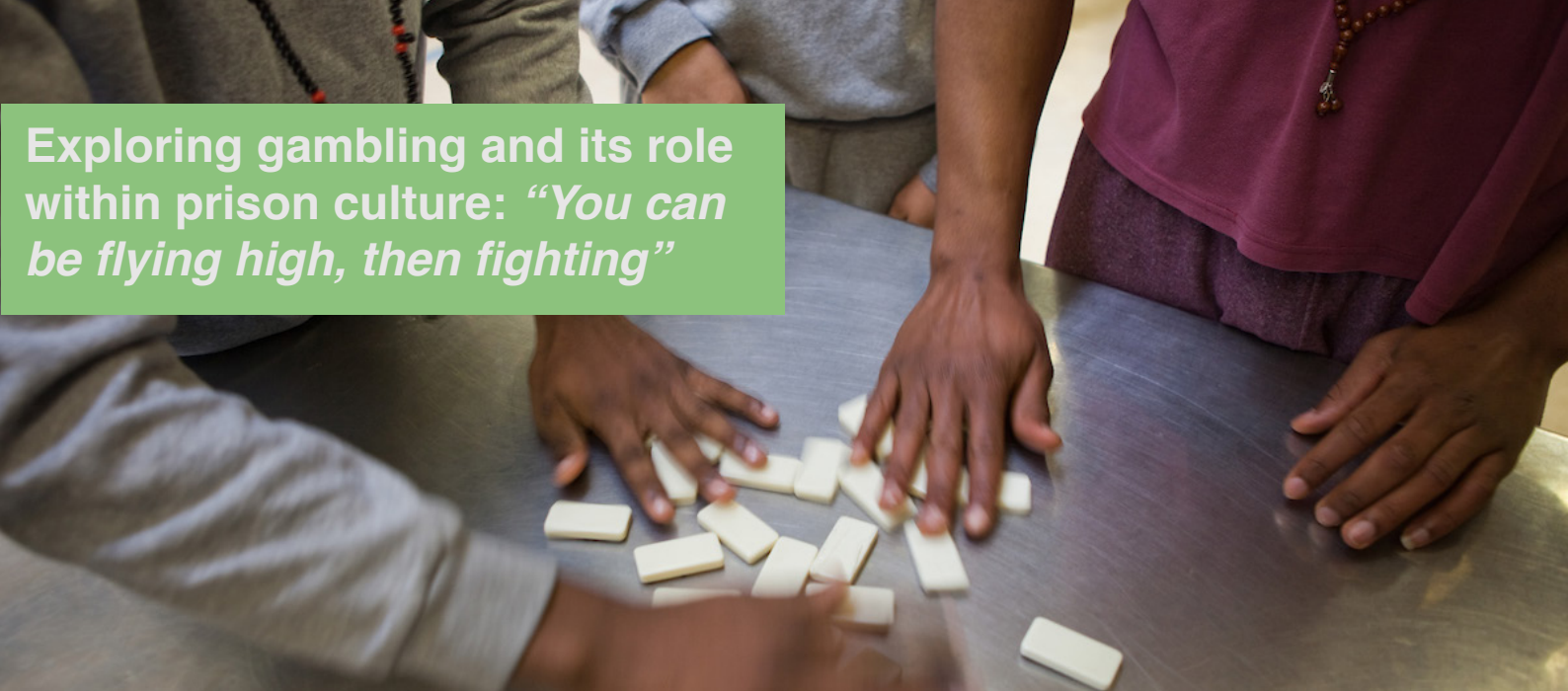


Exploring gambling and its role within prison culture: *“You can be flying high, then fighting”*



Commission on Crime & Gambling Related Harms

Key points

- The research aims to understand the nature and experience of gambling within the cultural context of the prison, through the lens of prison culture.
- The research was co-produced at a multiple security category men's prison, and in the community, by a team of researchers and peer researchers who live in prison. The participatory model of research was central to the project and co-production occurred at every stage.
- Despite not being officially sanctioned, gambling activity in prison was widespread and diverse, accessed by both residents and staff (though surrounded by a degree of secrecy). It was a normalised activity, often seen in a positive light. The currency with which people gambled ranged from money to material goods, to acts of service.
- While gambling is an increasingly normalised activity (both in the community and in prison), limited research exists regarding the relationship between crime, criminal justice and gambling harm and addiction. That which does exist suggests there is a significant prevalence of gambling related harm and addiction amongst the prison population; limited awareness and appropriate action regarding gambling harm and addiction across the criminal justice system; limited support for gambling harm and addiction in prison; and that prison can exacerbate gambling harm and addiction.
- There was limited staff awareness of the ways in which gambling activity in prison could be problematic, usually in relation to the resultant debt or violence. Moreover, if gambling behaviour was recognised, it was often left to continue.
- Gambling activity in prison occurred within a set of subcultures: 'Small and safe'; 'Temptation'; 'Risky'; and 'Immune'. Related harm increased as one moved up through the subcultures with the exception of those in the 'Immune' group. Gambling activity among those in the 'Risky' and 'Immune' categories was sometimes associated with serious acts of bullying, manipulation, and violence.
- Gambling served a particular purpose within the prison environment, fulfilling the need to feel; engineering freedom; enabling survival; and to develop meaningful relationships.
- The research highlighted the negative impact of gambling in prison, relating to: community relationships/safety; loss, powerlessness, and the dismantling of coping mechanisms; vulnerability; mental health; and personal growth and rehabilitation.
- Well-documented gambling related harms were intensified in the prison environment, relating to its cultural rules (e.g. the impact of debt in prison). The negative effects of gambling extended to people's wider networks outside prison. Moreover, the context of the prison environment was detrimental to people already experiencing gambling related harm and addiction.
- The recommendations centre on the need for greater awareness, education and training; the review of prison system's guidance on gambling; the need for further co-produced research; the provision of healthy alternatives to gambling in prison regimes; and the need for investment and collaborative action with people who have lived experience of prison and gambling, to address gambling related harm in prison and encourage safe behaviour.

Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Commission on Crime and Gambling Related Harms in response to a lack of existing literature about the role and impact of gambling within prison, particularly in England and Wales. The research aims were:

- To understand how gambling is conceptualised in prison by residents and staff.
- To understand how gambling is experienced within the cultural context of a prison by residents and staff.
- To understand the role of gambling in prison, both positive and negative.
- To understand the impact of gambling in prison on residents, staff and affected others and the support needed to address associated harm.
- To assess how aware staff and residents are of the role gambling plays within prison culture and its impact on the rehabilitative environment.

This research examined how gambling was understood and experienced in prison through the lens of culture, and the impact gambling has on people, both inside and outside of prison. A range of qualitative methods were adopted to promote engagement. The findings of this research highlighted that gambling played a significant role within prison culture. The role of gambling generated a sense of meaning and stimulation, acting as a form of escapism from boredom and was perceived as a tool to aid survival. The impact and experience of gambling were dependent on the subculture which the person belonged to and where they were positioned within the hierarchy of the prison.

This report outlines key recommendations that aim to address the harms associated with gambling within prison. Whilst the findings and recommendations based on this study may not be uniformly applicable to the whole male prison estate in England and Wales, it is hoped that this research will assist prisons in creating meaningful strategies to address the issues relating to gambling in prison.

Methodology

One hundred and forty-one people participated in the research, comprising 90 people in prison, 24 prison staff, 17 family members of those in prison and ten people with lived experience of prison. Data was collected using assisted questionnaires, interviews, and in-depth interviews. The data was analysed by the research team, which included four peer researchers who live in prison, two researchers from Penal Reform Solutions (PRS) and a researcher from Betknowmore UK.

Key findings

The experience and awareness of gambling in prison

Gambling is culturally embedded within prisons, described as a 'normal' pastime by residents and staff. While gambling is prohibited in prison (PSI 01/2022 Manage prisoner finance, Prisoners Earning Act, 1996), staff reported that they did not see gambling as problematic and mostly viewed it as 'harmless betting' and low-level. Residents highlighted that gambling is mostly hidden from staff and managed by residents, however there is a willingness amongst staff to turn a blind eye, to keep the "wings calm and quiet", as "everyone is well behaved, not causing any problems". A lack of knowledge around gambling harms meant that staff felt a sense of powerlessness in their ability to effectively control gambling. This lack of guidance and inconsistent response to gambling contributed to a confusing and enabling culture.

"... We were encouraged to bet a Mars bar on a game of pool, so we could build a rapport with a prisoner and find out what was going on in the wing, it was intentional and encouraged."

A hierarchy among residents was evident, and the position in this hierarchy influenced how residents experienced gambling. The analysis identified several subcultures which varied in terms of risk, harm, and intensity. However, these subcultures were not consciously determined or overtly discussed, but were silently categorised based on factors including vulnerabilities, wealth, influence, communication skills, confidence, and intent. It was made

clear by the residents that people could move between subcultures if they adopted the norms associated with the subculture and were able to survive within its belief system.

These subcultures were identified as: (1) small and 'safe' gambling, (2) temptation, (3) risky and (4) 'immune' gambling (see Figure 1). Small and 'safe' gambling was understood to be low level gambling, described as "gentlemanly" fun between friends, where little or no harm occurred.

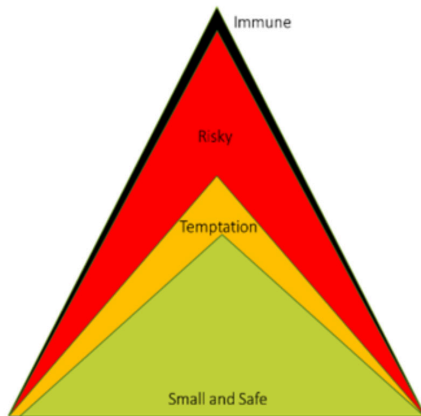


Figure 1: Representation of the gambling subcultures within prison

"I gambled, but they were small and safe. Only what I could afford. I never got into trouble. I only gambled with my friend."

Temptation gambling indicated a threshold between 'safe' and 'risky' gambling.

"It always starts small, and it snowballs, especially if you lose and they say double or quits..."

Higher rewards enticed some residents to engage in riskier gambling, increasing harms when they lost. Risky gambling was the point where the cultural tone changed and at this point staff involvement was activated, with staff acknowledging that some residents were experiencing gambling harms or funding addictions. Staff were also identified to operate within this risky subculture, from smaller bets to higher stakes, often associated with corruption. This space was managed by members of the hierarchy, who enforced non-payment of gambling debts. This included residents being made to give favours, store drugs, or enforce violence. The final subculture was described as 'immune gambling,' with those involved referred to as 'influencers'. Violence and harm were

instigated and managed in this subculture and deemed as protected from the harmful cultures of the 'underworld' (a network/community involved in organised activity, which manages the hidden economy within prison). Only very few individuals were part of this subculture, and many were not willing to discuss this echelon of prison culture. Although they were immune from retribution associated with losing, when they lost a game, the need to regain status increased and this was achieved by extreme violence or acts of humiliation.

"Depending on who you are, you get beat up, bullied, put pressure on your family to help you. Certain people are immune, depending on your stature. If you are somebody, people will try and navigate the situation. If you are a face, people are a lot more diplomatic. You still need to pay it back though ... If you try and go in heavy with someone, there is likely to be a war. Everything is about survival."

The role of gambling in prison

The role of gambling in prison was broken down into four themes: the need to feel; engineering freedom; survival; and meaningful relationships.

'The need to feel' was articulated in two ways; to alleviate boredom and to generate stimulation. It brought a sense of joy and excitement and provided relief from the "dullness" of prison, where there were limited options for education or employment. For some, gambling was an aid to "numb everything", to self-soothe and manage the pains of incarceration. In addition to this, gambling added meaning to life for many. Residents and staff stated that gambling added meaning to recreational activities (e.g. playing pool) and gave some residents a purpose, for example, having their own in-cell shop.

"... There's limited TV channels and association, it is so boring with nothing to do."

"Everyone is surrounded by gambling ... there's nothing better to do."

Residents also used gambling to engineer freedom, describing gambling as an "escape" from prison and a way to generate a sense of normality and to "pass the time".

Survival was a consistent theme within the data. Gambling was also described as a route to gain goods of value, which operated as currency across the underground economy (where food, property, drugs, and phones could be bought illegally). Staff and residents acknowledged that if people did not have family support and money was not sent into prison, residents would struggle due to the small food portions, poor food quality and low prison wages.

Some residents explained that gambling was an “*earner*” that meant they did not need to “*burden*” their families.

“On the football everyone had to put a pound of value in before they got their numbers ... it had to be a usable pound of value; shower gels or food ... not a pound of rubbish.”

Gambling was also used to validate friendships and status and enabled people in prison to build new relationships or reconnect with those relationships from outside of prison. For new connections, gambling allowed trust and friendships to be built, reducing loneliness. In turn, this formed communities within prison.

“It creates a bond though it depends how often you do it. It’s a boy thing, you gain a friendship and become part of the team.”

The impact of gambling in prison

The impact of gambling differed depending on where an individual was positioned within the prison community, and which subculture they identified with. Some research participants with lived experience of prison and residents described the positive impact gambling could have on prison culture and community, highlighting that it brought people together, occupied their time and helped build relationships with residents and other staff.

“...Gambling builds relationships and rapport between staff and prisoners, when it’s fun.”

Others described the potentially negative impact of gambling on the prison community due to its impact on the prison dynamics, causing serious disruption, tension, and in some cases violence.

“It breeds negativity in the houseblock, everyone knows about it but the pressure mounts.”

“Debt is 80 per cent of prison issues.”

Harm was the most prevalent theme within the data and related specifically to ‘*risky*’ gambling (both gambling related-harm, and broader harms associated with the prison environment). Residents described various trauma, including witnessing acts of violence due to non-payment of gambling debts, illuminating how the cultural rules dictate that residents are unable to disclose information to staff. Financial harms associated with gambling were highlighted, describing how gambling affected people in and outside of prison, explaining how some people can leave prison with thousands of pounds worth of debt. This harm extended to families, who were reported to be pressurised to bring in phones and drugs, to settle gambling debts, as well as experiencing the financial burden placed on them, while under threat.

“I have seen people get beaten up over a tin of tuna.”

“The most violent thing I saw was two guys stabbed over chocolate cake.”

“I got into massive debt once and had to fuck a few people up. It was weird and I was on edge because if I got caught, I would get extra [prison] time. You have to do it, or your family get hurt. You are concerned for their safety. My family was threatened, and I just lied to them about it...”

“There is no protection in prison, the prison is against us. If you say anything, it gets back to the prisoner, and you are at risk. If you get moved off the houseblock you are viewed as a snitch and the rumours follow you, you will inevitably get beaten up, wherever you are.”

Harm and vulnerability were observed when a person was blacklisted from the ‘underworld’, banished from the underground economy. Increased vulnerability was identified for those whose gambling was linked to their offending. An environment whereby gambling was embedded into the culture was viewed as unsafe for those who had a gambling addiction.

“I have been attacked, jumped by two lads in my cell, if you can’t pay it, they’ll double it and double it, I’ve had enough.”

“Some run up big debts and don’t pay ... If you move [off the wing] then debts have stayed on the cell.”

“People are targeted to gamble, and they pick on people on remand because they have less consequences if they get caught.”

“If you don’t pay, you get a bad name. So, you get blacklisted from accessing your wing shop, drugs, the whole underworld.”

Loss was evident in several forms, causing a sense of shame, insecurity, and powerlessness. This affected relationships inside and outside of prison. The cultural rules and limited support available for gambling meant that feelings of powerlessness were increased, and there was little to no help for those experiencing gambling harms.

“You take it out on staff, and they ask you what the problem is, you both know but neither of you can talk about it.”

“I saw a guy lose a bet and smash up his cell, he was so angry, but you can’t talk about it.”

“Prisoners isolate themselves, stay in their cell, we lock them in for their own safety.”

The harms associated with mental health were frequently acknowledged, including depression and anxiety associated with gambling. Vicarious trauma was not acknowledged by participants, although it was evidenced from the experiences shared and the way in which they were articulated.

“I knew a gambler, but they were depressed and scared, so he stayed away from everything.”

“...People get into debt, some people then turn to self-harm, even suicide in some cases.”

Irrespective of gambling and the culture that surrounded it, the lack of rehabilitation more generally within prison was clear. There was a divided perspective from people in

prison regarding the impact of gambling on rehabilitation. However, there was a consensus amongst those who were no longer in prison that gambling negatively impacted on rehabilitation, and the harms of gambling were seen to de-habilitate and remove key opportunities for residents.

“Gambling takes away where your concentration should be, concentrating on change and rehabilitation, instead you are concerned about the next bet, where to get the money and pay gambling debts.”

“... There’s not rehabilitation when every day is just the same, unlock and playing pool every day for an hour then back to lock up.”

Recommendations

Experience and awareness

- Further co-produced prison-based research is needed to enable His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and individual institutions to review current practices regarding gambling addiction (identification, support in prison and through the gate). Further research exploring staff culture and responses to gambling would enhance practices. Further exploration into subcultures associated with gambling would deepen understanding of the ways in which subcultures are reinforced, enforced, and governed in prison more generally. It is also recommended that in light of the prevalence of disordered gambling in the prison population, a collaborative review of the prison regime would be advised, to consider how best relationships can be developed and purposive activities can be promoted.
- Awareness-raising, education and training should take place across the system (for both staff and residents). Mechanisms should involve accessible and visible resources and could involve digital media such as a short co-produced digital film for new residents and available to prisons nationwide, to raise awareness around the cultural rules of gambling in prison and the risks of gambling, both in prison and in the community.

- Awareness-raising and training for staff should be centred on professional curiosity and dynamic security. Staff should be equipped to investigate games and activity, and have the knowledge and skills to develop professional, trusting relationships, so people feel safe enough to share their challenges associated with gambling.
- Awareness about the prevalence and risk of gambling activity in prison is needed at the start of the criminal justice journey. Screening and identification processes should be built into each stage of the criminal justice process, in tandem with a more holistic approach to facilitate trust and safe relationships. Acknowledging this at the pre-sentence stage, to support effective decision-making, would allow people to get the support they need in the community.
- Signposting support to family members affected by gambling would ensure additional support to those in need. Specific prison-related support should be developed for friends and families who have a loved one in prison. This could include Visitors Centres working alongside gambling charities such as Betknowmore.
- It is also recommended that HMPPS respond to the issues illuminated in this report and review their stance on gambling, in collaboration with those who live and work in prison. Establishing a considered, clear, meaningful response will provide clarity moving forward, in light of the findings from this Commission.

Role of gambling

- Healthy alternatives should be provided in prison regimes, in order to divert people away from gambling and towards rehabilitative-focused activities in line with PRS's Principles of Growth (Lewis and Hands, 2022). The research suggests that gambling currently provides a false sense of hope and purpose for people in prison.

Impact of gambling

- Investment in prison culture is needed in order to address gambling related harm in prison and encourage safe behaviour. Where gambling occurs, a safe and well-managed environment with openness and support equivalent to that in the community is needed. To support its effectiveness, the support of people who live in prison is imperative. A collective action committee (including residents, staff, and families) should be created within the prison in order to co-design a meaningful cultural strategy to address the systemic issues that prisons have historically faced. This approach should be integrated into HMPPS working groups.
- People working and living in prisons should strive for a recovery culture centred on harm reduction. Drawing on the experiences of gambling harms in prison can be an effective tool to discuss with people in prison how to gamble safely, addressing gambling harms and providing a safe and person-centred space, where staff and residents can speak openly about gambling and prison culture. In addition, this will provide additional opportunities for those with a gambling addiction to access help and support and feel safe enough to share their challenges.
- Person-centred education about gambling safety should be used as an opportunity for growth, integrating key discussions around gambling into key worker sessions and dynamic security, and adopting a professionally curious approach. To achieve this, prison staff need further investment to learn how to work effectively with people in prison to develop trust and allow gambling harms to be unearthed.

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About the Commission on Crime and Gambling Related Harms

The Commission on Crime and Gambling Related Harms was launched by the Howard League for Penal Reform in 2019 and is scheduled to run until early 2023. The Chair of the Commission is Lord Peter Goldsmith KC. He leads a team of 12 Commissioners,

with expertise in the criminal justice system and public health, as well as experts with knowledge of the gambling industry and with lived experience of addiction.

The Commission seeks to answer three questions:

- What are the links between crime and gambling harms?
- What impact do these links have on communities and society?
- What should be done?

About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League for Penal Reform is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison. We campaign and research on a wide range of issues including short term prison sentences, real work in prison, community sentences and youth justice. We work with parliament and the media, with criminal justice professionals, students and members of the public, influencing debate and forcing through meaningful change to create safer communities. Our legal team provides free, independent and confidential advice, assistance and representation on a wide range of issues to young people under 21 who are in prisons or secure children's homes and centres. By becoming a member, you will give us a bigger voice and give vital financial support to our work. We cannot achieve real and lasting change without your help.

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