



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Australian
Gambling
Research
Centre



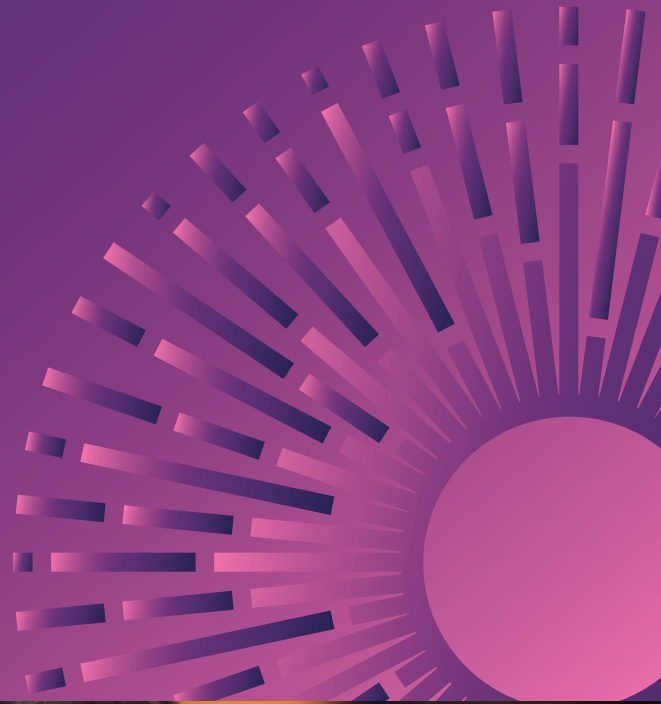
Discovering what
works for families

Gambling in Australia during COVID-19

RESEARCH SUMMARY

October 2020

Rebecca Jenkinson, Kei Sakata, Tayyab Khokhar,
Rukhsana Tajin, Uma Jatkar



© Commonwealth of Australia 2020

With the exception of AIFS branding, the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, content provided by third parties, and any material protected by a trademark, all textual material presented in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (CC BY 4.0) creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ You may copy, distribute and build upon this work for commercial and non-commercial purposes; however, you must attribute the Commonwealth of Australia as the copyright holder of the work. Content that is copyrighted by a third party is subject to the licensing arrangements of the original owner.



The Australian Gambling Research Centre is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing. Views expressed in its publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Gambling Research Centre, Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government.

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 4, 40 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Internet: aifs.gov.au

Cover image: © gettyimages/LaylaBird

Edited by Katharine Day
Typeset by Lisa Carroll

Overview

The global COVID-19 pandemic and related government restrictions led to changes in the availability of gambling in Australia, with land-based gambling venues temporarily closed and major national and international sporting codes suspended. To understand how people adjusted to these changes in gambling availability we surveyed over 2,000 people who gamble from across Australia during June-July 2020, and spoke with key experts who work in gambling research, regulation, policy and treatment. We wanted to learn more about the types of products people gambled on before and during COVID-19 (e.g. sports, racing, pokies), and how people's gambling participation, alcohol consumption and health and wellbeing were affected. Findings from the study will help to inform the development and implementation of policy and practice responses to prevent and reduce gambling-related harms in Australia.

Key findings

- Almost 1 in 3 survey participants signed up for a new online betting account during COVID-19, and 1 in 20 started gambling online.
- Even with limited access to venues, overall, participants gambled more often during COVID-19. The proportion who gambled 4 or more times a week increased from 23% to 32%.
- Horse racing, sports betting, greyhound racing and lotto were the main products that participants gambled on before and during COVID-19.
- Of concern, 79% of participants were classified as being at risk of, or already experiencing, gambling-related harm.
- Young men (aged 18–34 years) were the sub-population most likely to sign up for new online accounts, to increase their frequency and monthly spending on gambling (from \$687 to \$1,075), and to be at risk of gambling-related harm.
- Key experts noted that the temporary closure of pokies venues had had immediate benefits for some people who gamble, including more money for essential items and increased savings.
- Around half of the survey participants reported that their physical and/or mental health had been negatively affected during COVID-19.
- Survey participants and key experts recommended a range of initiatives to minimise gambling-related harm in the community, including a reduction in the availability and marketing of gambling products and the implementation of strong consumer protection measures.

What we did

Our Gambling in Australia during COVID-19 study involved two phases of data collection:

1. an online survey of 2,019 people who gambled (consumers), recruited via social media advertisements, e-news alerts and word of mouth
2. telephone and video interviews with 10 individuals who worked in gambling research, regulation, policy and treatment (key experts).

The online survey was available for completion between 10 June and 31 July 2020. Survey participants were aged 18 years or over, lived in Australia, and had gambled in the past 12 months. The survey took around 15 minutes to complete. People could choose to go into a draw for a \$200 voucher to be awarded to five randomly selected participants. Key expert interviews were conducted during July–August 2020.

Who we surveyed

A total of 2,019 participants from across Australia completed the survey. Around three-quarters were male (73%) with an average age of 38 years (median 29 years; range 18–84). The sample characteristics are summarised in Table 1.



Table 1: Sample characteristics (*n* = 2,019)

Sample characteristics	
Male	73%
Age (years)	
18–34	56%
35–54	20%
55+	24%
Australian-born	89%
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	3%
In relationship/married/de facto	56%
Live with other people	85%
Live in a major city	71%
Live in NSW or Vic.	64%
Bachelor degree or higher	32%
Currently studying	27%
Currently employed (paid)	69%
Median weekly income	\$1,000–\$1,299

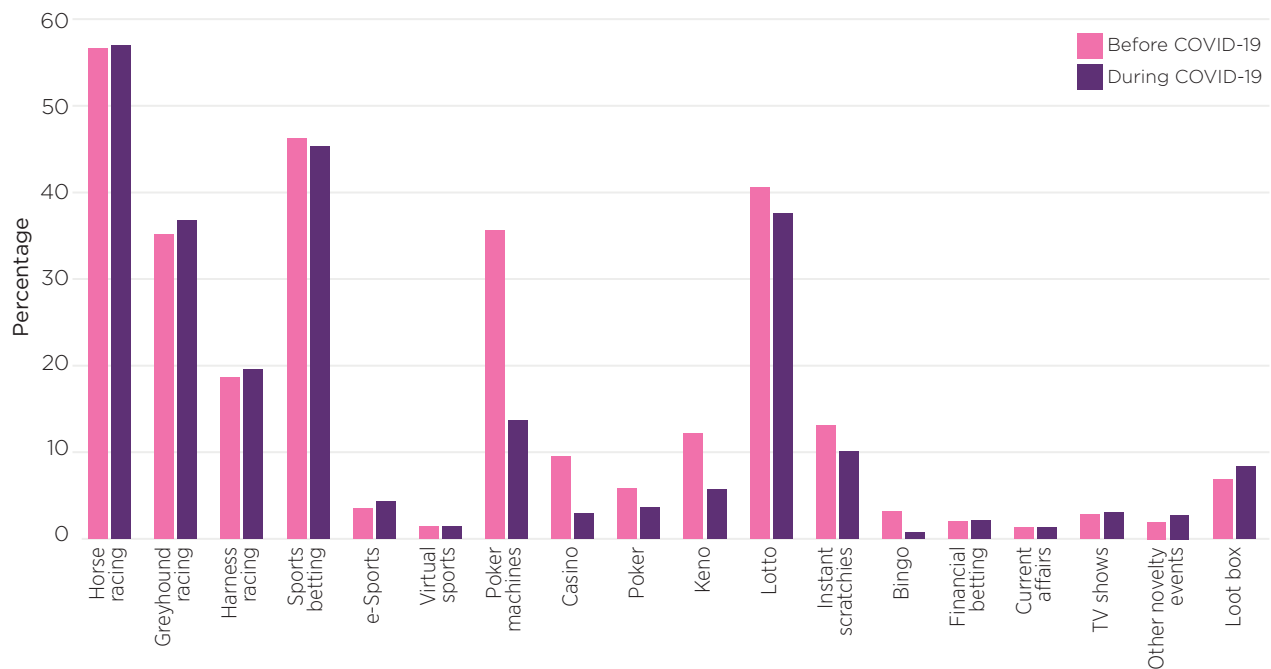
What people told us about their gambling

Most participants (79%) reported having spent money on gambling at least once a week during the past 12 months, and just under one-third (30%) reported gambling 4+ times a week during that time. Participants first gambled with real money when they were aged around 18 years (median 18, mean 20), but one in five (20%) first gambled when they were underage (<18 years). Some participants reported being relatively new to gambling, while others had been gambling for a long time (median 11 years, range <1-50+ years). Overall, we would describe this sample as a population of people who gamble regularly.

Which products did people gamble on?

Figure 1 shows which gambling products participants reported spending money on (out of a list of 18 different products) in: (i) the 30 days before the COVID-19 restrictions (i.e. February 2020/before COVID-19); and (ii) in the 30 days prior to completing the survey (i.e. May-July 2020/during COVID-19).

Figure 1: Proportion (%) who gambled on each product before and during COVID-19 ($n = 2,019$)



Participants gambled on approximately three different products before COVID-19 (mean = 2.9, median = 3, range 0-16) and two different products during COVID-19 (mean = 2.5, median = 2, range 0-18). Around 3.6% ($n = 73$) of participants reported that they did not gamble before COVID-19, and 7.9% ($n = 159$) did not gamble during COVID-19.

In both time periods, the main products that people gambled on were horse racing (before 57%, during 57%), sports (before 46%, during 45%), lotto (before 41%, during 38%) and greyhound racing (before 35%, during 37%). Around one-third of participants also used or played online electronic games before (32%) or during COVID-19 (36%).

In general, while participation in racing, sports and other wagering activities remained relatively stable, there were statistically significant decreases in gambling on most land-based products during the restrictions, including:

- poker/electronic gambling machines or 'pokies' (before 35%, during 14%)
- instant scratch tickets (before 13%, during 10%)
- keno (before 12%, during 6%)
- casino table games (before 10%, during 3%).

As with racing, participation in sports betting remained stable overall, with the two major sporting leagues in Australia – the Australian Football League (AFL) and the National Rugby League (NRL) – resuming competition during the data collection period (with condensed seasons and games played throughout the week). We

observed statistically significant increases in betting on these codes during COVID-19 (AFL increased 31% to 35%; NRL 22% to 25%). These increases were offset by statistically significant decreases in other national and international sports that remained suspended or out of season (e.g. basketball 19% to 5%; cricket 10% to 2%; American football/NFL 7% to 2%; and tennis 6% to 2%).

Participant responses to the open text questions in the survey provided further context about how they adapted to changes in the availability of gambling in Australia.

A gambler like me will always adjust. Can't go to [casino] to play poker, then just find an illegal site to play online. Can't bet on the sports I usually do, just bet on other sports that are still on. (Consumer, Male, 46)

I found that due to being so bored in isolation that my friends and I would put stupid bets on horses/dogs/overseas sport with little to no knowledge of the sport just to get a thrill out of it. This hit all of us quite hard financially. (Consumer, Male, 18)

No sport for a little while meant I ended up betting on weather markets or e-Sports and then looked at myself and said what the hell am I doing. (Consumer, Male, 25)

Being in Melbourne [Vic.] we have not had access to a [pokies] venue since March so my savings account has never seen so much money. I have found myself having little online \$5, \$10 bets with for AFL & NRL more than I did before COVID. (Consumer, Female, 38)

Since TABs have been closed during COVID-19 my gambling has stopped and I have managed to get some sanity and order in my life. (Consumer, Male, 55)

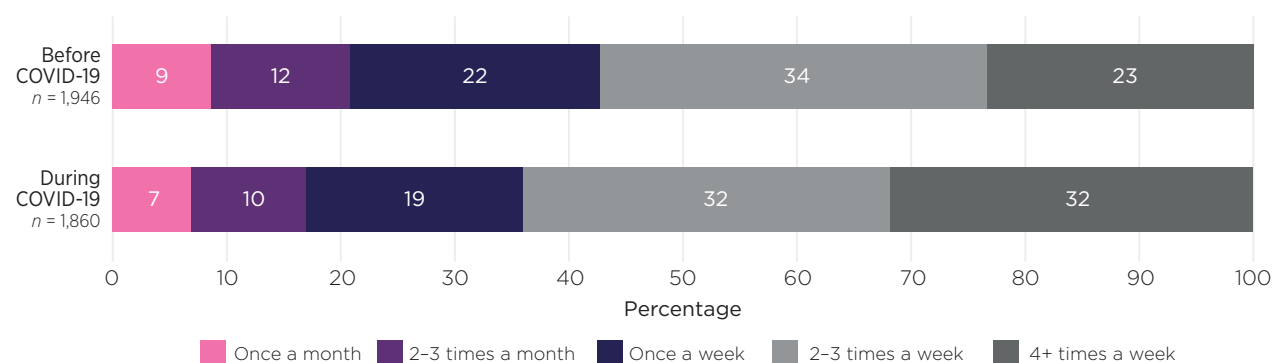
How often did people gamble?

Participants reported their frequency of gambling for individual products (e.g. once a week on lotto, 2–3 times a week on sports). If people gambled on multiple products, we used their highest frequency for an individual product (e.g. 2–3 times a week on sports) to estimate their frequency of gambling in the 30-day period¹ (for before and during COVID-19).

Overall, there was a statistically significant increase in the frequency of (any) gambling during COVID-19. The proportion of participants who gambled at least once a week increased from 79% to 83%, and the proportion who gambled 4+ times per week increased from 23% to 32% (Figure 2).

We observed some gender and age differences, with males and young people (aged 18–34 years) significantly more likely to increase their frequency of gambling during COVID-19 (especially at the most frequent category of 4+ times per week).

Figure 2: Overall gambling frequency before and during COVID-19



Statistically significant changes in the frequency of gambling on individual products were also found. Increases for all forms of racing (horse, greyhound and harness), sports, e-Sports, lotto, and casino table games were

¹ This is the participants' minimum frequency of gambling and may be an underestimate for people who gambled on multiple products. For example, a person might gamble on lotto 'once a week' and sports 'once a week', but we don't know if they gambled on these products on the same or different days (e.g. both on a Saturday, or lotto on a Saturday and sports on a Wednesday). In our analysis, these people are coded as 'once a week' (as a minimum) but their overall frequency of gambling could be two days a week.

observed, with most of these products available online (some via unregulated, offshore operators). Frequency of gambling on pokies decreased significantly during the restrictions, with land-based venues temporarily closed in most jurisdictions.

I've been thinking to myself that COVID has accelerated my gambling and that of my friends. Every weekend we share our bets for each game of the day and discuss them as they happen. As silly as it sounds, it's brought us closer somewhat, a distraction and something to do - but all of my friendship group have accelerated gambling and some have started for the first time during COVID. (Consumer, Male, 27)

I turned 18 during lockdown and spent a lot of isolation time gambling. (Consumer, Male, 18)

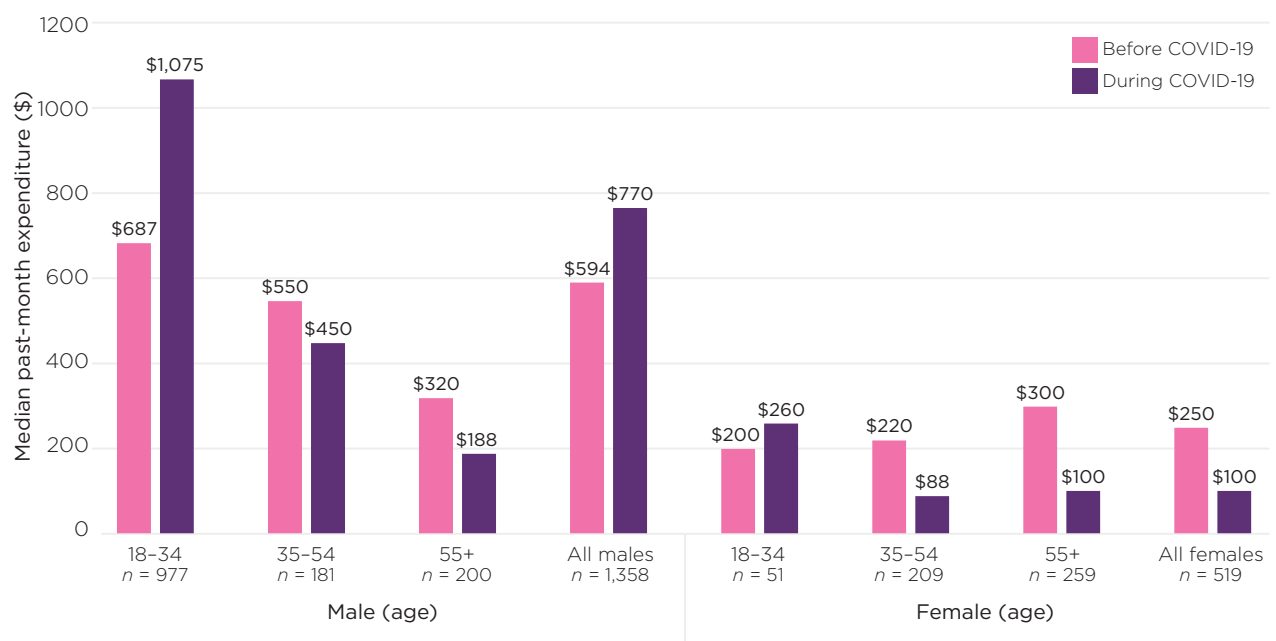
I've definitely gambled more. I am not a big gambler at all, but I broke my rule during COVID (to never download an online betting account), given TABs were inaccessible. I have bet more on impulse as a result, even though the net amount is quite low. (Consumer, Male, 28)

I used to gamble much more. Don't think I'll use poker machines again - too risky. Will continue to buy Tattslotto weekly and other days when there is a Jackpot. (Consumer, Female, 72)

How much did people spend?

We estimated participants' median expenditure on gambling (in the 30 days before and during COVID-19) by multiplying their spend on a typical day by their frequency of gambling.² Overall, median expenditure decreased from \$500 in the 30 days before COVID-19 to \$460 during COVID-19, but this decrease was not statistically significant.

Figure 3: Median past-month expenditure (\$) before and during COVID-19



While there were no overall differences in typical median expenditure on gambling during the two time periods, statistically significant gender and age differences were observed (Figure 3).

- Male participants increased overall spending, while females reduced their spending.
- Young people aged 18-34 years increased overall spending, while older age groups reduced spending.
- The largest increase in expenditure during COVID-19 was among young men aged 18-34 years (\$687 to \$1,075).

² For each product, for example, sports, we multiplied the participants' reported expenditure in a typical day in the 30-day period (e.g. \$50 spent on sports in a typical day) by their frequency of gambling on sports during that time (e.g. once a week, or 4 days in a month), to estimate their total expenditure of \$200 on sports in that 30-day period. We then summed expenditure on individual products (e.g. sports and lotto) to estimate overall expenditure for each participant.



Some differences in typical expenditure on individual products were also found. Among participants who spent money on a product in both time periods (e.g. they gambled on horse racing before and during COVID-19), statistically significant increases in spending (in a typical day) were found for horse racing, greyhound racing, sports, e-Sports, loot boxes and lotto.

Gambling is so easy to do anywhere any time and it doesn't feel like you're spending real money when you're able to do it over your phone. You spend less at the pub betting because you can see and feel the cash and are more reluctant to bet it. Over your phone you can't see the money and it's way too easy to get carried away and continue betting when you should stop. (Consumer, Male, 28)

I've spent a little more mainly because I have a much larger amount of disposable income due to lockdown. (Consumer, Male, 26)

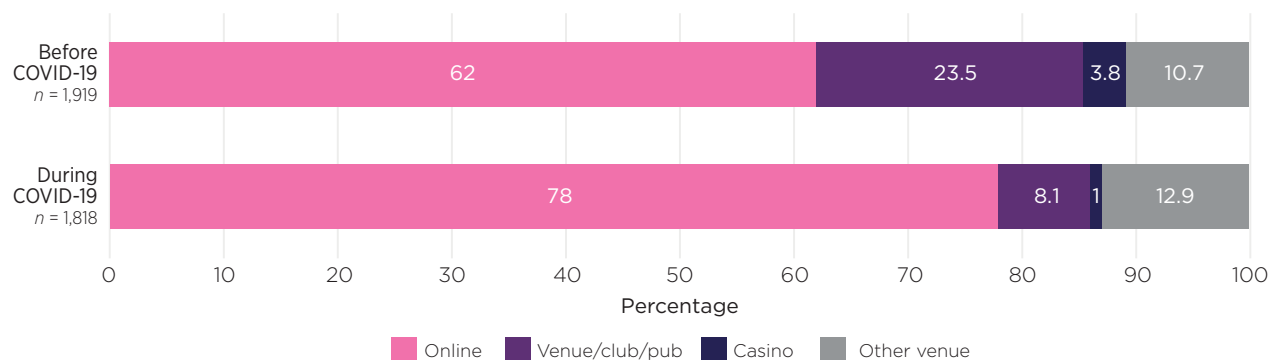
I love a flutter, but I have not missed it at all. My bank balance is a lot healthier too, which I love. (Consumer, Female, 54)

How did people gamble?

We asked participants roughly what proportion of their gambling was done via different modes (e.g. online, at a pokies venue) before and during COVID-19.

On average, before COVID-19, 62% of participants' gambling was conducted online; during COVID-19, this increased to 78%. With limited opportunities for land-based gambling during COVID-19, we observed a statistically significant decrease in the average proportion of participants' gambling conducted at a pokies venue, club or pub (from 23% to 8%) and at a casino (from 4% to 1%). The average proportion of participants' gambling at other land-based venues (e.g. racetrack, TAB/UBET outlet or newsagent) increased slightly from 11% to 13% (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Average proportion of gambling via different modes



Around one in 20 participants (5.1%; $n = 93$) shifted from using only land-based modes (before COVID-19) to using online modes during COVID-19. Half (52%) of the participants who started gambling online were female, with an average age of 46 years (median 51 years).

We also asked about online betting accounts and found that more than three-quarters (77%; $n = 1,562$) of participants had at least one active online account at the time of the survey (mean = 3.3, median = 2), and around one in three (30%; $n = 605$) had signed up for a new online account/s during COVID-19 (5% or $n = 100$ participants did not have an active online account prior to this). Young men aged 18–34 years were the most likely sub-population to sign up for new accounts ($n = 480$, 79% of new account holders).

It is far too accessible, and easy to open a new account. I did it this week and it took literally 45 seconds to create and deposit. (Consumer, Male, 28)

I played online pokies for the first time as I wasn't able to in person. I never knew how accessible it was, and I was hooked for a few days spending more than I typically do. In person it's easy to walk away from and perhaps grab another drink and enjoy the venue. During COVID, I found myself gambling during work hours and whilst working. (Consumer, Male, 22)

Downloaded an account due to boredom and no accessibility to TAB machines. Now have more random bets than I would without an account. (Consumer, Male, 22)

I had never gambled online previous to COVID-19, I had problems with gambling coming into this pandemic and before I knew it I had justified to myself to gamble at home online. (Consumer, Male, 30)

Definitely have put more into racing on mobile tab since COVID has shut down bingos and pokies. (Consumer, Female, 59)

Key experts also provided insights and views on how the COVID-19 global pandemic and resulting government restrictions had impacted the gambling environment in Australia, and how these changes had affected people's gambling behaviours and experience of harms.

Key experts generally described two broad groups of clients who they worked with prior to the COVID-19 restrictions:

1. a younger demographic who mostly bet or wagered online (e.g. on sports, racing)
2. a slightly older group of people who mainly gambled at land-based venues (e.g. pokies venues, TABs, lotto).

Most key experts discussed the temporary closure of pokies venues and casinos and the 'forced break' from gambling that many people experienced as being beneficial for their clients. While a number of key experts noted that they had not (to date) observed large shifts from land-based gambling (e.g. on pokies or TABs) to online modes, there was a concern that consumers at greater risk of gambling-related harm might shift to online gambling where larger sums of money could be lost very quickly, or that people might move to offshore (and unregulated) gambling websites to gamble on pokies or other 'casino type' games.

With most major sporting codes suspended early in the pandemic, key experts believed that consumers who gambled online before COVID-19 were likely to be gambling on racing (if not already doing so), minor international sports or 'novelty' type activities (such as reality TV). Key experts noted that wagering operators were offering a range of new promotions and offers to try to attract new customers, and that they expected large increases in online spending with the easing of restrictions and the return of major sports.

A lot of people will have accounts with more than one operator and the odds and promotions are a little more generous at the moment, because all the operators are all looking to attract new customers. (Key expert)

With sports like NRL and AFL restarting and some people having a bit more time on their hands and potentially access to stimulus packages or other discretionary money, I'm imagining that they're putting a fair whack of money on at the moment. (Key expert)

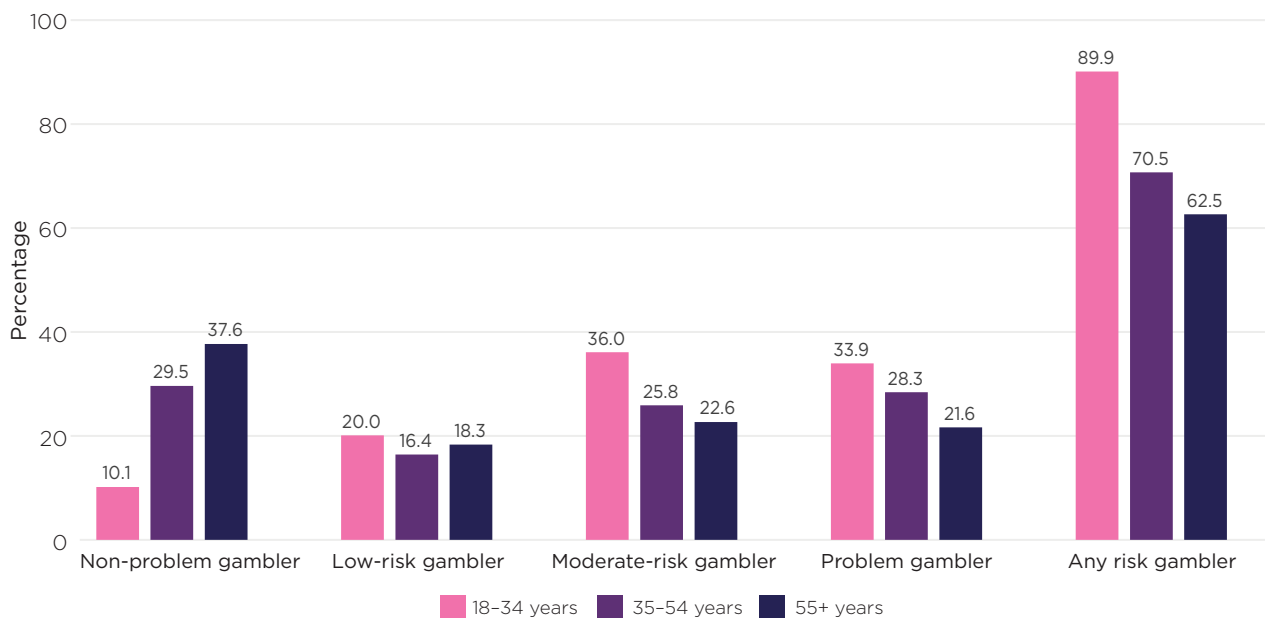
What impacts did gambling have on people?

We assessed gambling-related problems among survey participants via the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The PGSI provides a measure of at-risk behaviour in problem gambling during the previous 12 month period; as such, we were not able to explore changes before and during COVID-19.

Findings from the PGSI suggest that almost 4 in 5 participants (79%) would be classified as being at risk of, or already experiencing, some gambling-related harm in the previous 12 months. When examined by PGSI risk level, 19% of the sample would be classified as low risk, 31% at moderate risk, and 30% as experiencing problem gambling.

Among this sample, males were significantly more likely than females to be classified as being at any risk of gambling-related problems (84% compared to 67%), and young people aged 18–34 years were more likely to be at risk (90%), compared to those aged 35–54 years (71%) and 55 years and over (63%). Figure 5 shows the PGSI risk categories by age group.

Figure 5: PGSI categories by age group ($n = 2,019$)



Participant responses to the open text questions provided further context about how the restrictions had affected their gambling behaviour and impacted their health, relationships and finances.

I'm surprised how much it's affected my mental health recently. I'm much more stressed, anxious and deceitful. I've realised now how much I have changed just from gambling. I'm far less social. I think realising these things has made me want to stop. (Consumer, Male, 30)

Isolation and accessibility is very dangerous. Whenever I am bored my finger automatically opens the app now ... I had gambling, I guess, under control, I knew my limits, now I can't stop. (Consumer, Male, 23)

I have spent a considerable amount more since COVID-19 lockdowns and have had to suspend my bank account to limit myself from depositing. Even setting deposit limits on an account doesn't work, as you can just go open another account with any number of bookies when there's something you want to get on when you're chasing losses. Being at home all day was boring and all I did was put the racing channel on and have a bet. It has taken a massive toll financially. (Consumer, Male, 21)

COVID has made me 10x worse and I now fear for my health because while everything has stopped, gambling is still open for everyone and with all this time on my hands and no real income it has become a way to try to make more money. (Consumer, Male, 27)

I really enjoyed the break from pokies but have been back to the exact same patterns. I'll endeavour not to go back to a venue again because once inside I have no control. (Consumer, Female, 48)

Key experts also commented on how people had been affected by the restrictions and changes in the availability of gambling, with many noting that it could be some time before we have a true understanding of the real impacts.

Gambling harms take time to develop, so we may not see the real impacts for a while. (Key expert)

Others described more immediate impacts on their clients' health and wellbeing. When discussing harm among people who gamble online - especially those who wager on racing and sports - one specialist gambling counsellor described a 'hothouse' effect with an escalation in gambling and related problems.

For some people this whole scenario had a bit of a 'hothouse' effect, which exacerbated whatever place they were in ... they are people who rely on gambling to a degree where the restrictions exacerbated their stresses and anxieties ... especially if they had previously engaged in online gambling, that sometimes really escalated ... they had more time, they were at home more with nothing else to do ... so for some people that was very problematic and saw them slide very rapidly into escalating problems. (Key expert)

The potential harm and impacts for people who gamble at land-based (pokies) venues were also discussed. Some key experts from clinical and counselling organisations reported that many of their clients had experienced an immediate decrease in harm with the closure of venues. The physical inability to gamble at venues had reportedly resulted in significant benefits, including more money for essential items, increased financial savings, connecting with other interests and, for some clients, a desire to stop using pokies altogether.

There was, however, a concern among a number of key experts that the reopening of pokies and casino venues would lead to increased harm, especially among people with more risky gambling behaviours. Their concern related to some people 'binge' gambling on pokies, losing any financial savings they had accumulated, and returning to harmful gambling patterns.

People have stopped gambling but they are very eagerly awaiting the pokies venues to reopen ... in my opinion there will be a big influx [of people] with a lot of money put into pokies ... I wish [the venues] would stay shut ... (Key expert)

Key experts reported that gambling revenue from pokies had already increased significantly (compared to the same time last year) in the states and territories where venues had reopened after the restrictions. They noted that because of social distancing and limits on patron numbers in venues, it was likely to be people who were more at-risk of gambling-related harm who were gambling, and with larger amounts of money.

That gambling spend [once venues reopened] ... actually represents about a 50% increase, because there were about 50% less machines in venues because of social distancing ... so we've seen a smaller number of people gambling more money. (Key expert)

Key experts who work in treatment settings noted that most people who accessed help with their gambling during the restrictions were current or existing clients, and that new client referrals had essentially 'dried up' during that time (although services were starting to see an increase in referrals again).

Telehealth was reported to have been largely successful in filling the gap in face-to-face counselling and treatment during the restrictions, especially in regional and rural areas. A small subset of clients preferred face-to-face engagement during therapeutic sessions, but Telehealth sessions could be delivered more often and with an increased attendance rate.

Somebody might come and see their gambling counsellor once a week [prior to restrictions] ... now because everything has moved to either telephone or online, sometimes people are having shorter sessions and using them more frequently. (Key expert)

Drinking and smoking

Participants were asked about their drinking and smoking before and during COVID-19.

Around one in seven participants (15.3%; $n = 309$) did not drink alcohol in either period (classified as 'non-drinkers'), while 4.8% ($n = 97$) drank before COVID-19 but not during, and 2.4% ($n = 49$) drank during COVID-19 but not before.

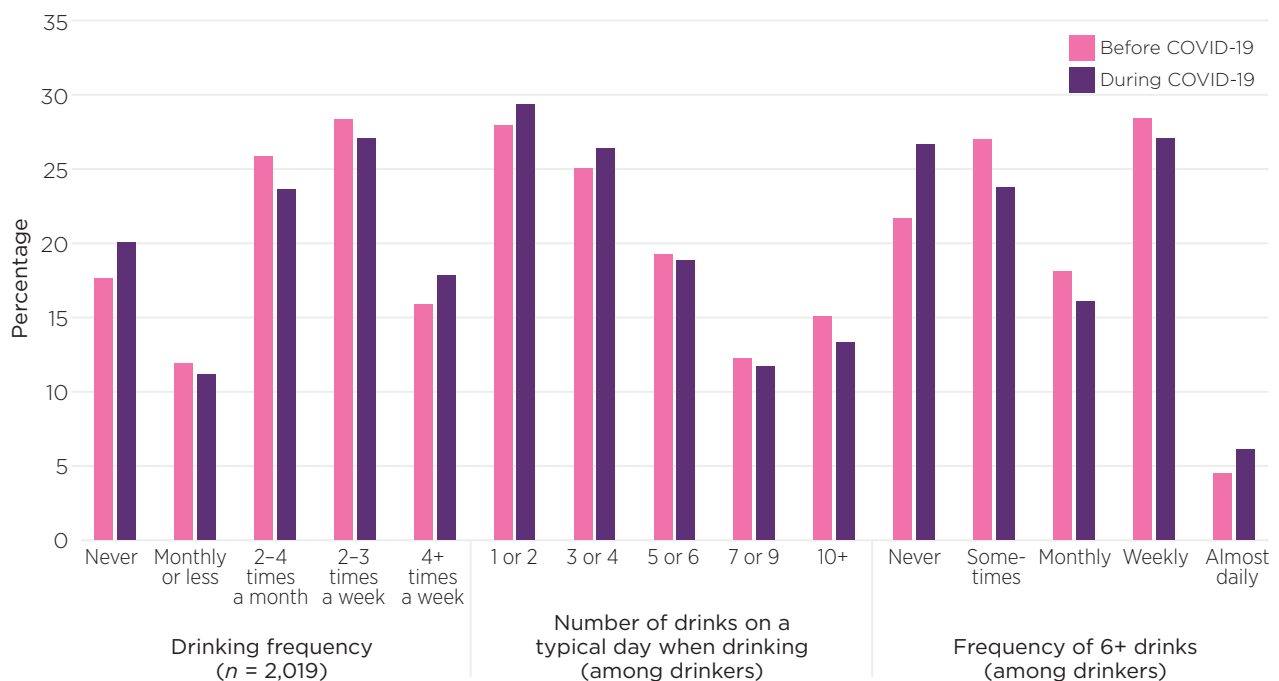
People who drank alcohol were asked to complete the AUDIT-C 'consumption' scale (scored 1-12) that asks: (1) how often they drank alcohol; (2) quantity consumed on a typical day when drinking; and (3) frequency of drinking six or more drinks on an occasion (Figure 6).

In both time periods (before and during COVID-19) alcohol consumption was significantly higher among:

- males compared to females (mean AUDIT-C scores around 6.2 compared to 4.6)
- young people aged 18-34 years compared to older age groups (mean AUDIT-C scores around 6.4 compared to 5.3 among those aged 35-54 years and 4.8 among those aged 55+ years).

Overall alcohol consumption remained relatively stable between the two time periods (mean AUDIT-C score 5.91 before and 5.86 during COVID-19); however, during COVID-19 significant decreases in drinking were observed among men and young people aged 18-34 years.

Figure 6: Alcohol consumption (AUDIT-C)



Smoking prevalence remained stable between the two time periods. Overall:

- twenty-five per cent of the sample reported smoking tobacco (manufactured or hand-rolled cigarettes) before and/or during COVID-19; 15% on a daily basis and 10% less than daily
- seven per cent reported smoking E-cigarettes; around 4% on a daily basis and 3% less than daily.

While overall drinking and smoking prevalence remained relatively stable among survey participants, some key experts commented that people might be consuming more alcohol during the restrictions to help 'cope' with the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, or to manage social isolation and boredom. Others noted that it was complex and difficult to draw direct links between the restrictions and their clients' alcohol and other drug use, but described the potential intersections with gambling and the importance of understanding co-occurring behaviours for individuals.

One key expert reported that the need for counselling across a range of issues had generally increased, stating:

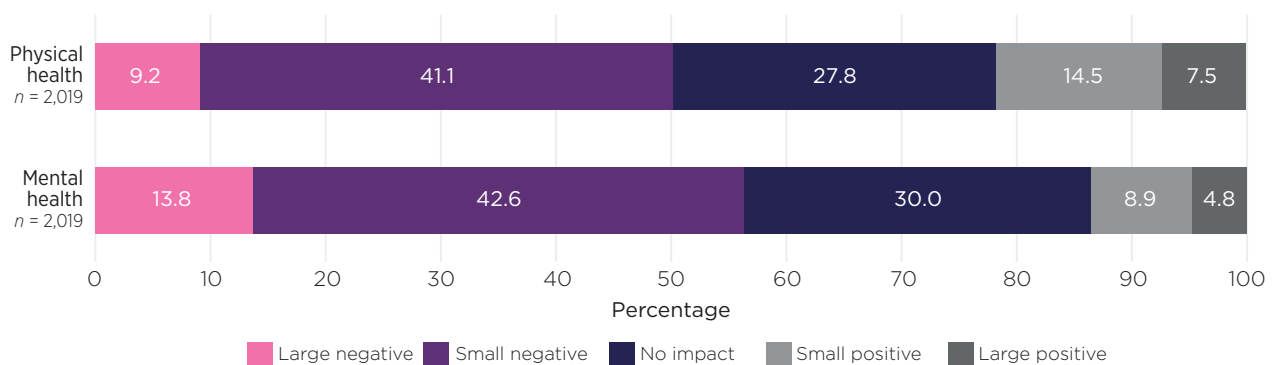
Because of the co-morbid nature of gambling ... It's not a massive empirical leap to suggest that people who are experiencing gambling harm are also experiencing higher levels of harmful substance use and family violence. (Key expert)

How were people feeling?

Participants were asked about their health and wellbeing and how they were feeling. Around one-third rated their overall health in the past 30 days as either excellent/very good (37%), good (31%) or fair/poor (32%). When asked what impact COVID-19 had had on their health, around half reported that their physical health (50%) and mental health (56%) had been negatively affected (Figure 7).

Some key experts reported improvements in the health and wellbeing of some of their clients who had reduced or 'taken a break' from gambling, but most were concerned about the negative impacts that COVID-19 and the related restrictions were having on people's mental health, and the potential for ongoing and legacy health harms that some people may experience.

Figure 7: Impact of COVID-19 on physical and mental health



What do people think about gambling in Australia?

Survey participants also provided their views on gambling availability, marketing and normalisation in Australia, and whether there were any changes they'd like to see when COVID-19 restrictions were eased. Around 1,600 participants (80%) provided comments in open text fields.

Almost two-thirds of the respondents who commented believed that gambling was, to some extent, a normal part of life in Australia.

Aussies drink, smoke, watch the footy, abuse the ref, have a tap on the pokie, have a flutter on a big multi. It's all part of the fair dinkum she'll be right Australian lifestyle. (Consumer, Male, 30)

Everyone has gambled at some point. It's almost un-Australian to not have. (Consumer, Male, 21)

From raffles to pokies, racing, bingo, etc. it seems to be in all aspects of Aussie life ... I see it everywhere. (Consumer, Female, 56)

I think it's a normal part of Aussie lives, we love a punt with friends whether it's at the races or playing two-up on Anzac Day. (Consumer, Male, 23)

When asked about their views on the accessibility of gambling in Australia, most described the widespread availability and ease of access, especially for online gambling via smartphones and other internet-enabled devices. Many participants commented that they believed gambling was 'too accessible in Australia'.

The accessibility is ridiculous. It's so easy to place a bet as quick as possible. Most people could unlock their phone, deposit money and place a bet all in the space of 30 seconds. (Consumer, Male, 23)

Too accessible. Pokies on every corner in every town and easy access to betting apps on your phone. Money just disappears from bank to betting account. Too tempting. (Consumer, Female, 30)

Everything is available 24/7 online. Bet on events around the world at whatever time you want. (Consumer, Male, 45)

It is extremely easy for kids who have just turned 18 to sign up to online betting accounts and get carried away easily. I also think the 'loot box' system in games promotes gambling to kids and teaches a young audience that throwing money into a service and not getting much in return is normal. (Consumer, Male, 20)

I have mixed views. Done appropriately it can be a fun activity. But it can be easy to become addicted. (Consumer, Male, 25)

Most participants who commented on the ways that gambling is marketed and advertised in Australia believed that there was an oversaturation of ads (especially related to sports betting) and were concerned about exposure among children and young people.

It's horrific, I was under 18 and getting gambling ads almost everywhere on social media! It's not right to target young kids. (Consumer, Male, 18)

There's a lot of it. Its satirical nature that attempts to appeal to Australian values and subcultures like beer, being overweight, having a beard, sneakily and cleverly lure a lot of people into betting. (Consumer, Male, 24)

I work in the industry and feel it gets shoved down people's throats excessively. You can't watch a game of footy without being told the odds, so what do u think kids growing up are going to associate footy with? (Consumer, Male, 30)

Far too much advertising, it encourages young children to gamble. As a former teacher, it is a worry when 10-year-old children talk about the odds of an AFL team winning a match or batsman makes 100 in cricket. (Consumer, Male, 70)

What do consumers and key experts want to see in the future?

Almost half of the survey participants who responded to the open text fields (many who gamble regularly) reported that they would like to see changes to the gambling environment post-COVID-19. The main change participants wanted to see was a reduction in gambling promotion and advertising – especially related to sports betting advertising.

It's everywhere. From TV ads, to billboards, to social media ads. It's bigger than the game and you CAN'T avoid it. It's too much. (Consumer, Male, 23)

Completely negative, ads should be regulated in a similar fashion to alcohol and tobacco. The display of promotions and placement within sporting events is reckless. (Consumer, Male, 30)

Professional sporting bodies must distance themselves from being directly aligned with these betting agencies. Stop having official sponsors – that's the only way to reduce the content and advertising during sport and on sporting websites/platforms. (Consumer, Male, 28)

Get real about sports betting company's tactics on social media – sponsored content, viral videos, sign-up bonuses. Stop normalising gambling and stop blaming the individual if 'they can't hack it'. (Consumer, Male, 29)

Shouldn't be advertised when young kids see it as normal. Footy is a family sport but many ads in all forms of media make gambling seem normal and easily accessible. (Consumer, Female, 57)

Many participants also wanted to see changes to the availability and provision of land-based gambling in Australia. This mostly related to restrictions on pokies venues and casinos.

Reduce access to gambling, particularly EGMs [electronic gambling machines/pokies]. Reduce machine numbers and betting limits to prevent harm. Rip down 'VIP room' signage, including flashing signs on exteriors of clubs and hotels. (Consumer, Male, 29)

Pubs & clubs should have their gaming room hours reduced. It is too easy for people to stay for 10 hours at a time. (Consumer, Female, 54)

Less gambling rooms, lower [spend] limits and slower spins. Mandatory pre-commitment per entry. (Consumer, Male, 29)

Removal of pokies from all venues except casinos. (Consumer, Female, 48)

The other change that participants most frequently raised related to broader consumer protection measures and harm reduction messaging.

A national self-exclusion register. Firmer restrictions on gambling advertising (possibly completely removing it) and more restrictions on gambling providers to pick up problem gamblers before they completely ruin their lives. (Consumer, Male, 25)

Limiting or closing of pokie machines/venues. Greater oversight for online betting. Mandatory restrictions for online bookmakers. Further support provided for problem gamblers. (Consumer, Male, 30)

You see 100s of ads during the footy and other sports - all I remember is something about not going too far and always being responsible at the end of the ad. This is said quickly and squeezed in at the end in 2 seconds. Perhaps something else could be done. (Consumer, Male, 23)

Regulation on casino games on the App Store in Australia must be a focus area for policy makers. The only checks completed on access for under 18s is a button when you first enter the game warning it is intended for over 18s. (Consumer, Male, 29)

The bottom line is that gambling in Australia is a public health issue. It needs to be treated as such. (Consumer, Male, 29)

Key experts also wanted to see changes to the gambling environment in Australia and believed that there was support for change in the broader community:

I feel like there's stronger public appetite for change around gambling ... it feels like the public are more concerned about things like the pokies and sports betting than they were a few years ago. (Key expert)

Some key experts felt that the COVID-19 restrictions and the temporary closure of land-based venues and suspension of sports offered an opportunity to 'take stock' of gambling in Australia and to implement some important consumer protection measures.

We want to make sure that harm minimisation is front and centre of any decision making. (Key expert)

Key experts described a range of policy and practical initiatives that were planned, in process or the focus of future advocacy, including:

- reviewing and strengthening responsible codes of conduct for gambling in Australia (for both online and land-based providers), and ensuring regular monitoring and compliance activities were in place
- reviewing the appropriateness of 'responsible gambling' messaging and learning from successful prevention and harm reduction campaigns in the tobacco and alcohol fields
- reviewing and limiting the availability of gambling marketing and promotions (especially related to sports betting)
- limiting the availability of land-based gambling (e.g. reducing the number of poker machines in venues, restricting operating hours), implementing pre-commitment systems (an amount willing to lose), and improving staff training
- implementing effective self-exclusion programs for online and land-based gambling products

- encouraging help-seeking behaviour and increasing the availability of Telehealth services for counselling and treatment
- delivering targeted interventions for specific sub-populations, such as young men
- conducting further research and data monitoring to improve understanding of gambling participation and related harms, both during and beyond COVID-19
- developing a National Gambling Strategy (similar to Australia's National Alcohol Strategy) to prevent and minimise gambling-related harms among individuals, families and communities.

Acknowledgements

The Australian Gambling Research Centre was established under the Commonwealth *Gambling Measures Act 2012*. Our gambling research program reflects the Act, embodies a national perspective, and has a strong family focus. We are part of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and would like to greatly acknowledge AIFS for supporting this work. Special thanks go to our colleagues in the Communications team, and to Think HQ, for their encouragement, assistance and guidance throughout the research process. We are indebted to the research participants and key stakeholders for their support, generosity of time and valuable contributions to this research.

Notes

- Throughout this report, 'before COVID-19' refers to the 30 days before the restrictions were introduced in Australia (i.e. February 2020), and 'during COVID-19' refers to the 30 days prior to survey completion (i.e. during May-July 2020).
- Individual state and territory governments in Australia implemented, eased and, in some cases, re-implemented restrictions related to land-based gambling venues (e.g. pokies venues, TABs) at different times. Similarly, some domestic and international sporting codes resumed competition at different times during the data collection period. We will be conducting further analyses to explore jurisdictional differences to better understand the impact that the timing of these changes may have had on our findings.
- For the online consumer survey, the total number of valid responses varies among questions. Appropriate paired tests were conducted by taking account of variable types (continuous, binary, categorical and ordinal) and we tested that the mean or median of the differences between two time periods was zero where it applied. We reported '(statistically) significant' when p -value < 0.05.
- We administered two scales: the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) and the short version of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C). Further information can be accessed here: Ferris, J., & Wynne, H. (2001). *The Canadian Problem Gambling Index: Final report*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse; and Barbor, T. F. et al. (2001). *AUDIT: The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test. Guidelines for use in primary health care*. 2nd ed. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- This study has provided valuable data that will enhance the understanding of gambling in Australia during COVID-19. There were, however, limitations that should be considered. The target sample for the online consumer survey was people living in Australia, aged 18 or over, and who had spent money on gambling (online or at a venue) in the last 12 months. While we were able to recruit a large sample of participants, this is a convenience sample of people who self-selected to complete the survey and, as such, the findings may not be representative or generalisable to the wider population of adults who gamble in Australia. Further, while confidentiality was assured and there were no negative consequences of disclosure, participant responses were based on self-report and may be subject to some social desirability or recall bias.