

Does a history of gaming in childhood represent a risk factor for gambling in young adulthood?

Evidence from an Irish cohort ^{1, 2}

Gretta Mohan*

ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing concern among parents, researchers, regulators and policy-makers about the rapid expansion and increasing sophistication of gaming and gambling opportunities in contemporary society. A 'gateway hypothesis' has been proposed, which posits that gaming in childhood could predict future gambling. This study addresses a dearth of information related to the growing policy-relevant issue of whether there is an association between early gaming behaviours and subsequent gambling behaviour.

DATA AND METHODS

The research uses data longitudinal data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study, following over 4,200 children, born in 1998. Information pertaining to gaming behaviours was gathered at three distinct time points: when the child was 9 years old (collected in 2007/8), 17 years (in 2015/16), and 20 (2018/19). Specifically, the research question asks: Is engagement with gaming at 9 years of age, and then at 17 and 20 years, associated with frequency of gambling at 20 years?

Statistical analysis investigates the predictive relationship between early and later gaming behaviours and subsequent engagement in gambling. The modelling controls for key factors such as sex, socioeconomic status, risk appetite, and other risky behaviours, including alcohol consumption.

RESULTS

Summary statistics

In terms of gaming activities, 86.8% of 9-year-olds reported using a computer to play video games in 2007/8, while two-thirds (66.8%) of the primary caregivers of the 9-year-olds reported that the study child spent more than 1 hour gaming on a typical day – with a substantially greater proportion of the caregivers of male

¹ This Bulletin summaries the findings from: Mohan, G. (2025) 'Kid gamers to adult gamblers? An investigation of gaming in childhood and young adult gambling'. *International Gambling Studies*.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2025.2488867>

* Correspondence: gretta.mohan@esri.ie

² This research was supported by the ESRI's Grant-in-Aid.

children reporting this than females. At 17 years, 39.6% of young people reported engaging in gaming activities online, while at 20 years, a slightly higher proportion (41.1%) reported engaging in online gaming; decreasing over time for females.

Turning to gambling, 3.6% of 20-year-olds reported (non-lottery) gambling at least on a weekly basis, with a further 3.6% reporting gambling on at least a monthly basis. There was growth in engagement in online gambling between 17 and 20 years, from 2.9% to 9%, representing a three-fold increase. Males were significantly more likely to engage in gambling activities than females.

Results from statistical modelling

Multiple regression models, adjusting for a range of socio-economic and health characteristics, revealed that those who were online gaming at 17 years were 1.4 times more likely to be more frequently engaging in online gambling at 20 years (compared to those who were not online gaming at 17). Twenty-year-olds who were online gaming were 1.7 times more likely to be online gambling more frequently. However, no association between early computer-based gaming at 9 years and subsequent gambling behaviours at 20 was uncovered for this cohort.

CONCLUSIONS

While this research found no statistically significant link between childhood gaming (at age 9) and later gambling (at 17 and 20), online gaming in adolescence and young adulthood strongly correlated with both online gaming and gambling frequency at age 20. This suggests a need for policies and regulations to mitigate potential harm.

We note that the time-frame of data collection is important. The features which have led to greater 'gamblification' of gaming such as loot boxes, skins, and social casino games are a relatively new development in gaming, which did not exist in 2007 when the childhood gaming behaviours were collected in this study. For example, in the 2000s, children's gaming was largely confined to console-based experiences (for example, PlayStation, Nintendo, Xbox etc), mainly offering immersive single-player adventures. However, the landscape shifted dramatically with the rise of mobile and online gaming in the 2010s, with social media and online communities beginning to grow, offering shared virtual spaces for players to interact and create. This period also witnessed the growing influence of independent game developers, leading to a more diverse range of genres and styles. As such, the effects of these new innovations in gaming on gambling behaviours are not observed in the current research study – and warrant further academic inquiry in a more contemporary cohort of young children. Given the rapidly evolving nature of online gaming and gambling, ongoing monitoring of these behaviours in younger and older cohorts is crucial.