The issue of potential harm through gambling is a topic of international concern. The impact of harmful gambling may have wide ranging social impact - with risk of negative effects on not only the person who gambled, but also their families, friends, and communities.

A gambling problem can have extreme, negative consequences for the gambler and for that person's social connections. Harmful gambling often has a significant financial impact on individuals and their families. This may lead to shame and stigma which may contribute to social isolation. Understanding gambling behaviour and the social outcomes of this activity may contribute to the development social policies in the area of gambling and addiction, with particular attention to policies which protect those vulnerable to the negative effects of gambling. In turn, the development of appropriate policies may help minimise the array of social, health, and economic costs associated with a gambling problem.

Participants in this study spoke of financial devastation, as well as social isolation. Both problem gamblers and their families also reported feelings of shame, stigma, and social isolation resulting from a gambling problem.
The purpose of our research was to examine the social impact of gambling in Ireland, and to understand the issues from the perspective of those affected.

In 2015 with funding from the Irish Research Council and support from the Department of Social Protection, we completed the first national study on impact, in which we spoke to the major stakeholders, including addiction service providers, recovering gamblers, the families and friends of gamblers, and the gambling industry. In December 2016, with funding from the Minister for Justice & Equality, we updated our literature review and invited stakeholders to comment on developing legislative issues around gambling in Ireland.

Addiction Service Providers were located throughout Ireland and included any counselling service that worked with gamblers or their social connections who had experienced harm. Recovering gamblers and their social connections came from diverse backgrounds. They were located across Ireland. They were from different age groups. They came from various socio-economic backgrounds.

Recovering gamblers had also suffered addiction to different forms of gambling, for example, one or more of casino games, fixed odds betting terminals (FOBTs), lottery tickets and scratch cards, betting on the horses or dogs, etc. Some had pursued land-based games, while others had followed online gambling.

Importantly, the first-hand accounts of individuals affected by gambling offer critical information about the social impact of harmful gambling. For those affected by gambling, this research provided an opportunity for these often unheard, vulnerable groups to have a voice, creating an important foundation of public experience to inform policy development. Our research explored perceptions of gambling in Ireland, the problems associated with problem gambling and opportunities for treatment and prevention. Because of the stigma around problem gambling, it is often very difficult for gamblers and their social connections to discuss gambling issues openly; stigma increases the hidden nature of a gambling problem and complicates recovery. This research made it possible for those affected by a gambling problem to take a step past this stigma to discuss the impact of gambling on them.

Research outcomes:
The research has led to multiple findings. However, participants agreed on three major social measures: they identified open discussion and educational initiatives, approaches at national level to facilitate those affected about gambling, and legislative measure as key requirements for addressing the risk for harmful gambling in Ireland. Today, we would like to highlight some of these needs identified by participants.

i) Participants’ desire for open discussion and education
Participants in this study expressed a need for open discussion about gambling and the risk it can pose to individuals and their families. Today’s public forum helps to support that open conversation.

Participants also spoke of a need for education. Some proposed education along the lines of life skills in the curriculum from primary education through to university level education.

While participants connected advertising with triggers for gambling, some suggested using advertising for positive impact to warn the public about the potential for harmful gambling. For instance, they suggested that advertising could be used successfully to help educate people and create awareness, similar to recent campaigns to increase public awareness and understanding of social issues, such as mental health.

ii) Participants’ views on approaches to harmful gambling
Participants in our study have identified the need for multiple supports to help treat and prevent problem gambling. There is an urgent need bring together people and information to create a unified, transparent approach to facilitate those affected by problem gambling. A national strategy, that encompasses government and charitable and volunteer bodies, is needed to address causes and outcomes of problem gambling in Ireland.

The framework for General Scheme of the Gambling Control Bill 2013, intended to update legislation in Ireland, provided for the establishment of a Social Fund, paid for by licence holders in the gambling industry, for the purposes of promoting responsible gambling and assisting those affected by gambling.

Under the draft framework, the Office for Gambling Control Ireland (OGCI), in consultation with an Advisory Committee on Responsible Gambling, consisting of “a nominee of the Minister for Social Protection, the voluntary / community sector, a
representative from the HSE [Health Services Executive] and two representatives from licence holders," would recommend distribution of the Social Fund for purposes such as education. This is in keeping with practice in the UK where the Gambling Commission requires gambling companies with UK customers to contribute money to fund research and services around problem gambling. Our research outcomes included a recommendation that the Social Fund included in the General Scheme of the Gambling Control Bill 2013 should provide significantly for public education about gambling, and do so neutrally without the influence of gambling operators.

Participants also noted the existence of services in the form of counselling and treatment centres to assist gamblers in recovery; however, study participants noted a lack of services to help family and friends affected by a loved one’s addiction. Participants called for action around harmful gambling to become a social priority, and for the development of additional and expanded services to help those affected.

iii) Participants’ views on specific legislative needs
First, participants in our research identified the passage and, importantly, the implementation of new and updated legislation around gambling as essential government tasks to protect the public.

Second, our interviewees suggested a variety of measures they wanted government to include around regulation. In particular, they wanted regulatory measures to provide a framework around gambling to protect those vulnerable to gambling addiction.

Some of the specific measures frequently noted involved the regulation of, for example:

- advertising
- increased taxation and licensing for gambling operators
- maximum spends
- measures to avoid underage gambling
- numbers of particular gambling establishments
- online gambling
- opening hours for gambling premises
- removal of fixed odds betting terminals
- standards around the gambling industry's obligation to alert the public to the risks of gambling
**Risk to Young People**

Of particular concern to participants was the risk of gambling to young people. Underage gambling was a common theme among recovering gamblers in our research. They frequently spoke of the early age at which they first saw gambling. The legal age to gamble in Ireland is 18. However, our participants reported collecting gambling winnings for relatives while they were underaged – and sometimes under the age of 10 years. They also reported an initial exposure to gambling as seeing adults gambling – both adult relatives and adults related to friends. From there, participants reported their initial gambling experiences as often occurring while young – and often underaged.

As their gambling continued, a number of recovering gamblers in our study reported that they progressed from land-based gambling opportunities to forms of digitised gambling, including digital gambling machines and online gambling.

**Technologies associated with gambling**

And this brings us to the relationship between technology and gambling. Participants in our research, including gamblers, family members, and addiction counsellors, identified technologies that enabled digitised access to gambling as potential factors in harmful gambling.

They referred to gambling via the Internet, computers, mobile phones, slot machines, casino games and machines, virtual races on screens at betting shops, television, social media, and tablet computer applications (apps). They described smart mobile devices, such as iPhones, as particularly convenient, because these devices enabled gambling anywhere and at any time.

In particular, technology now enables hidden gambling on phones, online, etc. Our work has revealed the digital space, which is continuously changing, is a critical point to address regarding gambling, particularly with regard to young people. Young people are often considered more digitally literate and routine users of technologies; this familiarity with technology may make them more vulnerable to online gambling, especially if they play, for instance, social casino games in which micro-transactions are completed to unlock additional play features.

Our second report found technology continues to feature in gambling, with gambling online and social media as popular means. The mobile phone is shown in research
to be a particular access point for gambling – just as participants in our study spoke of attraction of mobile phones in gambling.

The technological area of gambling is constantly changing. Recovering gamblers in our study spoke of technology as accelerating and deepening the effects of gambling, because the technology enabled secret gambling.

Our review found that responsible gambling measures can include self-exclusion and set limits on their gambling. However, research – and our gambling participants – have identified issues around self-exclusion measures, for example:
- the complexity of self-exclusion agreements
- the inability of exclusion agreements to exclude from multiple venues simultaneously
- gamblers’ using multiple accounts
- the shame felt when enquiring about self-exclusion
- an unwillingness or inability to admit the existence of a gambling problem
- and a lack of awareness about self-exclusion programmes.

In addition, our research revealed that social media are common forums for gaming opportunities. Because social media have developed rapidly and continuously, gambling operators can make sophisticated use of these technologies to interact with current and potential customers in new and evolving ways. Significantly, there is a blurring of lines between online gambling and social media games which simulate gambling. Importantly, social media may expose children to advertising and promotions on these platforms. While a range of age verification processes have been employed in different jurisdictions, there are technical and legal difficulties with online age verification, which have led some to argue that parental responsibility and user education are critical.

Since our work in 2016, additional technologies have arisen. For example, loot boxes or loot crates are a gaming feature in which the player can purchase random content through video games. New technologies post a challenge for regulatory bodies, not only for Ireland, but also for the EU as a whole.

**A complex gambling landscape**
The gambling landscape offers significant challenges for legislators, but challenges that participants in our research viewed as significant to address. Participants described harmful gambling as having profound, life changing impact on them, whether gamblers or their families and friends. And, significantly, they believed
government could and should act to protect them and those at future risk of a gambling problem.

Access to our research reports:

1. *Playing Social Roulette: The Social Impact of Gambling on Individuals and Groups in Ireland* was the first national study of the social impact of gambling in Ireland, running from December 2013 to the summer of 2015. This research was funded by the Irish Research Council with support from the Department of Social Protection. The final report may be freely downloaded via UCD’s Research Repository at [http://hdl.handle.net/10197/6796](http://hdl.handle.net/10197/6796)

2. *Developments in the Gambling Area: Emerging trends and issues supporting the development of policy and legislation in Ireland*, provided a further literature review, conducted in December 2016 and published in the following year. This project was funded by the Department of Justice & Equality. The final report may be freely downloaded via UCD’s Research Repository at [http://hdl.handle.net/10197/8612](http://hdl.handle.net/10197/8612)

Contact us via:
Dr. Crystal Fulton
University College Dublin
Email: [Crystal.Fulton@ucd.ie](mailto:Crystal.Fulton@ucd.ie)