

Online gambling in Australia

Findings from the 2021
ACMA annual consumer survey
February 2022

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Overview

Online wagering emerged in Australia in the mid-1990s, with Centrebet the first Australian-based operator to offer online sports betting in 1996. Today, the proliferation of internet-enabled devices, especially smartphones, allows Australians to place bets whenever and wherever they like.

This report examines the prevalence and nature of online gambling in Australia, and how this has changed in recent years. It draws on the findings of the ACMA's annual consumer survey, which tracks Australian adults' engagement with communications and media services. The most recent wave of this survey was undertaken in June 2021 – when most of Australia was free of COVID-19 restrictions, following the lockdowns of 2020. The research provides a snapshot of online wagering in Australia at this time and how this has changed from pre-COVID years.

The research draws attention to significant growth in online sports betting since the 2020 survey, likely driven by the return of sporting events after the COVID-related lockdowns that year. As in previous years, online sports betting and race betting are marginally more popular than online gaming activities like pokies, poker or casino-style table games. Lotteries remain the most popular form of online gambling, with 21% of Australian adults participating in June 2021.

The research also demonstrates that a small proportion of Australian adults are using illegal online wagering services. One in 20 online gamblers (5%) reported using an offshore betting platform.

One-quarter (25%) of respondents who reported participating in sports-related online gambling (including betting on racing, e-sports and fantasy sports) in the previous 6 months had made online in-play bets.

Harms associated with gambling

[Previous studies](#) conducted by Gambling Research Australia have associated online gambling with a range of harms, from financial distress to relationship breakdown and mental health issues. These risks are common to both online and land-based forms of gambling, but research has consistently identified higher rates of problem and at-risk gambling among online gamblers compared with venue-only gamblers. Race and sports betting were reported to be the most harmful betting activities. In interviews, online gamblers emphasised speed, convenience, and direct promotional messaging as factors that drove their online gambling. Harms associated with problem gambling are amplified for those engaging in in-play betting. Further, offshore betting platforms are associated with fraud, money laundering and corruption of sporting integrity (for example, match-fixing).

Gambling rules

The [Interactive Gambling Act 2001](#) (the Act) sets rules for companies that provide or advertise gambling services. It covers gambling that takes place online and prohibits gambling providers from offering online in-play sports betting, pokies, casino-style table games and betting on the outcome of a lottery. It also prohibits unlicensed online wagering and lottery services.

The ACMA's role

The ACMA works to safeguard the community from the harms associated with illegal online gambling activities by enforcing compliance with the Act. We also have a role in raising consumer awareness of Australian gambling laws and the risks of using illegal gambling services. The [ACMA's reports on online gambling complaints and investigations](#) are available on the ACMA website.

In 2018, the Commonwealth, state and territory governments launched the [National Consumer Protection Framework for Online Wagering](#). This framework includes 10 measures to protect Australian consumers from gambling-related harm. The ACMA is responsible for 3 of these measures. Two relate to credit betting and ban online wagering operators from providing credit or facilitating the provision of credit to Australian customers. The third is the development of a national self-exclusion register for Australians to exclude themselves from licensed interactive wagering services for a set period.

About the research

This report references ACMA annual consumer surveys collected from 2017 to 2020 by the Social Research Centre (SRC). These quantitative consumer surveys were undertaken to further understand trends in consumer take-up and use of communications and media services. The key insights presented in this snapshot are drawn from responses to a selection of questions relating to online gambling behaviour in the 2021 survey.

Fieldwork was conducted from 15 to 28 June 2021. During this period – shortly before the Delta variant would cause Australia's 'third wave' of coronavirus infections – most of Australia was free of COVID-19 cases and restrictions. The survey asks about online gambling activity in 'the past 6 months': December 2020 to June 2021.

See the [methodology report](#) for further details about the research design, sample sizes of subgroups and additional notes.

Defining gambling in the research

Gambling involves risking money on the outcome of uncertain events. The Act distinguishes between gaming (for example, online poker), wagering (betting on events) and lotteries as categories of gambling with their own hazards and regulatory concerns. This report uses 'wagering' and 'betting' interchangeably.

Our findings suggest that around three-quarters of Australians do not understand lotteries to be gambling. We therefore note a measurement error risk due to divergent definitions of gambling.

Further, as for all survey research on gambling behaviour, respondents may under-report their gambling activities. This risk is discussed at length in the Productivity Commission's [2010 Gambling report](#) (volume 2, appendix B, pages B1 to B28).

researchacma

Our research program makes an important contribution to our work as an evidence-based regulator. It informs our strategic policy development, regulatory reviews and investigations, and helps us to support a media and communications environment that works for all Australians.

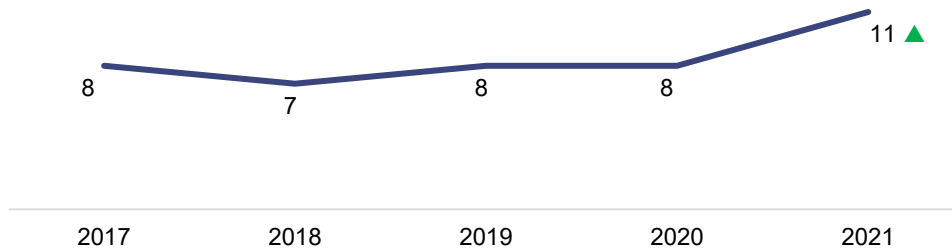
The research from which this report is drawn is part of the [ACMA research program](#).



More Australians gambled online in 2021

After many years of relatively stable levels of participation, the prevalence of online gambling (excluding lotteries) increased significantly in 2021. More than one in 10 Australian adults (11%) reported that they had gambled online in the 6 months to June 2021, up from 8% in 2020.

Figure 1: Australians participating in online gambling, excluding lotteries (%)



Base: Australians aged 18 and over: 2017 (n=2,277), 2018 (n=2,106), 2019 (n=2,067), 2020 (n=2,009), 2021 (n=3,586).

▲ Significantly different to previous period at the 95% confidence level.

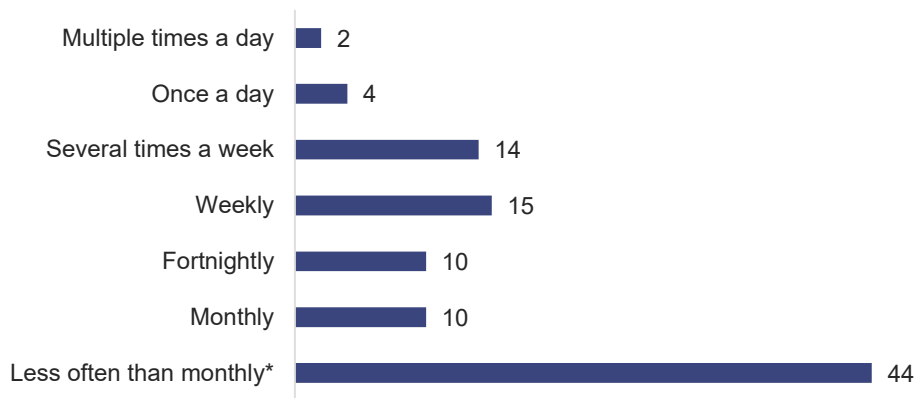
D8: Please indicate whether or not you have done any of the following in the past 6 months at home or elsewhere. Online gambling (e.g. using a website or app to bet on racing, sports matches or to play pokies/slots or casino style games).

The 2021 survey also asked about frequency of gambling activity.¹ At June 2021, among Australian adults who participated in any non-lottery gambling online, 35% reported gambling one or more times per week on average. Just over half of online gamblers reported doing so only occasionally: 'monthly' (10%), 'less often than monthly'² (44%).

¹ Frequency of online gambling excludes those whose only online gambling activity was purchasing lottery tickets.

² 'Less often than monthly' includes 'never' responses. While this question was asked of people who responded that they had participated in non-lottery gambling online in the past 6 months, some reported 'never' gambling in response to how frequently they currently gambled online. These people may have quit gambling, or gamble so infrequently that they feel that 'never' is the best response.

Figure 2: Frequency of current online gambling activities, June 2021 (%)



Base: Australians aged 18 and over who participated in any non-lottery online gambling in the previous 6 months (n=382).

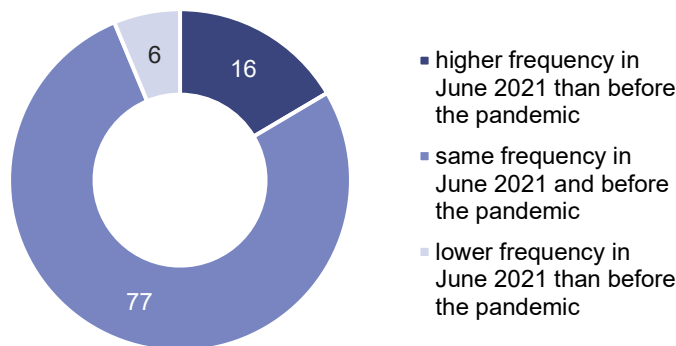
* 'Less often than monthly' includes 'never' responses. Those who report 'never' gambling in response to how frequently they currently gambled online may have quit gambling, or gamble so infrequently that they feel that 'never' is the best response.

Note: Data does not add to 100 due to rounding.

K7: On average, how often do you currently gamble online?

The 2021 survey also asked respondents to report how frequently they gambled before the pandemic, and during the strictest COVID-19-related restrictions in their area. While the majority of online gamblers (77%) reported the same frequency of gambling activity in June 2021 and before the pandemic, 16% indicated a higher frequency in June 2021 than before the pandemic.

Figure 3: Gambling frequency in June 2021, compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic (%)



Base: Australian aged 18 and over who participated in any non-lottery online gambling in the previous 6 months (n=382).

Note: Data does not add to 100 due to rounding.

K7: On average, how often do you currently gamble online?

K8: How often were you gambling online prior to the COVID-19 pandemic?





The results indicate that the frequency of gambling activity did not change significantly *during* the COVID-19-related lockdowns, which took place before June 2021. For instance:

- > There was negligible difference in reported gambling rates ‘during the most severe or strictest COVID-19 related restrictions in your area’ compared to reported levels of gambling *before* the pandemic.
- > A marginally greater proportion of online gamblers indicated they ‘never’ gambled online *during* the lockdown, compared with the proportion of those indicating they never gambled online *currently*.
- > There was no difference in reported gambling frequency when restrictions were strongest among residents of Victoria compared with residents of other states, despite the lockdown being considerably more extensive in Victoria over the survey period.

Sports betting bounced back in 2021

The increase in online gambling observed in 2021 appears to be driven primarily by the resurgence of sports betting following the 2020 COVID-19-related lockdowns (see Figure 5). In the 6 months to June 2021, 8% of Australians reported betting online, with sports the most popular form of wagering (defined in the questionnaire as ‘Sports betting (e.g., betting on football) excluding horse or dog racing or e-sports’), followed closely by betting on racing. Men were more than twice as likely as women to bet online (12% compared to 5%).

Figure 4: Online betting activities undertaken in the previous 6 months (among online bettors), June 2021 (%)

		Online bettors
	Sports*	57%
	Racing (horse, dog)	55%
	e-sports	6%
	Non-sporting events (e.g., elections)	5%
	Fantasy sports	3%

Base: Australians who placed wagers online in the previous 6 months (n=279).

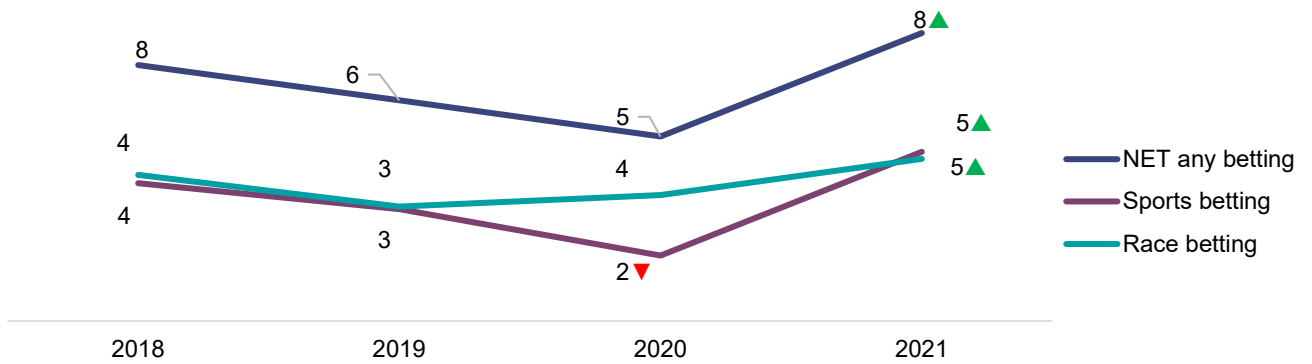
* Sports betting (e.g., betting on football) excludes horse/dog racing or e-sports.

K1: Please indicate which, if any, of the following online gambling activities you have undertaken in the past 6 months.

Participation in online betting in 2021 was significantly higher than in 2020, when only 5% of Australian adults reported online betting. As Figure 5 shows, this was primarily the result of an upswing in rates of sports betting in 2021.

The growth in sports betting may be due to factors including the return of sporting competitions following the 2020 lockdowns, together with the increasing use of digital services and technology generally. Research by the [Australian Gambling Research Centre](#) has also highlighted advertising as an important driver of gambling participation.

Figure 5: Australians participating in online betting (%)



▲ ▼ Significantly different to prior year at the 95% confidence level.

Base: Australians aged 18 and over: 2018 (n=2,106), 2019 (n=2,067), 2020 (n=2,009), 2021 (n=3,586).

Note: in 2018 and 2019, 'sports betting' included e-sports. From 2020, sports betting excludes e-sports.

'NET any betting' includes:

- 2. Lottoland or a similar service betting on results of the financial market indices
- 4. Sports betting (e.g., betting on football) excluding horse or dog racing or e-sports
- 5. Betting on fantasy sports
- 6. Betting on racing (e.g., horse, harness or dog races)
- 9. Betting on e-sports
- 11. Betting on non-sporting events (e.g., elections, TV shows or award ceremonies)

K1: Please indicate which, if any, of the following online gambling activities you have undertaken in the past 6 months.



A minority of online wagerers used illicit gambling services

The Act sets the rules for companies that offer or advertise gambling services. It covers all gambling that takes place online. In relation to online wagering, the Act prevents providers from offering online in-play betting on sporting events, because this presents greater risk of gambling-related harms ([Gambling Research Australia, 2021](#)).

The law changed in 2017 to give the ACMA expanded [responsibilities and powers](#) to combat groups from outside Australia that provide illegal gambling services over the internet. Since those reforms, more than 150 online gambling services have withdrawn from the Australian market, and the amount of money people lost on gambling services based outside Australia has reduced.³


Nonetheless, the research shows some engagement with illegal gambling services in 2021, as detailed below.

In-play betting

In-play betting is the placing of a bet after a sporting event has started. It may include ‘micro-bets’, such as betting on the outcome of a point during a tennis match. This potential for rapid and continuous betting exacerbates risks of gambling-related harm ([Gainsbury, Abarbanel and Blaszczyński, 2020](#)). In-play bettors exhibit problem gambling behaviour at a significantly higher rate than non-in-play bettors ([Gambling Research Australia, 2021](#)). The 2021 consumer survey asked about in-play betting behaviour to assist the ACMA’s evidence-based regulatory decision-making.

One-quarter of respondents who reported participating in sports-related online gambling in the previous 6 months had made online in-play bets. It is important to note that the results do not distinguish between legal (in-play betting on racing) and illegal forms (in-play betting on sporting events) of online in-play betting. Young people are more likely to make in-play bets, with 37% of sports-related bettors aged 18 to 44 reporting in-play wagering, compared with 12% of those aged 45 and older (Figure 6). This may indicate that younger people have a greater appetite for risk, willingness to experiment, or confidence in dealing with online platforms.

Figure 6: Sports-related bettors making online in-play bets, June 2021 (%)

	Sports bettors	18 to 44 years	45 and over	NET
 made an in-play bet online		37% ▲	12%	25%

Base: Australians aged 18 and over who participated in sports-related betting betting (including sports, horse or dog racing, fantasy sports and esports) in the previous 6 months (n=264).

▲ ▼ Significantly different to the other sub-group at the 95% confidence level.

K5: Did you make any in-play bets during any of your sports-related online gambling activities in the past 6 months?



³ Source: H2 Gambling Capital Australian Dataset, last updated 20 September 2021.

Offshore wagering platforms

State and territory governments license providers to offer interactive wagering services. While the ACMA regularly blocks unlicensed operators, these providers continue to target Australians. Offshore services (those based outside Australia) do not offer the consumer the same protections provided by licensed operators.

A small minority of Australians reported using offshore services in 2021, skewing toward younger cohorts, and those on lower incomes. One in 20 adults who had participated in online gambling (5%) reported using an offshore betting site or app in the 6 months to June 2021. A further 6% were not sure where their service was based.

Figure 7: Use of offshore betting platforms, June 2021 (%)

	Online gamblers	18 to 34 years	35 and over	NET
	used an offshore betting site or app	11% ▲	2%	5%
	did not know where their service was located	9% ▲	4%	6%
	did not use an offshore betting site or app	78% ▼	94%	89%

Base: Australians aged 18 and over who gambled online in the previous 6 months (n=938).

▲ ▼ Significantly different to the other sub-group at the 95% confidence level.

K6: In the past 6 months, have you used any offshore betting sites or apps?

Conclusions

Our research suggests that the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia may have had some impact on participation in online gambling. Small but notable rises in both the prevalence and frequency of online gambling in 2021 may have been brought about by the increasing adoption of digital wagering services, along with the availability of expanded gambling features and increased betting advertising over this period. In addition, as Australian sporting codes returned to a more 'normal' schedule after the disruptions of 2020, online sports betting has bounced back and attracted new participants.

New data on the prevalence of in-play and offshore betting will allow the ACMA to report trends in consumer behaviour in these areas in future years.

Appendix A: Other research into online gambling during the pandemic

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on gambling has been the subject of considerable research. There is little consensus between studies to date. This reflects both the difficulty of selecting reliable measures of gambling activity and the general uncertainty of the current period.

Gambling Research Australia published *The second national study of interactive gambling in Australia (2019–20)* in October 2021. The survey questions asked about the 2019 calendar year to minimise the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. It therefore does not report on quantitative changes in gambling prevalence or frequency since the COVID-19 pandemic. In interviews conducted between April and May 2020, current gamblers reported a variety of changes to their gambling activities during COVID-19 restrictions:

- > fewer sporting events led to less gambling
- > increased convenience of online gambling led to more gambling
- > taking up 'novelty bets' (on election results, for example) to replace sports betting.

The ACMA's *2020 annual consumer survey*, undertaken in June 2020, asked respondents how their online gambling had changed since the start of the pandemic.

- > 21% of respondents reported increasing their online gambling activities since the start of the pandemic, 34% decreased their gambling.
- > Among online gamblers, participation in online sports betting decreased from 18% in 2019 to 9% in 2020. This may be due to COVID-19 restrictions resulting in less sport being played.

The Australian Gambling Research Centre published *Gambling in Australia during COVID-19* in October 2020. The report analysed a survey of 2,019 Australians who participated in gambling activities, and interviews with experts. It found:

- > Survey participants gambled more often during COVID-19. The proportion who gambled 4 or more times a week (online and offline) increased from 23% to 32%.
- > Young men (aged 18 to 34) were the sub-population most likely to:
 - > sign up for new online accounts
 - > increase their frequency and monthly spending on gambling (from \$687 to \$1,075)
 - > be at risk of gambling-related harm.