

Childhood exposure to gambling increases likelihood of problem gambling as an adult^{1, 2}

Diarmaid Ó Ceallaigh, Shane Timmons*, Deirdre Robertson and Pete Lunn

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

An estimated 1 in 30 adults in Ireland suffers from problem gambling, meaning that their gambling behaviour harms their finances, wellbeing and social circle. International evidence suggests that childhood experiences of gambling, such as gambling oneself or having a parent who gambled frequently, can increase the chances of developing problem gambling. This study tested for a link between childhood exposure to gambling and problem gambling as an adult within a large, representative sample in Ireland. The study used an anonymous, online survey, because in-person or telephone surveys can lead people to underreport their gambling behaviour.

DATA AND METHODS

A nationally representative sample of 1,663 adults took part in the online survey and responded to all questions relevant for this study. Participants reported if they had gambled before the age of 18, whether their parents gambled (and how frequently, if they did) and their parents' attitudes towards gambling. We measured problem gambling using a standard survey scale called the Problem Gambling Severity Index.

RESULTS

Almost two-thirds of adults (64%) reported gambling before 18. The most common forms of gambling were slot machines, scratch cards, horse or dog betting, gambling amongst friends, bingo and lotteries. Those who gambled as children were almost twice as likely to have problem gambling in adulthood. Having a

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Ó Ceallaigh, D., Timmons, S., Robertson, D. and Lunn, P. D. (2026). Childhood gambling experiences and adult problem gambling. *International Gambling Studies*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2025.2591411>

² This research was funded by the Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland.

* Correspondence: shane.timmons@esri.ie

parent who gambled increased the risk by a third, while having a parent who gambled heavily almost doubled the risk. Having a parent with a positive attitude towards gambling also increased the risk. When these risk factors were combined, the risk amplified: those who gambled before 18 and had a parent who gambled heavily had a four-fold increase in the risk of problem gambling.

For those aged under 40 years old, the link between parental gambling and adult problem gambling was weaker. This may reflect the younger generation's greater exposure to online gambling and marketing, whereas the older generation's exposure occurred mostly at home. Certain forms of childhood gambling, such as sports betting, loot boxes and casino games, were linked to a higher risk of problem gambling in later life, although more evidence is needed to measure the impact of these relatively less common forms of gambling.

CONCLUSIONS

Childhood gambling experiences strongly predict problem gambling as an adult. The findings from this research support stricter regulation to protect children from gambling exposure, including better age checks, limits on gambling marketing, and regulation of products that appeal to children. Helping parents to reduce gambling may also help, although the weakening influence of parents in younger cohorts suggests that broader measures to limit exposure outside the home are important. Further research should test how well these measures work.