moreover, training and awareness raising among criminal justice professionals – police officers, court workers, prison and probation staff – will equip them with the knowledge and ability to recognise and respond to gambling problems, gambling-related IPV and other forms of gambling-related offending. It has been reported (Howard League, 2021) that there is a lack of awareness and understanding of gambling problems among probation officers, whilst tailored support for those on probation or in prison does not yet exist. With limited guidance available to probation officers, individual practitioners are currently left to identify gambling problems in their case load and help facilitate service users' engagement with local help, support, and treatment services where they exist.

Thus, the systematic screening of people on probation for gambling problems at different points of the criminal justice system – including during induction to probation services – should be standard practice. The effective identification of service users who gamble problematically could inform criminal justice decision-making, and ensure that they receive treatment and support to aid recovery and prevent gambling-related reoffending. In turn, the institution of probation led support or the creation of referral pathways to local gambling treatment services would represent a logical development, given that there is some evidence (McKenna et al., 2013) to suggest that this can be effective in reducing problematic gambling and reoffending.

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