



## Lived experiences of gambling, gambling-related harms, and crime within ethnic minority communities



**Commission on Crime & Gambling Related Harms**

### Key points

- This research seeks to understand the lived experiences of crime and gambling-related harms for people within ethnic minority communities. This is the first research in the UK to address these issues.
- The research centres the lived experiences of people from ethnic minority communities who have had experiences of crime and gambling-related harms, prioritising co-production. Peer researchers were central to the methodology. The research evidence was gathered using interviews (n=18) and focus groups (n=8).
- The research centres the importance of recognising that ethnic minority communities are diverse and that there is no single ethnic minority experience. Experiences of gambling (and crime) connect to, and must be contextualised in relation to, wider social, economic and cultural factors.
- Research participants revealed a range of pathways into gambling and gambling-related harm including: growing up around gambling; migrating to the UK and the role of acculturation; the role of gambling as a means of hope (in relation to addressing socio-economic disadvantage) and escapism from their wider lives. Participants also revealed how pathways into gambling were related to wider experiences of trauma and stress.
- Participants disclosed having committed a range of offences relating to gambling, including financial crimes and those relating to public disorder and drugs. While ten participants came to the attention of the criminal justice system, a significant number of 'hidden crimes' were also revealed.
- Participants' experiences of the criminal justice system illustrated a lack of understanding of gambling-related harm and inadequate provision of support. At all stages (i.e. arrest, prosecution, sentencing and under sentence) participants reported that their gambling was not adequately considered and there was no meaningful provision of support. This lack of support continued in the community. Participants described release from prison as a missed opportunity to support a gambling addiction.
- Understanding the needs and issues for people from ethnic minority communities in relation to disordered gambling is problematic as insufficient data exists to provide information to shape and commission services and support. Participants identified a preference for the involvement of people from ethnic minority communities in the shaping and delivery of these services.
- A key motivation for participants to share their stories was a sense of invisibility in public discourse, treatment services, and gambling-related policies and law.

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**SUMMARY**

## Introduction

The Gambling Commission (2021) found that while people from ethnic minority communities may be less likely to gamble, 'those that do gamble may be more at risk of experiencing harm' (see also Conolly et al., 2018; Dinos et al., 2020; Levy et al., 2020). Research suggests that people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities are less likely to seek treatment and support for gambling following the threat of criminal proceedings than their White counterparts (one per cent compared with six per cent respectively) (Gunstone and Gosschalk, 2019). It is thus imperative to develop a clearer understanding of criminalisation for gambling-related crimes, and the resultant experiences of the criminal justice system.

The aim of this research is to understand the lived experiences of crime and gambling-related harms for people within ethnic minority communities. The research aimed to answer the following questions:

- What are the different trajectories and lived experiences of individuals from ethnic minority communities involved with gambling and crime?
- How do people from ethnic minority communities understand and experience the gambling in their lives? What is 'problematic' about the gambling in their lives? What gambling-related harms do they experience?
- How does gambling affect people from ethnic minority communities' key relationships such as employment, education, social, and familial networks?
- How have crime and gambling intersected in people from ethnic minority communities' lives? What contact and experience have these people had with the criminal justice system?
- To what extent have people from ethnic minority communities sought out, been offered, or utilised treatments for gambling? What have their experiences of seeking out and/or accessing support been?

## Methodology

The research centred the lived experiences of people from ethnic minority communities who

had experiences of crime and gambling-related harms, prioritising co-production. Co-production seeks to reduce the power imbalances that traditional forms of research can reproduce by 'offering the potential to resituate those residing in the margins, bringing them into the centre of knowledge produced about (by) them' (Harding, 2020:1). Peer researchers were recruited to the study to collect and analyse data, and involved as participants.

Twenty-six participants were recruited to the study, including the peer researchers. Criteria for recruitment as a peer researcher or lived experience participant within this study was that an individual was a member of an ethnic minority community with lived experience of gambling-related harms (either as someone who had gambled, or as an 'affected other'), and lived experience of crime or victimisation (usually related in some way to the gambling-related harms they have experienced). Sixteen people met the lived experience study criteria and took part in the research, three of whom were peer researchers. In addition, interviews were conducted with ten key stakeholders from organisations that are concerned with gambling and/or crime. Four stakeholder participants also disclosed that they had lived experience of crime and gambling-related harm.

Data collection was primarily conducted via interviews and focus groups. Eighteen interviews were conducted with participants and peer researchers. Two focus groups were conducted inside a Category B men's prison with eight serving prisoners. The research team met weekly to contextualise the themes appearing within the data and to discuss emerging themes and topics for further exploration.

## Key findings

The data sets out both shared and different experiences, and the potential for the label of 'ethnic minority' to render differences within and between groups invisible. This has ramifications for understanding diverse experiences of gambling-related harms and crime. The data also highlights the importance of understanding how systemic inequalities shape the lived experiences of ethnic minority communities. It highlights the need for the adoption of intersectional analysis to capture how factors

such as race, ethnicity, class, culture, religion, migration, immigration status, mental health and gender shape people's experiences of gambling, crime, and the criminal justice system, as well as gambling treatment and support services.

### **Contextualising ethnic minority communities' relationship to crime and gambling-related harms**

The research reveals how experiences of gambling (and crime) connect to, and must be contextualised in relation to, wider social, economic and cultural factors. These factors are significant because they may create additional 'risks' and experiences of harm to ethnic minority communities' pathways into, and experiences of, disordered gambling and crime. The study highlights the value of an intersectional approach as a means of understanding and responding to specific experiences of discrimination and disadvantage (race, ethnicity, class, gender etc.). An intersectional approach makes visible how context shapes experiences.

It is important to recognise that ethnic minority communities are diverse and people's experiences differ. The experiences of research participants Mazz and Dawn illustrate this.<sup>1</sup> Mazz is from a Muslim background and shared how his gambling started when he was 18 years old and how it led to criminal activity and a prison sentence. Mazz recounted how the word for addiction does not exist in his culture and how this is reflected in his and others' lack of knowledge and understanding about gambling and gambling-related harms:

*"It's against our religion ... I felt guilty for gambling, but that was within myself. And in terms of, in terms of being brown, black, or white, of course, there's different cultures ... in terms of obviously being brown, and the culture and my family, etc., yeah, I couldn't talk to anyone about it, I didn't even know I had an addiction for a while because you know, from an Asian background the word addiction doesn't exist, you know what is that? ...when I was gambling ... I started, unfortunately, stealing money. Well, after I had used all my money, you know, I was like stealing money to keep gambling, and I would*

*have to hide it away of course, naturally, by trying to make excuses but you know you can only make so many excuses until you're caught out."* (Mazz)

Dawn is a 52-year-old mother from a mixed heritage background (Black Caribbean and White British) who lives in the West Midlands. She is a homeowner, a business owner, and served as a reservist in one of the armed forces. Dawn described herself as being privileged in terms of educational, employment history and financial opportunities and circumstances.

Stakeholders in the research suggested that ethnic minority communities were often invisible within discourse, policy and practice around gambling and gambling-related harms, and that they themselves did not have expertise or good awareness about gambling-related harms and ethnic minority communities. Nevertheless, they were committed to developing this understanding and the provision of appropriate services.

### **Ethnic minority communities, gambling, and gambling-related harms**

The research presents a valuable insight about how individuals from ethnic minority communities experience gambling and gambling-related harms. It draws attention to how participants narrated and understood key factors that underpinned their gambling trajectories and how their gambling had escalated to a problematic level.

Study participants reported a number of pathways into gambling. Some described growing up around gambling, reporting gambling from an early age with family and friends, activity which was characterised as a 'normal' in their family or peer group, whereas for others gambling was forbidden within their culture. Those who had migrated to the UK highlighted how gambling could be involved with processes of acculturation. Gambling in some countries was limited by cultural/religious considerations, for example being regarded as 'Haram' or seen as a lower-class or criminal activity. This is illustrated by Anil who described participating in gambling as a means to integrate. He recalled a conversation with his father where he tried to convince him that

<sup>1</sup> All names used in the report are pseudonyms.

gambling was 'good and normal' in the UK:

*"I convinced him gambling is good and normal in this country, because I took him to Cheltenham, Ascot racecourse, casinos and it's like, look, normal people are coming. It's not like gangsters do this like you see in Bollywood movies, you know, dog dens... It's like gambling is so normalised in this country."*  
(Anil)

Participants also highlighted how gambling could offer a means of hope (in relation to addressing socio-economic disadvantage). Mazz regarded gambling was a way to secure independence and a better standard of living for him and his family. However, this aspiration was unfulfilled as Mazz's gambling spiralled out of control and he eventually ended up in prison for a financial crime related to his gambling:

*"My childhood was ... we were ... on the lower side of the poor ... and as soon as I saw an advert [relating to gambling] like that, you know, where you're getting money for free you know at the age of 18 you think...*

*"... but I started feeling something with my gambling then, because I would always try to kind of have so much money to have a kind of, the comfortability in life... My only ambition in life was to be a dad and to be married... I wanna be financially comfortable, so I can provide for my [family] ... I started realising I'm gambling a hell of a lot and increased amount that I'm gambling is gradually increasing over time as well, from the £10 to like now a 100 to 200 to so on so forth, thousands. And yeah, it just it just got worse and worse from there."* (Mazz)

Other participants highlighted gambling as a mode of *"Escapism from the day-to-day ... all of the racism"* (Patricia, Stakeholder (Probation)) as well as other experiences of trauma and stress. Some participants viewed gambling as a normalised response to structural, social, and economic disadvantage.

The research showed that people from ethnic minority communities experience a wide range of gambling-related harms, including cultural harms. Gambling-related harms can be compounded by a culture of secrecy and silence within some families who may seek to

protect the gambler (and wider family) from the shame and stigma associated with gambling. The research highlights how the role of familial support can be double edged. Families can be protective and well-intentioned, but also have the potential to enable further gambling and may serve to delay access to professional support. Charmaine's experiences illustrate this. She shared that she did not know what to do when she realised her son was experiencing gambling-related harm and addiction. Charmaine indicated that she had found it difficult to talk as she had been brought up in a culture where you are encouraged to keep things private and within the family. Moreover, as a Black woman, she expressed how she felt there was an expectation to be strong and in control of your personal affairs.

*"So, all of those things sit at the back of my head so and even though I am aware that I can go out there and get help, the notion is ... as a Black woman you have to be seen to be strong, you have to be seen to be coping."*  
(Charmaine)

Faith played a key role in the lives of many people from ethnic minority communities, and while it was regarded as a source of support, it was also perceived to serve as a barrier to accessing support.

### **Ethnic minority communities, gambling, crime, and the criminal justice system**

Little is known about how crime, gambling and gambling-related harms intersect within ethnic minority communities. This research highlights a diverse range of circumstances where gambling and crime can co-exist, as well as a lack of attention given to the relationship between gambling and crime across all areas of the criminal justice system.

Participants disclosed having committed a range of offences relating to gambling, including financial crimes and those relating to public disorder and illegal drugs. Omar was sentenced to three and a half years in custody for cultivation of a class B drug. He 'agreed' to facilitate the growing of drugs to settle a gambling debt:

*"...he was going to give me a lump sum at the end of six months, which was really*

*agreement and he carried on. He was there for three months. He paid the rent and then ... I found out that he was growing [cannabis]. I sort of had my suspicion. Basically, someone had tipped off the police. They've broken into the yard and found the ground. And then I got arrested..."* (Omar)

While ten of the participants in the research had come to the attention of the criminal justice system, participants also described hidden harms, including: unreported crimes (e.g. theft from family members); domestic abuse; the relationship with associated addictions; and legal issues relating to immigration. One stakeholder participant explored how gambling might link to these broader harms:

*"...there is a bigger, bigger picture ... there is a lot more going on with crime and gambling I think that has just not been explored fully yet."*

*"There must be some kind of link between ... the county lines and the gambling with young people... But they are all on the gambling apps, they are always you know talking about gambling ... there will be a link between, you know, the county lines, the drugs, the street, and gambling."* (Chris, Stakeholder (Gambling treatment and support service))

At all stages of the criminal justice system (i.e. arrest, prosecution, sentencing and under sentence) participants reported that their gambling was not adequately considered and there was no meaningful provision of support.

Participants recalled how their gambling was not recorded or taken into consideration by the police when they were arrested or charged. For example, Mazz recalled how his gambling and criminal activity had escalated to a point where he felt desperate and could no longer bear the guilt. This led to him handing himself in to the police, where he hoped they may be able to help him in some way:

*"I ended up handing myself into the police. Basically, just telling them, you know, I've stolen tons of money and, you know, I need basically report myself. And they didn't take it [gambling] seriously... But you know I was I was a broken man... I was [a] walking corpse, like I had a no emotion in me. I had nothing in me."* (Mazz)

This lack of recognition continued through to sentencing where gambling was not considered as a mitigating factor. As with the police, participants felt that the courts had a very limited understanding of gambling and its relevance to the offence which they were being prosecuted. Adeel, a man in prison following a gambling-related offence, told us:

*"My sentence is my sentence. The judge doesn't even know what is gambling. Listen I would say I have got an addiction; this is to fund the addiction and she said what is gambling addiction?"* (Adeel)

Participants highlighted how the prison environment could serve to limit some people's ability to gamble, but for others it could pose a risk since gambling activity still takes place within the custodial environment. One senior prison manager spoke of the challenge of differentiation between 'social activities' such as card games and dominoes and gambling:

*"Gambling ... cards, dominos and all of those things are also social activities. You can imagine in prison you want to be able to do things socially with others to pass the time. So, I suppose those are some of the complexities, aren't they? ... but I don't know what the rules and regulations around it would be, I don't know if that is a gambling thing or not a gambling thing?"* (Peter, Stakeholder (Senior Manager from HM Prison Service))

Participants also identified missed opportunities through the lack of support on release. Mazz asked for support upon release from prison but this was not forthcoming. After a short period of time he began to gamble again, this time accruing greater losses than before his imprisonment. Mazz felt that he was let down when he most needed the support. This led to Mazz and his family having to leave his family home and placed him at risk of homelessness:

*"And I then contact my probation officer saying, you know, can we have a meeting... It'd be good to catch up and see where I'm at and so on and what you can do for me. Eventually I got an appointment and then I hadn't heard from her after that for about two months. I then, unfortunately went down the route of gambling a lot again, and started*

*stealing thousands of pounds from my mom and I called her office, saying, please, please can you get me some support... I need your help for my gambling because it's destroying not only me again, but people around me yet again. I'm about to go homeless, please, can you call me. She didn't call me. I have not heard from her since, not once did I hear from her. And you know I could be dead, could be homeless, could be back in prison. I could be, you know, the middle of my addiction yet again, not a single email."* (Mazz)

The research suggests there is a lack of awareness and support in probation and community services, which are critical services for desistance, recovery and resettlement.

### **Ethnic minority communities, gambling, treatment, and support**

The recovery journey is a personal one, however the research highlights some common themes. There are key points during interaction with the criminal justice system, such as arrest, sentencing and during punishment, where greater multi-agency working, and awareness of gambling can positively influence recovery.

However, this study identified data as an issue. One stakeholder from a national treatment and support service spoke about difficulties in work, particularly in relation to ethnic minority communities. As many people did not appear to come forward for treatment, they were often missing from current understanding:

*"We're realising actually, we may need to take a different approach with communities, who have particular needs, but ... the difficulty we have it is kind of we don't have the data to understand. We need to create the data ... it is chicken and egg, what comes first you know?"* (Sarah, Stakeholder (Gambling treatment and support service))

The public health stakeholder raised concerns about the lack of understanding

about unmet needs within ethnic minority communities:

*"We don't have any robust data except for the fact that people are less likely to gamble from these communities but twice as likely to experience a level of harm. And what we also don't know is that the scale of harm that people experience."* (Richard, Stakeholder (Director of Public Health))

A lack of data can challenge service organisation and delivery as well as pose a barrier for those from ethnic minority communities who need to access treatment or support services. This may be particularly the case where therapeutic aims are met though peer connection in group support service settings.

There are many challenges for policy and practice, particularly in relation to minoritised communities. The research suggests several areas that need to be developed in order to reduce crime and gambling-related harms. Particularly highlighted are the areas of preventative strategies and better education about gambling-related harm, and the need for better diversity and representation of different ethnic and faith communities. These should be present at all levels of gambling oversight, regulation, and treatment, alongside a public health approach to gambling.

Many participants indicated that they found services to be more useful where they felt they had shared understandings with staff, not only in relation to gambling, but also in relation to their wider cultural experiences and backgrounds. While Wendy reported that Gamblers Anonymous had been useful to her, she also regularly joked how she continued to be the "only Black woman in the room." This reveals how participants felt it was important (and preferable) for services to be able to relate and respond appropriately to the specific needs of ethnic minority communities. The importance of culturally inclusive services, ideally staffed by people with similar lived experiences, is captured by Mazz:

*"I think the main thing really that would help, where you said you spoke to a*

*Muslim with lived experience. Those things are massive for people like me, and people like you ... The simple thing that it is yeah, like, if I had someone, if I had a counsellor who was a lived experience counsellor who was brown Muslim, black Muslim, white Muslim, whatever ... or not even a Muslim, but just black or brown, similar culture, that would have been huge.”*  
(Mazz)

The need to build engagement and trust with diverse communities was identified with the key to the success in meeting the needs of ethnic minority communities. This could be achieved by adopting a community-involved approach. The probation stakeholder (Patricia) spoke about some of the cultural barriers involved with people coming forward and seeking support for gambling-related harms. Patricia proposed the creation of better and more anonymised spaces, that people can access with less shame. But, for this to work, more needs to be done in raising awareness and understanding in communities. Patricia explained:

*“...and for us [ethnic minority communities] it is the other way around; we need our community to be saying go through that door. You have got a problem, go through that door so ... we have to make it accessible to the community in order to make it OK for someone to go through the door ... If the community gives their stamp of approval, the rest of it is easy. So rather than trying to fix the person that the gambling, how do we get the people on side?”* Patricia, Stakeholder (Probation))

Some stakeholders highlighted that faith leaders could also play a significant role in terms of raising awareness and providing education, and also to help with support.

This research advocates involving ethnic minority community members as key stakeholders within decision-making processes (policy and practice) and in building services that understand and are responsive to the needs of ethnic minority groups. It was notable that participants in this study had an overall pessimistic view of the gambling industry and called for

changes in policies and services to reduce gambling-related harms.

## Recommendations

- **Further research about gambling-related harms and gambling and crime, which adopts an intersectional approach.**

This study points to an urgent need for further research, particularly with minoritised communities, that explores their specific and shared experiences of gambling-related harms and the relationship between gambling and crime. Further research needs to adopt an intersectional lens, locating people's lives within their wider socio-economic and cultural contexts. Research also needs to consider a wider and more diverse range of voices and experiences, and to ensure that people with lived experience have a central and meaningful role in the production of knowledge and research.

- **Need to raise awareness about gambling and gambling-related harms within ethnic minority communities.**

The findings point to a need to raise greater awareness about gambling-related harms within ethnic minority communities and among key societal institutions (e.g. health, education, religious, sport, housing, employment, benefit, criminal justice). Raising awareness about these issues needs to be done in an inclusive way, in partnership with communities and people with lived experiences.

- **Mandatory screening for gambling-related harms across the criminal justice system.**

Screening for gambling-related harms, however, is not on its own sufficient and greater thought needs to be given to how people involved with the criminal justice system due to a gambling-related crime can be offered more structured support for their gambling while under police investigation or under sentence (either in prison or the community).

- **Need for clearer national and local strategies in relation to ethnic minority communities and their experiences of gambling-related harms.**

This should include a community-involved/led structure to support the delivery of inclusive services. A partnership and strategic approach to design, implementation and review of treatment supports services to develop, manage, and coordinate a strategic approach to gambling harms. This work should be underpinned by an equality and health inequalities impact assessment framework in order to properly understand how it may impact on the work that is done across ethnically diverse communities.

- **Need for a community-involved approach.**

Building relationships with ethnic minority communities is important alongside ensuring better diversity and representation of different ethnic and faith communities at all levels of gambling oversight, including the Gambling Commission, regulation, treatment, and support services.

- **Need for gambling industry to engage with greater scrutiny and responsibility in relation to minoritised communities.**

Greater thought needs to be given to the accessibility of gambling along with safer gambling policies and advertising strategies, and the consequences of these for ethnic minority communities. Particular thought should be given to the licensing of gambling outlets in areas that are known to have higher socio-economic deprivation.

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## About the team

The research team comprised Dr Geraldine Brown (Coventry University), Dr Nicola Harding (Lancaster University), Dr Julie Trebilcock (Brunel University London), Dr Liz Riley (Betknowmore UK), Tony Sales (We Fight Fraud), and peer researchers Anil, Joseph, and Wendy. The team were supported by Frankie Graham, Steven Nyandu, and Anna Niemczewska (Betknowmore UK). You can read more about the research team [here](#).

## 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, comprising of academics and professionals 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.

Please visit [www.howardleague.org](http://www.howardleague.org) and join today.

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