

The family dynamics of gambling harms

Key Findings

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Overview

11.8 million adults and children in Britain may be negatively affected by someone who gambles. The risk of harm is likely to be much higher for the estimated 3.6 million people who live with a 'problem gambler'.

Personal relationship harms, financial harms and emotional harms from gambling problems compound each other in damaging ways within family and friendship networks; and can span several decades or generations. While close family and friendship networks can be an important source of support both for people who gamble and affected others, it should not automatically be assumed that families or friends are able or willing to be supportive.

Services already exist in Britain that provide the sort of help and support for affected others that family members and friends identified. But figures for national gambling support services show low take-up of help by adult affected others, who only make up around 14% of their service users. Similarly, in a 2021 online survey of 18,038 GB adults, 78% of affected others said they had not sought any type of advice or support for themselves. The scale of potential harm to family members and close friends, coupled with low levels of help-seeking by affected others, highlights the need for strategic efforts to support this group.

Recommendations:

- Specific services for affected others should be included in strategic commissioning plans.
- Making sure there is 'no wrong door' for people who seek help.
- Public health campaigns about the impact of gambling problems on family members and friends.
- Clear, targeted messaging about the existing services that can provide the types of help and support family members and friends want.

The support that family and friends would value

It was uncommon for family members and friends in the study to have sought any external help for the impacts of harmful gambling they experienced themselves – either because they felt that external support would not be relevant or useful to them; or they weren't unaware of sources of external help; or they wanted to manage things within the family. From our data, family members and friends would value help and support in **three** areas:

- **Understanding what's going on**, e.g. hearing real-life stories from 'people like me' to help recognise the early warning signs of gambling problems; understanding more about the motivators and behaviours around gambling.
- **How to talk about what's going on**, e.g. helping family members and friends to talk about gambling problems with the person who gambled; how to have conversations with other family members; and knowing what they could do to help their loved one.
- **Accessing specialist support and advice**, e.g. emotional support through counselling or peer support; and practical support such as help to protect personal finances, or legal advice on access to children post-separation where there were concerns about their exposure to gambling and gambling harms.

Where the person who gambled was still within the close family circle, family members and friends were primarily interested in 'getting help to help' – in other words, accessing support that in turn could help them support the person who gambled. For ex-partners, the focus was much more on emotional and practical support to deal with the impact of gambling-related harms they personally experienced, particularly once the relationship had ended.

For me it was difficult to understand, I could see that he had a problem, that he had to gamble, in the end he was stealing money to do it. But I just didn't really know what triggers were in his mind. Interview with a woman whose nephew has a gambling problem.

Providing support: what needs to happen

Services already exist in Britain that provide the sort of help and support for affected others that family members and friends identified. But figures for national gambling support services show low take-up of help by adult affected others, who only make up around 14% of their service users. Similarly, in a 2021 online survey of 18,038 GB adults, 78% of affected others said they had not sought any type of advice or support for themselves. In addition, some of the newer services for affected others are relatively small or only serve certain geographical areas or groups, meaning that access is limited despite high needs.

Not all family members and friends who are negatively affected by someone else's gambling will necessarily want or need support. Even so, the scale of potential harm from gambling to family members and close friends, coupled with low levels of help-seeking by affected others, reinforces the case – at the very least – for the recommendations set out below.

Recommendations to improve gambling support for affected family members and friends



The inclusion of specific services for affected others in strategic commissioning plans e.g. the [NHS Long Term Plan](#) and the [National Gambling Treatment Service](#) as well as increased funding for other types of provision.



Making sure there is 'no wrong door' for people who seek help, whether they are someone who gambles or an affected other. Gambling problems often co-occur with other issues such as mental health problems and debt problems offering opportunities for cross-referrals between organisations.



Regularly-run publicity and awareness-raising public health campaigns about the impact of gambling problems on family members and friends drawing on real-life, relatable stories and experiences.



Clear, targeted messaging about the existing services that can provide the types of help and support family members and friends want and a simple way to find information online about the range of help available.

As 'experts by experience', affected family members and friends have invaluable knowledge and experience to input to a new generation of campaigns, messages and services to help prevent and reduce harms from gambling among all those who are negatively impacted.

"The main thing that I have taken from this [workshop] is that it's okay to talk about it, like don't keep it all in myself, other people are going through it as well... it's been a big, big help." Research Workshop participant

About the research

The study involved 45 online in-depth interviews and three online workshops with people who reported experiencing negative consequences from their own gambling (15 participants) or someone else's gambling (30 participants). The 30 'affected others' included partners, ex-partners, siblings, parents, adult children, uncles and nephews, and friends of someone who gambled.

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**About the Personal Finance Research Centre (PFRC)**

PFRC is an interdisciplinary research centre exploring the financial issues that affect individuals and households. It combines multi-method approaches with specialisms drawn from social policy, human geography, psychology and social research.

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About abrdn Financial Fairness Trust

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