

Social and Economic Impact of the Gambling Industry Committee inquiry: The Social and Economic Impact of the Gambling Industry

CLOSER, the home of longitudinal research – Written evidence (GAM0060)

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1. Summary

- 1.1 CLOSER, the home of longitudinal research, is an interdisciplinary partnership that brings together world-leading longitudinal studies with participants born throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, the British Library and the UK Data Service. Our work aims to maximise the use, value and impact of the UK's longitudinal studies in order to help improve our understanding of the social and biomedical challenges facing the country.
- 1.2 Longitudinal studies follow the same people and households over time, often from birth, collecting a wide array of information about study participants, which enable researchers and policymakers to explore people's complex lives and how changes in society affect health, community and education.
- 1.3 The UK's longitudinal studies are recognised as vital sources of evidence on how early circumstances and experiences affect people's lives from childhood to adulthood, providing insights into individual short and long-term change and the relationship between different elements of people's complex lives that cannot be obtained from any other data sources. They allow researchers to explore how different groups vary, and how and why people's lives change, enabling a greater understanding of the difference between causal relationships and correlation.
- 1.4 There is limited research examining gambling prevalence and behaviours in the UK and the associated social and economic costs and benefits. This lack of independent research affects the ability of academics and policymakers to understand fully the impacts of gambling to individuals and society as a whole.
- 1.5 Research using the CLOSER studies has investigated young people's gambling behaviour. The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) has asked study participants questions about gambling behaviour and investigated the background to regular and problem gambling. This research found that problem gambling behaviours are associated with poor mental health, involvement in crime and potentially harmful use of drugs and alcohol. It also highlights that the only gambling activity of study participants showing a consistent increase is online gambling and betting.

- 1.6 The relevant longitudinal data collected by the CLOSER studies are currently underutilised, therefore presenting a number of opportunities for further research and analysis into the prevalence and social and economic impact of gambling.
- 1.7 Given the paucity of data, a new longitudinal study on gambling should be considered. CLOSER is working with relevant bodies, including the Gambling Commission, to help explore how this can be progressed.
- 1.8 When designing interventions for problem gambling, it is important to recognise the relationship between other factors that may be associated with this behaviour, e.g. mental health and the home environment.

2. Longitudinal evidence (UK)

Response to Question 5 and 6. What are the social and economic costs of gambling? What are the social and economic benefits of gambling?

Response to Question 15. How are new forms of technology, including social media, affecting children's experiences of gambling? How are these experiences affecting gambling behaviour now, and how might they affect behaviour in the future?

- 2.1 Fundamentally, there is a paucity of research in the UK examining the impact, whether social or economic, of gambling, particularly that which examines change over time and across generations. This lack of independent research affects the ability of academics and policymakers to understand fully the social and economic costs and benefits of gambling.
- 2.2 The only CLOSER study that has examined gambling behaviour in detail and over time is the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC). ALSPAC is a longitudinal birth cohort study charting the lives of 14,500 people born in the former county of Avon between April 1991 and December 1992 as well as the lives of their parents and their children. To date, gambling behaviour questions have been asked four times in the ALSPAC study: first, when the child was age 6, their mothers and fathers provided information on their own gambling. Then at approximately ages 17, 20 and 24, the children in the study were asked about their gambling and, if they had gambled, were assessed using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).
- 2.3 Previous research using ALSPAC data examined the link between young persons' gambling behaviour and potential influences from childhood. Witnesses highlighted this research in the committee's 3rd September oral evidence session. GambleAware commissioned surveys about the young person's gambling behaviour when they were age 17 years and again when they were age 20. In summary, this research found that at age 20, a little more than 10% of those surveyed were regular (weekly or more) gamblers. Apart from National Lottery products, online betting was the most common form of regular gambling. Evidence from this study found that problem gambling increased significantly when young people first have legal

access to most forms of commercial gambling, suggesting a need to focus on and protect this age group. [1]

2.4 New research using data from ALSPAC participants, 'The ALSPAC Gambling Study', describes their gambling behaviour between the ages of 17 and 24, investigates the background to regular and problem gambling, and explores the associations with other addictive behaviours and mental health.

2.5 This research found that 54% of all 17 year olds had participated in gambling in the past year, rising to 68% at 20 years and 66% at 24 years. The most common forms of gambling were playing scratchcards, the lottery and private betting with friends. Gambling on activities via the internet increased markedly between 17 and 24 years, especially among males. At 24 years, nearly 50% of all gambling activities in males were online, compared to 11% for females.

2.6 This research identified a number of associated factors with those young people who regularly gamble, including their home environment. Regular gamblers were more likely to be male, smoke, abuse alcohol and use social media than non-gamblers, have mothers who struggle financially and parents who gambled regularly. These associated factors identified in ALSPAC are in line with those found in other large, prospective international longitudinal studies (highlighted in Section 3 of this submission).

2.7 Emphasising that many young people gamble without any harm, the research underlines that a significant minority (6-7%, mainly males) show problem gambling behaviours that are associated with poor mental health, involvement in crime and potentially harmful use of drugs and alcohol. It also highlights that the only activity showing a consistent increase over the age range of the study was online gambling and betting and, crucially, that patterns of gambling were set by the age of 20 years. Whilst it should be recognised this finding is from one longitudinal study, it does suggest that early identification and targeted interventions, such as education, before this age could help reduce problem gambling behaviour. Note, a full report on this study will be published in October.

2.8 The only other CLOSER studies that have collected information about people's gambling are the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study and the Millennium Cohort Study. The 1970 British Birth Cohort Study follows the lives of 17,198 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. The Millennium Cohort Study follows the lives of 19,517 children born across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2000-01.

2.9 In 1986, when participants were aged 16, the 1970 British Cohort Study asked 6,000 16 year olds if they spend money on betting and or gambling. Of these, 5% spent money on betting or gambling, but of these, only 5% saw it as their most important spending activity. The question was not repeated in future sweeps (surveys of study participants). [2]

2.10 The Millennium Cohort Study collected some baseline information about gambling behaviour when the study participants were age 14. They were asked if they have spent any of their own money on gambling over the past four weeks and which games they played (fruit

machines, private bet with friends, placing a bet at a betting shop, or any other gambling, e.g. online). [3]

2.11 A total of 11,872 participants were asked these questions. Around 4% had used fruit machines, 6% placed a private bet for money, just under 2% had placed a bet at a betting shop and a similar percentage said they had taken part in other gambling. [3] The same questions were asked at the age 17 survey. At the time of writing, this data is not yet available, but is expected to be released before the end of 2019.

2.12 Note these longitudinal studies also ask a range of contextual questions in their surveys, including about study participant's mental health and wellbeing, their home environment, and background, enabling exploration of associations between behaviour and context.

2.13 Looking beyond the CLOSER studies, since 2002 the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) has asked study participants a question on the amount won on football pools, national lottery or other forms of gambling, however no research using this data have been published. [4]

3. Longitudinal evidence (International)

Response to Question 8. What might be learned from international comparisons?

3.1 Oral witnesses have already surfaced some of the international longitudinal research on gambling behaviours, including from Canada. Other international longitudinal research worth noting is from Sweden, Denmark and Norway. This includes 'Swelogs', the Swedish longitudinal gambling study which ran from 2005 to 2016, and academic research in these countries investigating prevalence and problematic gambling among adolescents; associations between problematic gambling and later problem gambling; and the relationship between mental health symptoms and gambling behaviour in the transition from adolescence to emerging adulthood. [5]

3.2 Evidence from this Nordic longitudinal research found there was a high degree of mobility in and out of gambling problems over time on an individual level, reflecting the complex nature of people's lives and the need to understand behaviour over time. On prevalence, research found the frequency of gambling activities were low in both sexes, although higher among boys compared to girls, and problem gambling was almost eight times more common among boys. [5]

3.3 Key lessons we can learn from these studies and research are:

- 1) The importance of understanding how the changing nature of peoples' lives affects their gambling behaviour;
- 2) The need to conduct longitudinal research with a large sample in order to capture information over time;

3) The importance of recognising the common associations with gambling and problem gambling behaviour, for example having parents who gamble regularly [5].

4. Missing data and evidence gaps

Response to Question 9. If, as the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board (RGSB) has suggested, there is limited evidence on which to base sound decisions about gambling by children and young people, what steps should be taken to rectify this situation?

4.1 Fundamentally, there is currently a lack of data and subsequent evidence on gambling prevalence and behaviours in the UK.

4.2 To help fill these evidence gaps and support world-class research, CLOSER has been working with the Gambling Commission to explore the existing evidence and the potential of a new longitudinal gambling study. CLOSER is convening a roundtable discussion in October 2019 to bring together experts in longitudinal study design and representatives from the Gambling Commission, Advisory Board for Safer Gambling and GambleAware to explore how this can be taken forward.

4.3 There is an urgent need for new research exploring how individual gamblers' behaviour changes over time. Longitudinal studies are uniquely placed to explore the factors that cause people to start, continue and stop gambling at different points in their lives, help to understand more about how people move in and out of harmful play and treatment, and crucially, examine changes over time and across generations. [6]

4.4 Witnesses (including Dr Heather Wardle and Dr Anna van der Gaag) have echoed this call in the committee oral evidence sessions of the need for longitudinal research to understand trends and behaviours and how these evolve over time. [7]

5. Recommendations

5.1 The need to exploit existing publicly funded UK longitudinal studies: there should be a renewed effort to maximise the existing data from the relevant CLOSER longitudinal studies, for example, by adding questions about gambling behaviours to future sweeps (survey of study participants) and/or commissioning new research. We recommend the industry funds specific research about gambling behaviour, including the development of relevant questions for future sweeps in the existing UK longitudinal studies.

5.2 To address the issues around the paucity of data, a new longitudinal study examining the social and economic impact of gambling should be considered. International studies and associated research demonstrate the value of conducting a bespoke longitudinal study into gambling behaviour. Given the high and ongoing costs associated with setting up and running a longitudinal study, it is unrealistic to expect the UK research councils to fund this. We recommend that the gambling industry bear the majority of the costs of any new longitudinal study, along with contributions from the relevant UKRI Research Councils. Ensuring access to relevant data will be key to the success of any longitudinal study; therefore, it is vital to ensure access to gambling companies' data for bona fide researchers.

5.3 Recognise the changing nature of gambling behaviour over time: given the findings from the ALSPAC study on the rise of online gambling among adolescents, future research questions and longitudinal studies need to adapt to changes in gambling behaviour.

5.4 When designing interventions for problem gambling, it is important to recognise the relationship between other factors that may be associated with this type of behaviour, including mental health and the home environment.

6. About CLOSER

6.1 CLOSER, the home of longitudinal research, brings together eight world-leading longitudinal studies with participants born throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Our work maximises the use, value and impact of these and other longitudinal studies to help improve our understanding of key social and biomedical challenges. [8]

6.2 There are currently eight studies in CLOSER: four national and three regional birth cohort studies and Understanding Society (the UK Household Longitudinal Study). CLOSER is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Medical Research Council (MRC). [9]

6.3 We enable change over time and across generations to be better understood: We bring longitudinal data together in a consistent format – a process known as data harmonisation. This is allowing longitudinal researchers to compare data from different studies for the first time, revealing how and why the country is changing over time – and what this means for the future.

6.4 We enhance insights through data linkage: We lead research to link data held by government to survey data collected by longitudinal studies across a range of areas, including health, geography, education and social media. Linking this data enables researchers to gain rich insights into how different aspects of people's lives interrelate.

6.5 We help researchers find data: Our flagship resource, CLOSER Discovery, enables researchers to search and browse questionnaires and data from the UK's leading longitudinal studies to find out what data are available in unprecedented detail. [10]

6.6 We inspire and equip the next generation of scientists: We provide training and capacity building opportunities for researchers and those running longitudinal studies. Our Learning Hub has information and resources aimed at those in academia, government and the third sector to help them better understand the value of longitudinal research and how to use the data. [11]

6.7 We support innovative research projects: We support research projects that use longitudinal data to investigate a wide range of areas of interest, including obesity, physical activity, mental health, and social media. Many of the research projects we support are creating harmonised datasets, improving data linkage or developing other resources for the wider longitudinal research community.

6.8 We maximise the impact of longitudinal research: We work to achieve the greatest possible impact for CLOSER's outputs and activities, as well as our studies. We do this by engaging with policy makers, producing longitudinal resources for the academic community and facilitating research that addresses the biomedical, social, economic and environmental policy challenges facing the UK.

7. References

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[8] <https://www.closer.ac.uk/about/>

[9] <https://www.closer.ac.uk/about/partners/>

[10] <https://discovery.closer.ac.uk/>

[11] <https://learning.closer.ac.uk/>

6 September 2019