

# Navigating an addictive and toxic landscape:

A rapid review of evidence concerning  
contemporary influences on problem  
gambling among young men

Chris Harkins



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## For more information about this report, please contact:

Chris Harkins, Public Health Programme Manager,  
Glasgow Centre for Population Health

[Christopher.Harkins@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Christopher.Harkins@glasgow.ac.uk)



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# Executive summary

## Background and purpose

Problem gambling among young men (defined broadly as 16 to 30 years of age) in the UK is an increasingly complex public health concern, shaped by digital environments, social media cultures, emerging technologies and wider psychosocial vulnerabilities. This rapid review synthesises current UK-relevant evidence to identify key themes, risks and gaps in understanding, with the aim of informing policy, public health leadership and frontline practice.

## Approach

A rapid review methodology was used to provide timely and relevant insight. UK literature published between 2015, and January 2026 was prioritised, supplemented by selected international studies where UK evidence was limited. Seven thematic areas were examined, spanning digital gambling environments, video gaming, social media and advertising, masculinity and influencer cultures, trauma and mental health, substance use and violence, and structural factors such as disadvantage.

## Key findings

Problem gambling among young men rarely occurs in isolation. Evidence links gambling harms with trauma, adverse mental health outcomes, substance use, suicidality and intimate partner violence, indicating clustering of harms and the need for holistic, trauma-informed responses.

The most robust evidence reviewed concerns gambling-like features in video games, particularly “loot boxes” and “skin gambling”. Early exposure to these mechanisms primes and normalises gambling behaviours among children and adolescents. From legal, moral and ethical perspectives, such practices are incompatible with safeguarding principles within UK society.

The review also highlights extensive exposure of young men, and notably children, to gambling marketing through social media and online platforms, contributing to early

normalisation. Evidence directly linking masculinity influencers, flexing culture and cryptocurrency gambling platforms to problem gambling remains extremely limited; however, these domains represent emerging, under-regulated risk environments requiring urgent attention.

Significant evidence gaps remain in estimating prevalence, characterising young men at greatest risk, and understanding the interaction between poverty, disadvantage and contemporary digital gambling ecosystems.

## Implications of the evidence reviewed

The evidence reviewed has distinct implications for policy makers and practitioners involved in the prevention of, and recovery from, problem gambling among young men.

For policy makers, the findings emphasise the need for prevention strategies informed by the contemporary gambling ecosystem, including digital platforms, social media influencers and marketing and emerging online gambling technologies, and support stronger upstream regulatory action and targeted focus on young men as a priority population.

For practitioners, the evidence underscores the importance of trauma-informed, holistic and culturally attuned approaches that recognise the clustering of gambling harms with mental ill-health, substance use and wider psychosocial adversity, and that support proactive identification and engagement beyond self-disclosure. Collectively, these implications highlight that an informed understanding of the cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial environments shaping young men's gambling is essential to effective prevention policy and recovery-oriented practice.

## Conclusion

Despite clear gaps in the evidence base, this rapid review identifies timely and credible signals of harm from gambling that demand attention. By grounding its analysis in the lived realities of young men in 2026, including the social, digital, economic and cultural influences that shape gambling behaviour and the pathways into problem gambling, this review offers a nuanced and culturally relevant foundation for policy and practice.

This clearer understanding of how, where and why gambling harms emerge enables more effective, targeted and responsive interventions. With coordinated leadership, improved regulation and sustained investment in research and prevention, there is a meaningful opportunity to reduce gambling-related harm and improve outcomes for young men, their families and communities.

# Key terms used in this report

## **Gambling**

Gambling refers to staking money or something of value on an outcome that is uncertain and partly or wholly determined by chance. It is central to this review because understanding what counts as gambling, and how it can be framed as socially desirable, entertainment or skill shapes how risk is recognised among young men.

## **Problem gambling**

Problem gambling describes persistent or recurrent gambling behaviour that results in significant distress or impairment across areas such as finances, relationships, work or mental wellbeing. This is a key concept because it provides the primary lens through which severity, escalation and potential need for intervention are understood.

## **Gambling harms**

Gambling harms refer to the adverse consequences of gambling that can extend beyond the individual to affect families, relationships and communities. The term matters because a harms-based framing encourages attention to wider impacts and prevention, rather than focussing solely on diagnosis or individual responsibility.

## **Landscape**

In the context of this review “landscape” is used to refer to the cultural, social, economic, digital and normative conditions that shape how the behaviours of young men are learned, interpreted and reinforced. It is important here because young men’s gambling does not occur in isolation, but within contexts that influence identity, aspiration, coping and risk-taking.

## **Toxic/Hegemonic masculinity**

Toxic or hegemonic masculinity denotes dominant social ideals about “successful” masculinity, often emphasising competitiveness, status, control and emotional restraint. It is relevant because these norms can shape young men’s attitudes to risk, winning/losing, and whether they disclose harm or seek support.

## **Manosphere**

The manosphere is a loose network of online communities and content that promotes rigid, adversarial and often misogynistic and anti-feminist ideas about gender and masculinity. It is relevant because these narratives may shape some young men’s broader beliefs about power, entitlement, risk and grievance that can intersect with harmful coping strategies, including gambling.

## **Social media**

Social media refers to digital platforms where users create, share and engage with content within networked communities. Social media is a major site of identity formation, norm-setting and behavioural reinforcement for young men, including around consumption and risk.



### **Social media advertising**

Social media advertising is paid or sponsored content delivered through platforms using targeting based on user data and engagement. Targeted advertising can shape awareness, normalisation and perceived legitimacy of gambling products within young men's everyday digital environments.

### **Social media influencers**

Social media influencers are individuals who monetise attention and trust through content creation, sponsorships and brand partnerships. Influencer marketing can blur boundaries between entertainment and promotion, potentially shaping perceptions of gambling's desirability, risk and social acceptability.

### **Social media “flexing culture”**

Flexing culture refers to online performances of wealth, success and status, often presented as aspirational and attainable. It is relevant because it can intensify social comparison, pressures to “win big,” and narratives that position gambling as a shortcut to status.

### **Masculinity influencers**

Masculinity influencers are creators whose content centres on ideals of masculinity, often involving performance of confidence, dominance, wealth or sexual success. These portrayed ideals can intersect with gambling-related identity, aspiration and attitudes toward vulnerability or help-seeking.

### **Gambling ecosystems**

Gambling ecosystems describe the interconnected set of products, platforms, marketing practices, influencers, technologies and cultural narratives that surround gambling participation. Contemporary gambling risk is shaped by how these components combine to increase exposure, access and reinforcement.

### **Digital cultures**

Digital cultures refer to the shared meanings, practices and norms that develop within online spaces, including gaming, streaming and social platforms. They are important because they influence what is perceived as normal, humorous, impressive or acceptable, including gambling-like behaviours and risk-taking.

### **Online gambling platforms**

Online gambling platforms are digital services that enable betting and gambling activities through websites or apps. They are central here because platform design (speed, accessibility, rewards, frictionless payment) can shape patterns of engagement and escalation.

### **Substance use**

Substance use refers to consumption of alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, ranging from occasional to dependent use. It is relevant because substance use can interact with gambling through impaired judgement, coping motivations, and overlapping risk environments.





### **Co-morbidities**

Co-morbidities are co-occurring conditions that may include mental health difficulties, substance use issues or other behavioural addictions. The term is important because problem gambling is often understood clinically and socially within broader patterns of vulnerability rather than as a standalone issue.

### **Intimate partner violence**

Intimate partner violence (IPV) includes physical, psychological, sexual or financial abuse within intimate relationships. It is relevant because gambling-related financial strain, conflict and coercive dynamics may intersect with relationship safety and support needs.

### **Trauma**

Trauma refers to psychological and physiological impacts of distressing experiences that overwhelm a person's capacity to cope. Trauma-informed perspectives help explain why gambling may be used as escape, regulation or control, and why responses may need to address underlying distress.

### **Trauma-informed practice**

Trauma-informed practice recognises the pervasive impact of trauma and embeds principles of safety, trust and empowerment in policy and service delivery. In the context of problem gambling among young men, it is vital given the frequent co-occurrence of trauma, mental ill-health and substance use, ensuring responses address underlying distress as well as gambling behaviours.

### **Childhood trauma**

Childhood trauma includes adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, household dysfunction or chronic insecurity during development. Such adversity can shape coping strategies, risk-taking, emotional regulation and later vulnerability to addictive behaviours.

### **Video game microtransactions**

Microtransactions are in-game purchases of digital items, upgrades or currency, often designed to encourage repeated spending. They familiarise young people with rapid, reward-based spending systems and blurred distinctions between play, chance and purchase.

### **Grooming / priming of future gamblers**

Grooming or priming refers to processes through which repeated exposure to gambling-like cues, mechanics or marketing makes gambling seem normal and low-risk over time. This concept is important because it draws attention to how early experiences in digital environments can shape later attitudes and behaviours.

### **Skins gambling**

Skins gambling involves wagering virtual cosmetic items from video games, often with real-world monetary value and exchangeability. It is relevant because it illustrates how gambling-like practices can emerge in youth-oriented digital spaces outside traditional gambling venues.





### **Loot boxes**

Loot boxes are purchasable in-game items that provide randomised rewards of variable value. They matter because their chance-based mechanics resemble gambling and raise questions about children's exposure to gambling-like design features.

### **Cryptocurrency**

Cryptocurrency is a decentralised digital currency enabling fast, sometimes anonymised transactions across borders. It can facilitate new forms of online gambling access and marketing that may sit outside familiar consumer safeguards.

### **Crypto casinos**

Crypto casinos are gambling platforms that use cryptocurrency for deposits and withdrawals, often operating transnationally. The term matters because it highlights how regulatory, identity verification and consumer protection contexts may differ from conventional gambling platforms.

### **Holistic responses**

Holistic responses refer to prevention and support approaches that consider psychological, social, cultural and structural factors, rather than focussing only on gambling behaviour in isolation. This is important because it foregrounds multi-component action across policy, services and communities to address complex risk contexts.



# Introduction

## Defining problem gambling and gambling harms

Across cultures and historical periods, human beings have shown a persistent attraction to gambling, reflecting the enduring appeal of reward obtained through luck and chance rather than proportional effort<sup>1</sup>. Philosophical accounts, from as far back as Aristotle, have situated this inclination within broader human tendencies toward hope, uncertainty, and the overvaluation of favourable outcomes under risk<sup>2</sup>. From an evolutionary and social standpoint, such behaviour may be understood as risk-taking aimed at accelerated gains in resources or status. Within this long-standing human pattern, young men have been widely regarded, both in philosophical reflection and societal understanding, as particularly predisposed to risk-taking, an assumption that precedes and frames the empirical evidence examined in this report<sup>3</sup>.

The commercial gambling industry has seen an unprecedented expansion globally in recent years<sup>4</sup>, not least through the increase in, and normalisation of online sports gambling platforms<sup>5</sup>. This growth has been partly driven by legislative and policy changes over the past 20 years, including the *Gambling Act 2005*, which facilitated the expansion of online platforms and advertising, thereby increasing the accessibility and visibility of gambling<sup>6</sup>. The global gambling yield (the total amount of money lost by consumers to the gambling industry) is estimated to reach £510 billion by 2028<sup>7</sup>. In the UK, the total amount gambled, measured as Gross Gambling Yield (GGY), reached approximately £16.8 billion for the year ending March 2025, a rise from £15.1 billion in the previous year<sup>8</sup>, with online gambling driving much of this increase<sup>A</sup>. This global and UK growth has been accompanied by a rising acknowledgment of gambling as a public health issue, requiring population-level prevention and intervention strategies alongside individual support and recovery services, as well as a clearer understanding of specific community needs<sup>9</sup>.

“Problem gambling” is characterised by persistent and recurrent gambling behaviour that leads to significant distress or impairment, including financial hardship, relationship breakdown, psychological distress, and in some cases, suicidality and criminality<sup>10</sup>. The broader concept of “gambling harms” extends beyond the individual gambler, encompassing the adverse ripple effects of problem gambling on families, communities, and society, such as debt, loss of productivity, and pressures on health and social care systems<sup>11</sup>. Further detail as to how problem gambling and gambling harms are

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<sup>A</sup> <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/statistics-and-research/publication/industry-statistics-annual-report-financial-year-april-2024-to-march-2025>



conceptualised within Scotland’s public health landscape can be found in the 2025 Public Health Scotland *publication Healthcare Needs Assessment of Gambling Harm in Scotland (PHS-HCNA)*<sup>B</sup>.

Problem gambling or “Gambling disorder”, as defined in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision (ICD-11)<sup>C</sup> is included under the category “Disorders due to addictive behaviours,” recognising it as a behavioural addiction that parallels substance use disorders in clinical criteria and impact. Similarly, within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5)<sup>D</sup>, gambling disorder is classified within the chapter on Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders, making it the only non-substance-related disorder in that category and reflecting the view that its clinical features mirror those of substance addiction.

Problem gambling is not confined to one demographic group – evidence shows that men and women, people of all ages, and those across the income spectrum can be vulnerable at times<sup>12</sup>. Evidence relating to problem gambling within minority groups is slowly emerging, with the LGBT+ community<sup>13</sup>, disabled people<sup>14</sup> and racially minoritised communities<sup>15</sup> each facing particular risks, underlying mechanisms of addiction, and disparities in treatment accessibility<sup>16</sup>. Although gambling harms can potentially impact anyone, evidence also suggests that higher prevalence is associated with specific social, demographic and environmental conditions; meaning that there is a health inequality dimension to gambling related harms<sup>17</sup>. Indeed the 2021 Scottish Health Survey reports higher levels of gambling harms among Scotland’s more disadvantaged communities, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)<sup>E</sup>.

## **Problem gambling: rationale for prioritising a focus on young men**

Emergent evidence and expert perspectives support that young men warrant particular focus and consideration as a priority group for reducing and preventing problem gambling and gambling harms<sup>18</sup>. The impacts of gambling can be tragic; indeed, suicide is a leading cause of death among young adults, especially young men<sup>19</sup>.

In recent years, increased attention has been given to the extent to which problem gambling should be considered a risk factor for suicidality<sup>4</sup>. For example, a 2026 long-term

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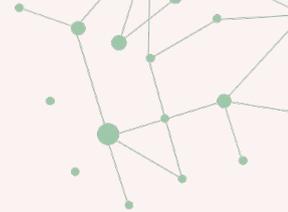
<sup>B</sup> [https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/32522/2025\\_04\\_08-final\\_healthcare-needs-assessment-of-gambling-harm-in-scotland-2025.pdf](https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/32522/2025_04_08-final_healthcare-needs-assessment-of-gambling-harm-in-scotland-2025.pdf)

<sup>C</sup> <https://icd.who.int/en/>

<sup>D</sup> <https://psychiatryonline.org/doi/book/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

<sup>E</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2022/11/scottish-health-survey-2021-volume-1-main-report/documents/scottish-health-survey-2021-volume-1-main-report/scottish-health-survey-2021-volume-1-main-report/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-health-survey-2021-volume-1-main-report.pdf>





cohort study reports that among young adults in the UK, harmful gambling is associated with increased suicide attempts<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, a 2023 longitudinal survey showed that increases in severity of problem gambling are associated with increased suicide attempts among young people in the UK<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, a 2021 cross-sectional study reported that attempted suicide was nine times higher in young men with problem gambling compared to those with no indication of problem gambling<sup>22</sup>. Prevalence studies internationally have reported that males in young adulthood tend to have the highest rates of problem gambling<sup>23</sup>.

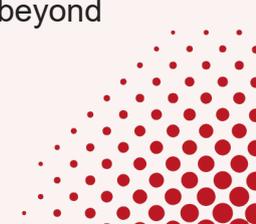
From a public health perspective, prevention and early intervention in problem gambling are vital; adolescence and early adulthood are formative life stages during which several behaviours, including health behaviours and coping strategies<sup>24</sup> are formed<sup>25</sup>. Behavioural patterns established during these years also have long-lasting consequences for both physical and mental health later in life<sup>26, 27</sup>. Based on this evidence, we can broadly say that late adolescence and young adulthood represent an important intervention window to prevent problem gambling and its subsequent harms, not least suicidal ideation and attempts<sup>23</sup>.

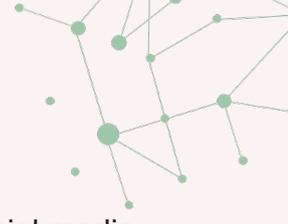
## **The underexamined landscape influencing problem gambling among young men: a case for rapid review of evidence**

Within the UK and Scotland, we argue that problem gambling is one of several interrelated risks that some young men encounter within what could be described as a toxic and addictive landscape<sup>28</sup>. Within this landscape we situate problem gambling within the cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial environments that young men navigate in 2026.

An area of concerning influence within the contemporary cultural environment young men occupy is the emergence of hegemonic or toxic masculinity, or the manosphere<sup>29</sup>, which may promote aggressive competitiveness, misogyny and anti-feminist views through primarily digital platforms and social media<sup>30</sup>. While it is beyond the scope of this rapid review to explicate the implications of varying forms of toxic masculinity for public health, a recent 2026 study has demonstrated that toxic masculinity is linked to men's restricted emotional expression, which is in-turn associated with lower mental health help-seeking intentions<sup>31</sup>.

Whilst the concepts of toxic masculinity are developing, complex and sometimes contested, their reach, engagement and relevance within the lives of young men is generally recognised<sup>32</sup>. While it is also likely that only a small proportion of young men actively and directly engage with or participate in toxic masculinity and manosphere communities, the influence of these extreme beliefs and ideologies can extend well beyond





these spaces<sup>33</sup>. Elements of such narratives often permeate more mainstream social media influencers and “flexing” cultural discourses, subtly shaping attitudes and behaviours among a wider group of young men<sup>34</sup>, particularly in contexts associated with risk-taking, the pursuit of social validation, and gambling-related practices<sup>35</sup>.

These underlying cultural influences experienced by young men dovetail with features of modern gambling practice within the commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial environments, including the normalisation of sports gambling<sup>5</sup>, constant exposure to targeted social media advertising and promotions from gambling platforms<sup>36</sup>, highly addictive 24/7 online gambling and casino platforms<sup>37</sup>, and the early years “priming” of adolescents, particularly males, to gamble through targeted social media<sup>38</sup> and gambling-like features in video games<sup>39</sup>.

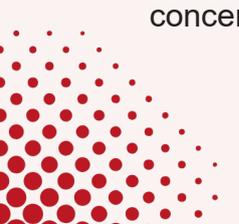
Collectively we contend that these influences create a toxic and addictive landscape which actively promotes gambling. Furthermore, some young men may have pre-existing poor mental health and patterns of substance use that problem gambling could exacerbate, while others may develop such issues as a consequence of disordered gambling<sup>40</sup>. Stigma surrounding mental health and help-seeking is likely to affect all young men to some degree<sup>41</sup>. This review will seek to examine the available evidence relating to these environments, factors and influences and how they relate to problem gambling.

To enhance the relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of policies, interventions and campaigns aimed at preventing and supporting recovery from problem gambling among young men, in this review of evidence, we urge that policy makers, public health professionals and gambling-harms specialists must develop a deeper understanding of the cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial environments experienced by young men.

Recognising the addictive, competitive and often harmful norms that shape many young men’s identities and behaviours<sup>42</sup> enables policy makers and practitioners to plan and deliver holistic and realistic recovery and prevention campaigns, support and services. It also supports more effective and authentic dialogue between healthcare professionals and affected young men.

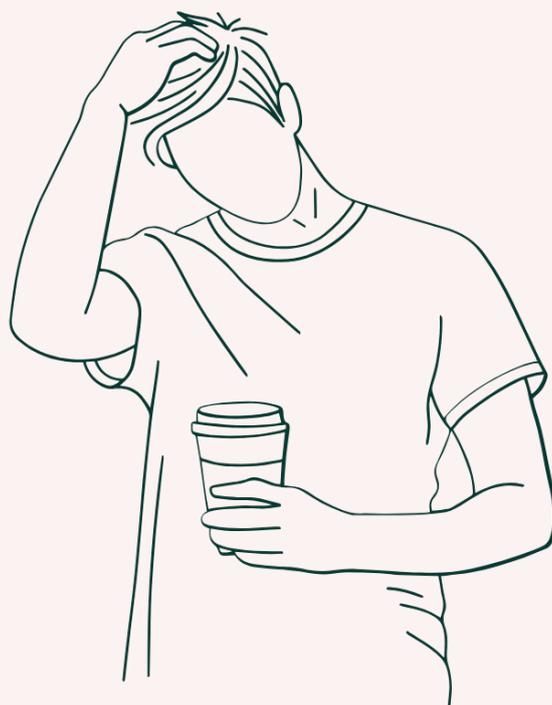
Approaches which recognise the contemporary landscape that young men inhabit will be more effective in identifying where, when and how gambling problems take root, how relapses may occur, and will be able to respond to the external pressures and influences that can trigger deteriorations in mental health among young men and problematic gambling urges. By situating individual experiences within this broader context, policies and interventions can better address not only the behaviour itself but also the structural and social forces that sustain vulnerability to problem gambling and gambling harms.

This rapid review of the existing evidence is therefore essential to illuminate these interconnected issues and to assess the strength, limitations and gaps within the current knowledge base. Such an approach enables the synthesis of diverse and, at times, disparate strands of research and evidence spanning – gambling harms, mental health, addiction, masculinity, contemporary digital cultures and other related public health concerns – into a coherent and accessible narrative.





While the scope of this review does not enable us to directly incorporate the lived experiences or voices of young men, it contributes critical insight into an underexplored dimension of problem gambling. In doing so, this review strengthens the foundations for future research, including work that more fully centres young men’s perspectives, and enhances the capacity of policy and public health practice to engage meaningfully with this emerging public health priority.



# Rapid review of evidence: purpose and aims

This rapid review will broadly investigate evidence underpinning the hypothesis that problem gambling is one of several interconnected and reinforcing addictive and harmful factors within the cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial landscape many young men in the UK and Scotland are forced to navigate within.

The review will appraise the evidence concerning the associations between adverse aspects of this landscape young men exist within and how these influence susceptibility to problem gambling and gambling harms within modern gambling ecosystems.

Specifically, the review aims to:

- 1 **Identify and examine evidence** (published from 2015 to January 2026) which identifies and describes the key influencing cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial factors which are associated with problem gambling among young men in the UK.
- 2 **Assess the quality and reliability of evidence** which examines aspects of the contemporary landscape and their associations with and influences on problem gambling among young men in the UK.
- 3 **Highlight evidence gaps** including areas where research is under-theorised, and where knowledge remains limited or underdeveloped, and suggest priorities for future research and policy development.
- 4 **Develop actionable and realistic recommendations** which are acutely cognisant of the gaps in evidence identified but which respond directly to the landscape young men live within, including cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial influences, and which shapes problem gambling.

# Rapid review of evidence: methods

## Evidence sources and search strategy

A rapid review methodology was adopted to generate a timely yet robust synthesis of the most recent evidence relating to the contemporary landscape young men in the UK inhabit and how this relates to problem gambling and gambling harms. Rapid reviews streamline elements of traditional systematic review processes while retaining methodological transparency, thereby enabling the efficient appraisal of emerging and multidisciplinary evidence.

The review focussed on literature published in the UK from January 2015 to January 2026. Some international studies are cited where there is insufficient UK-based evidence or where quality systematic reviews and meta-analyses are available which add a weight of evidence and analysis to particular themes which are directly relevant to problem gambling among young men in the UK. Comprehensive searches were conducted across major electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and PsycINFO, using structured combinations of key terms associated with *gambling*, *gambling harms*, *problem gambling*, *addiction*, *young men*, *masculinity*, *interventions*, *harm reduction*, and *mental health*.

Given the complexity and breadth of the contemporary landscape occupied by young men, the development of search terminology was iterative and reflexive. Emergent concepts, particularly those relating to cultural, social, technological and behavioural influences, were initially explored using Google Scholar to establish their relevance within the wider evidence base and to refine the specificity of subsequent database searches.

## Eligibility criteria

Studies and sources were included if they met the following criteria:

- Reported on problem gambling, gambling-related harms, or interventions, programmes, or approaches addressing these harms among young males (defined broadly as 16–30 years).

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- Explicitly examined or provided insight into the associations between elements of the wider cultural landscape, particularly those understood as toxic, addictive, or harmful and young men’s susceptibility to problem gambling and gambling-related harms.
  - Included evidence that contributed to accurately characterising young men in the UK who may have heightened susceptibility to problem gambling and gambling harms, including studies providing insight into the cultural, commercial, social, economic, and digital environments they navigate.
  - Specifically recognised the impacts of disadvantaged backgrounds and poverty within problem gambling and the described cultural or environmental landscape.
  - Were published between January 2015 and January 2026 and originated from UK contexts (except where explicitly stated), ensuring relevance to policy and practice in Scotland.

## Evidence collation and synthesis

Evidence was systematically collated from included sources, capturing information on study design, participant characteristics, intervention aims and components, delivery contexts, outcomes, and key findings. Given the diversity of evidence types and the heterogeneity of methodological approaches, a narrative synthesis was employed.

The collated evidence was analysed thematically to identify recurring themes, contextual insights, mechanisms of influence, and systemic challenges. A total of 114 studies were considered in depth and systemised across seven themes. A further 44 studies and sources were cited in framing the introduction and discussion sections. Eight footnotes are also included, citing important grey literature sources, surveys and diagnostic tools. Particular attention was given to how different sources conceptualised and described the cultural, commercial, digital, economic and psychosocial landscape surrounding young men and how these environments shape vulnerability to gambling harms.

This approach enabled the integration of academic literature into seven distinct and coherent themes, supporting the identification of evidence gaps and informing the development of practice and policy relevant implications. To support reader engagement and understanding “Key points and reflections” are included at the end of each theme.

# Problem gambling and young men: findings from a rapid review of evidence

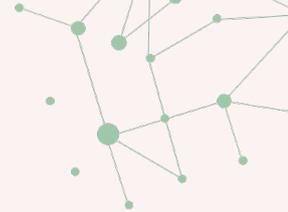
## Estimating the prevalence of gambling and problem gambling among young men

Estimating the prevalence of problem gambling among young men in Scotland and the wider UK is difficult due to multiple intersecting challenges. Historically, research has been limited and has utilised a patchwork of screening instruments, including the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS)<sup>43</sup>, DSM criteria<sup>44</sup>, and the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI)<sup>45</sup>, that varied across surveys, impeding meaningful comparisons over time<sup>46</sup>. The PGSI developed in Canada in 2001, first appeared in UK prevalence reporting through the British Gambling Prevalence Surveys (BGPS) of 2007 and 2010<sup>47</sup>. It became the default measure in the early 2010s, featuring consistently in the Health Survey for England, the Scottish Health Survey, and its Welsh equivalent<sup>48</sup>.

Despite this standardisation, differences in survey mode, sample selection, and question framing continue to introduce variability across estimates. Relatedly, we note that the BGPS doesn't consider regional specificity nor population sub-groups, making data relating to young men in Scotland difficult to access.

A quality UK population-based study by Hollén et al published in 2020 examined the prevalence of gambling amongst 17- to 24-year-olds<sup>49</sup>. Participation in gambling over the past year was reported at being 54% of 17-year-olds, rising to 68% at 20 years, reducing slightly to 66% at 24 years. Regular (weekly) gambling showed a strong gender effect, increasing among young men from 13% at 17 years to 18% at 20 years, and 17% at 24 years<sup>49</sup>. Although gambling frequency increased between the ages of 17 and 20 years, gambling behaviours showed little variance between 20 and 24 years. These findings are consistent with other UK studies, in suggesting that gambling behaviours tend to become established at 20 years of age<sup>25</sup>.

A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis (Tran et al), published in the Lancet, examined the global prevalence of gambling and problematic gambling<sup>50</sup>. This study reported that among adolescent and younger age groups (reporting from 129 studies) most



were studies from western Europe (77 studies) and eastern Europe (32). An estimated 17.9% of adolescents and younger people had gambled in the past 12 months. Of the 44 studies reporting by sex or gender, the estimated gambling prevalence was again lower among girls (21.0%) compared with boys (40.8%)<sup>50</sup>.

Among the 20 studies estimating levels of problem gambling among adolescents and young adults, most were from western Europe (15 studies) and reported an average prevalence of 5.2%<sup>50</sup>. Eight studies reported problem gambling data by sex or gender, with higher rates of boys and young men engaging in problematic gambling (ranging from 4.7% to 14.5%) compared with girls and young women (0.5% to 4.9%)<sup>50</sup>.

Within Scotland, the 2021 Scottish Health Survey reports lower prevalences (using PGSI screening methods) than these European studies, with 1.4% of the male population of 16- to 24-year-olds being recorded as being problem gamblers, with this rate rising to 1.9% in 25- to 34-year-olds; these rates among younger males being higher than the reported 0.4% of problem gambling for the overall Scottish population (aged 16+)<sup>F</sup>.

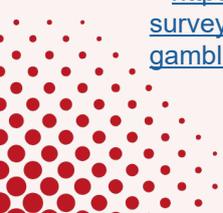
However, even quality estimates such as these do not address the fundamental point that young men may not self-identify as problem gamblers within research<sup>51</sup>. Stigma, denial, and a lack of awareness regarding gambling harm inhibit both disclosure and help-seeking, leading to systematic underrepresentation in population-based surveys<sup>52</sup>.

In terms of supporting improved problem gambling prevalence reporting, and identifying problem gambling unmet need, studies have highlighted the importance of screening for problem gambling in primary healthcare, secondary healthcare, and mental health settings<sup>16</sup>. Community based screening is also vital, local sports venues and football clubs, for example, are particularly important for young men, for whom stigma and lack of awareness are particularly acute<sup>53</sup>. Screening for problem gambling is important because individuals are likely to present with other mental and physical problems (including those secondary to gambling), but often do not seek help for gambling itself, or do not mention a gambling problem without prompting<sup>54</sup>. When help-seeking occurs among young men, it is typically crisis driven, occurring only after experiencing severe harm (e.g., suicide attempt)<sup>55</sup>. This reinforces the challenge of capturing accurate prevalence estimates, as those most affected may neither label themselves accordingly nor engage with support services.

We also note that problem gambling prevalence surveys significantly underestimate the wider scale of gambling-related harm because they rely on narrow diagnostic criteria, focussed only on those gambling. By focussing on individuals who meet specific thresholds, these surveys exclude a broader range of harms associated with out-of-control gambling<sup>56</sup>. Specifically, they overlook the wider number of people adversely affected by another person's gambling. When these wider harms and affected populations are considered, the extent of gambling-related harm is substantially greater than problem gambling prevalence estimates indicate<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>F</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2022/11/scottish-health-survey-2021-volume-1-main-report/documents/chapter-9-gambling-tables-updated-14-11-22/chapter-9-gambling-tables-updated-14-11-22/govscot%3Adocument/chapter-9-gambling-tables-updated-14-11-22.xlsx>



## Key points and reflections

### *Estimating the prevalence of gambling and problem gambling among young men*

- Estimating the prevalence of problem gambling among young men in Scotland is difficult due to various screening assessments, different survey and sampling approaches.
- Evidence from studies across Europe estimate the prevalence of problem gambling among young men at 5% to 15% of the population.
- The 2021 Scottish Health Survey reports lower prevalences, with 1.4% of the male population of 16- to 24-year-olds being recorded as being problem gamblers, rising to 1.9% in 25- to 34-year-olds.
- Even quality prevalence estimates are likely to mask the true extent of gambling harms overall, and significant unmet need regarding problem gambling among young men, specifically. Stigma, denial, and a lack of awareness inhibit both disclosure and help-seeking.

## Characterising young males at risk of problem gambling

An influential UK population study (Emond et al, 2020) reports that problem gambling behaviours develop during late adolescence, with increased access to legal gambling after 18 years, and become established by the age of 20 years<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, UK evidence suggests that problem gambling tends to be two to four times higher among older adolescents than among adults overall, and that boys are much more likely than girls to gamble and to exhibit symptoms of problem gambling<sup>57</sup>. Male problem gamblers at age 20 years have a history of hyperactivity and conduct problems, high sensation seeking, and low sense of self control<sup>25</sup>.

Problem gamblers among young people also reported less parental supervision, higher overall social media usage<sup>25</sup>, and higher rates of immersive, addictive social media usage<sup>58</sup>. Problem gambling at age 20 years is associated with regular cigarette smoking, high levels of illicit drug use, and other addictive behaviours, and with problematic use of alcohol by 24 years of age<sup>25</sup>. Evidence from outwith the UK supports that young males are more likely to experience problem gambling if they have low education, are unemployed or not in the workforce; are gambling on electronic platforms, table games, races, sports or lotteries; and gamble for reasons other than social reasons, for example to win money to support financial management, or for general entertainment<sup>59</sup>.

Hollén et al (2020) also report that gambling on diverse activities via online platforms increased markedly between 17 and 24 years, and almost exclusively among males<sup>49</sup>.



Individual predictors of regular gambling among young people were: being male, having a low IQ, an external locus of control, and high sensation-seeking scores<sup>49</sup>. Parental gambling behaviours and maternal educational background were also associated with regular gambling in both sexes. Regular gambling was again associated with smoking cigarettes and frequent and harmful use of alcohol<sup>49</sup>.

It is generally recognised across a limited, contemporary evidence base, that the burden of gambling problems is felt more strongly among people who experience poverty<sup>60</sup>. Findings from a 2021 scoping review conclude that gambling problems are associated with several poverty measures including unemployment, housing instability, homelessness, low income, and neighbourhood disadvantage<sup>61</sup>. Despite being examined in other countries<sup>62</sup>, at this early juncture we draw attention to the lack of UK studies specifically examining contemporary pathways between disadvantage, poverty and problem gambling among young men.

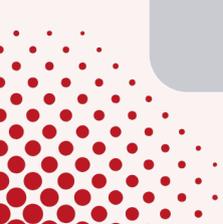
There is a substantive body of evidence demonstrating that land-based betting outlets are disproportionately concentrated within socioeconomically-deprived communities, and that higher levels of problem gambling are observed in these areas<sup>63-65</sup>. However, while this spatial association has been relatively well documented, the mechanisms through which poverty and structural disadvantage operate within increasingly digital gambling ecosystems, and the ways in which these dynamics may shape exposure to risk and vulnerability to harm, remain less clearly conceptualised and comparatively underdeveloped within the current evidence base<sup>66</sup>; collectively, both pathways are under-theorised, in terms of their specific impacts on young men.

Despite the insights outlined above, the existing literature shows clear limitations in how young men at risk of problem gambling are conceptualised. Research overwhelmingly relies on binary, biologically defined categories of sex or gender, with little consideration of gender identity, expression or diversity. This framing risks rendering trans, non-binary and gender-diverse young people largely invisible, despite the likelihood that they share similar exposures and pathways into gambling harm. Moreover, attempts to characterise those at risk rarely attend to intersecting characteristics such as ethnicity, disability and other forms of marginalisation.

## Key points and reflections

### *Characterising young males at risk of problem gambling*

- Consensus exists among quality UK studies that problem gambling among young males takes root during adolescence and is established by 20 years of age.
- Factors associated with problem gambling among young men include hyperactivity, conduct problems, high sensation seeking, low sense of self control, less parental supervision, parental gambling, high social media usage, regular cigarette smoking, problematic alcohol consumption and illicit drug use.



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- Overall, however more UK-based research is required to accurately and reliably characterise young men with susceptibility to problem gambling.
  - The interplay of deprivation and disadvantage within these associations is less well articulated in UK studies and is under-theorised in relation to contemporary gambling influences including digital gambling ecosystems and online practices among young men.

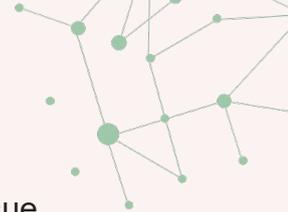
## Problem gambling, trauma, violence, mental health and substance use

Several quality international studies, including systematic reviews<sup>67</sup>, demonstrate that problem gambling is associated with adverse mental health and problematic substance use<sup>68-70</sup>. Reliable evidence also exists within the UK – a 2022, population-based study reports an association between problem gambling in young people and regular cigarette smoking, high levels of illicit drug use, and problematic use of alcohol<sup>25</sup>. A significant minority of young adults (mainly males) showed problem gambling behaviours which were associated with other addictive behaviours<sup>25</sup>.

A 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis pooled results of 61 studies<sup>71</sup>. The findings indicated that among individuals with substance use disorders there was a prevalence rate of 19% for problem gambling<sup>71</sup>. The findings indicated that individuals with substance abuse disorders who were male, had depressive and mood disorders, and had alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis use disorders, were significantly more likely to report problem gambling<sup>71</sup>. This systematic review does not adequately report sociodemographic variances in these associations.

In physiological terms, individuals with cocaine and gambling addictions exhibit similar cognitive flexibility deficits that may explain the continued persistence of addictive behaviours even when harm is becoming obvious<sup>72</sup>. Reduced ventrolateral prefrontal cortex activation may constitute a common neural marker across gambling and cocaine addictions<sup>72</sup>.

An important finding from a nationally representative 2017 survey of UK men found that problem gambling is uniquely associated with trauma and life stressors in childhood and adulthood, even after adjusting for alcohol and drug dependence<sup>73</sup>, these findings are consistent with other studies<sup>73, 74</sup>. Likewise, a systematic review (2016) demonstrated clear associations between childhood neglect and sexual and physical abuse and problem gambling in later life<sup>75</sup>. Furthermore, in terms of familial gambling harms, problem gamblers may be more likely to physically abuse or neglect their own children, but data remains limited<sup>75</sup>.



Problem gambling is also becoming increasingly recognised as a public health issue among military veterans<sup>76</sup>. In this association, posttraumatic mental health problems, rather than trauma exposure appears to explain the relationship between trauma and gambling problems among veterans<sup>76</sup>. Taken together, this evidence suggests that problem gambling may function as an unhealthy, maladaptive coping mechanism or cycle in the context of trauma and chronic stress, providing short-term emotional relief or distraction from distressing memories or life pressures and experiences<sup>77, 78</sup>.

A 2016 systematic review and meta-analysis by Dowling et al reported an association between problem gambling and intimate partner violence (IPV)<sup>79</sup>. The review concludes that most of the available research suggests that there is a significant relationship between problem gambling and being both a victim of IPV and a perpetrator of it. Although the exact nature of the relationships between problem gambling and IPV cannot be fully determined, the findings suggest that being a younger male, being in less than full employment, clinical anger problems, impulsivity, and alcohol and substance use are implicated in the relationship between problem gambling and IPV perpetration<sup>79</sup>.

In addition, a 2022 qualitative study illuminated a clear gendered dimension within the relationship between problem gambling and IPV, where males are significantly more likely to perpetrate violence against females<sup>80</sup>. The study reports how problem gambling created situations that increased IPV, including anger over losses, family stressors and conflicts, with violent backlash silencing the woman's objections<sup>80</sup>. Violence intensified as the gambling escalated, with short-term cycles of violence directly linked to gambling events. Women experienced financial, psychological, physical and sexual abuse, and patterns of coercive control that maintained a climate of fear<sup>80</sup>. Collectively, these findings highlight the need for support and treatment services to undertake routine screening and assessment of problem gambling, IPV, alcohol, substance use problems, and mental health issues and provide interventions designed to manage this cluster of comorbid conditions<sup>79</sup>.

## Key points and reflections

### *Problem gambling, trauma, violence, mental health and substance use*

- The evidence concerning associations of trauma, intimate partner violence, adverse mental health and substance use with problem gambling is vital to understanding how young men and their families experience contemporary gambling harms.
- The evidenced associations point to problem gambling existing within clusters of co-morbidities and addictions – outlining the need for multi-faceted and holistic support for young men experiencing problem gambling.
- In the context of trauma, problem gambling may function as an unhealthy, maladaptive coping mechanism or cycle, providing short-term emotional relief from distressing memories or life pressures.



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- The associations with intimate partner violence illustrate the extreme stress that problem gambling can exert on vulnerable individuals, and the onward toxic and corrosive impacts of gambling harms on relationships and family members.
  - More UK-based studies are required to establish these associations, and their influence on problem gambling – as both cause and consequence, among young men.

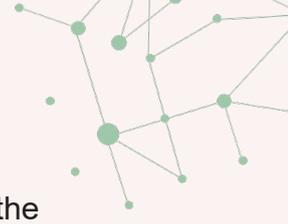
## Gambling-like features within video games

Gambling-like features within video games and new forms of hybrid-gambling products have emerged, yet until very recently, little has been known about their relationship to gambling and problem gambling among young people (who are most likely to play video games)<sup>81</sup>, particularly males<sup>82</sup>.

Within video games, there are several objects, unique to each game, that allow players to gain in-game advantages and to more quickly achieve the game's objectives. Graphic elements that modify the external appearance of the characters by changing their aesthetics, their clothes, armour, or their weapons (often referred to as "skins") are now commonplace<sup>83</sup>. Skins can have further appeal in that they are acutely tailored to be culturally desirable and representative among young people, including fashion, influencer and music artist collaborations<sup>84</sup>. Skins are usually purchased through microtransactions; the purchasing process being often streamlined and almost instantaneous<sup>85</sup>. Skin gambling has become a form of online gambling where players use purchased skins, rather than real money, to place bets on games of chance such as roulette, coin flips, or esports matches. These skins often have real-world monetary value and can be won, lost, or traded<sup>86</sup>. Several studies demonstrate that skin gambling is associated with problem gambling in adolescence and young adults, particularly males<sup>86-90</sup>.

"Loot boxes" are another emergent phenomenon in video games and are also referred to as crates, cases, or chests<sup>91</sup>. Similar to skins, loot boxes are another form of in-game microtransaction in which an unknown virtual item or items is purchased, which also boosts the strength and resilience of the game character<sup>92</sup>. Loot boxes can be purchased using real or (pre-purchased) virtual in-game money<sup>93</sup>. Importantly, the most desired and impactful items appear less frequently in purchased loot boxes, making them directly akin to gambling itself<sup>94</sup>. Young males have been reported to be more likely to purchase loot boxes than female gamers<sup>95</sup>.

A 2021 cross-sectional survey showed that in unadjusted regression models, the odds of developing problem gambling were 11 times higher among young people who purchased loot boxes in their video gaming<sup>96</sup>. The strength of this relationship diminished but remained



significant, equating to five times more likely to develop problem gambling, when the influences of existing gambling participation, impulsivity, and sociodemographic factors were adjusted for within the analyses<sup>96</sup>. The purchase of loot boxes was highly associated with problem gambling, the strength of this association being of similar magnitude to gambling online on casino games or slots. The study concluded that young adults purchasing loot boxes within video games should be considered a high-risk group for developing gambling problems in future<sup>96</sup>.

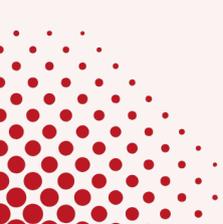
Similarly, a 2022 systematic review and meta-synthesis reported that 12 of 13 eligible studies demonstrate a statistically reliable association between in-game loot box purchasing and problem gambling; again, young males were at greatest risk<sup>97</sup>.

An emerging evidence base over the past five years, has demonstrated a clear association between the purchase of loot boxes and problem gambling; these findings are strikingly consistent across several quality studies, internationally and with varied methodologies<sup>92, 96, 98</sup>. Loot boxes, along with other microtransaction processes, have been described as a “predatory practice,” which entraps young people into repeated purchasing<sup>99</sup>. It has been suggested that they are “psychologically akin” to gambling as individuals stake money on the uncertain outcome of a future event in the hope of receiving something of greater value<sup>82</sup>.

## Key points and reflections

### *Gambling-like features within video games*

- An emerging, yet convincing evidence base demonstrates clear associations between gambling-like features within video games (including skins and loot boxes) and problem gambling in later life.
- Where studies have adequate levels of socio-demographic breakdown, it is clear that young males are particularly susceptible to adverse longer-term impacts of gambling-like features within video games.
- The exposure to skins and loot boxes in childhood and adolescence, has been described as a predatory practice which appears to “prime” children and adolescents for gambling addiction.
- These findings are reported with confidence however more UK-based studies are required to illuminate specific risks and influences, among young males.





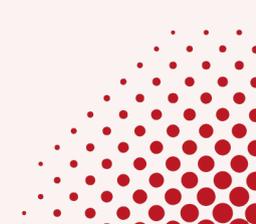
## Social media targeted promotion of gambling

Social media now occupies a central role in the everyday lives of adolescents and young adults, shaping social norms, identity formation, attitudes to risk, and perceptions of success, status, and reward<sup>100, 101</sup>. Relatedly, the adolescent developmental period into early adulthood is characterised by heightened sensitivity to peer influence<sup>102</sup>, underdeveloped and ongoing neurological maturation characterised by a lack of critical thinking<sup>103</sup>, and increased propensity for impulsive and sensation-seeking behaviours<sup>104</sup>. All of which make young people particularly vulnerable to external influences, including social media<sup>105</sup>.

Within this context, in examining how social media contributes to gambling-related problems among young men, this rapid review focusses on two interrelated mechanisms. Firstly, the role of social media in promoting and normalising gambling through targeted advertising and the exposure to online betting products, promotions, and enhanced odds<sup>106</sup>. And secondly (as detailed in the following section), the influence of “flexing culture” and aspirational social media influencer lifestyles<sup>107</sup>, which may encourage risk-taking, reinforces toxic masculinity norms, and can frame gambling as a pathway to status, wealth, and social validation<sup>108</sup>. These dynamics appear to be becoming increasingly recognised as elevating the risk of harmful and problem gambling<sup>109</sup>.

Social media advertising is growing at an unprecedented rate. Global social media advertising spend has risen from \$51 billion US dollars in 2017 to a projected \$385 billion by 2027<sup>110</sup>. Although unquantifiable, limited available evidence suggests that there are huge volumes of gambling adverts and promotions within social media platforms<sup>111, 112</sup>. The high volume of gambling ads on social media results in high exposure for young people<sup>113</sup>. A 2021 study found that 63% of adults (over the age of 25 years) reported viewing gambling ads on social media at least once a week, this rate rose to 72% among 18–24-year-olds<sup>114</sup>. Evidence shows that gambling companies target young men on social media<sup>5, 115</sup>.

A concerning insight from the evidence reviewed is the high level of self-reported exposure to gambling adverts on or relating to social media, among children. The UK Gambling Commission found that 37% of 11–16-year-olds said they had been exposed to gambling ads on social media<sup>116</sup>, whilst another study reports that 46% of 11–17-year-olds reported seeing gambling ads at least once per week<sup>114</sup>. The oversight and legality of this is potentially complex, as many children may be online through their parent’s or guardian’s devices and accounts. However, this exposure is recognised as normalising gambling at a young developmental age<sup>117</sup> as well as cultivating a well-evidenced psychological effect – Zajonc’s mere-exposure effect, where repeated exposure to a stimulus leads to an increasingly positive attitude towards this stimulus<sup>118</sup>. This effect has been reaffirmed in many experiments over the past decades and underpins the effectiveness of social media targeted advertising<sup>119</sup>. Whether or not individuals consciously report noticing gambling adverts, high exposure builds subconscious positive feelings towards advertised brands<sup>120</sup>.





A limited evidence base exists to suggest that young men are targeted with gambling adverts on social media, and that this saturated exposure promotes normalisation of gambling and even positive feelings towards some gambling platforms<sup>121</sup>. This normalisation is further reinforced by the saturation of gambling advertising in sport, at events and on TV coverage, including on football strips of high-profile teams in Scotland and the UK<sup>122</sup>. Evidence supports that sport broadcasters offer gambling (and alcohol) companies a “loophole” to avoid the post-watershed guidelines, meaning that children and young people are exposed to gambling adverts and promotions when watching sports on TV<sup>123, 124</sup>.

Importantly, in the associations linking social media to problem gambling, it is recognised that children and young people tend to interpret betting odds as factual, rather than a financial risk and reward situation that may or may not happen<sup>125</sup>. This may relate to the underdeveloped neurological stage previously mentioned but was not explicitly stated in the evidence reviewed. Adults, on the other hand, who understand that gambling involves winning and losing, are reported to be more sceptical of gambling advertising overall<sup>125</sup>. The appeal of gambling to children and young people is amplified given the curtailed wording forms of social media advertising of enhanced odds for new members of gambling platforms, which typically have several eligibility criteria which stack the odds and outcomes in favour of the gambling platform, at the detriment of the gambler<sup>126</sup>. This makes it unlikely that users, particularly younger gamblers, will process this complex criteria messaging, before opening an account<sup>126</sup>.

A 2016 online survey study reported that moderate-risk and problem gamblers were significantly more likely to report having been exposed to social media gambling promotions and indicated actively engaging with gambling operators via these platforms<sup>127</sup>. They were more likely to self-report that they had increased gambling as a result of these promotions, and over one third reported that the promotions had increased their problems<sup>127</sup>. Those experiencing gambling problems are more likely to be impacted by social media promotions, and these may play a role in exacerbating disordered gambling<sup>127</sup>. A 2019 systematic review (Newall et al) of gambling marketing also concluded that social media gambling marketing is highly targeted and ubiquitous around sport, and that it is associated with more frequent and riskier gambling behaviour<sup>128</sup>.

## Key points and reflections

### *Social media targeted promotion of gambling*

- ▶ The developmental stage of adolescence and young adulthood is particularly vulnerable to the influences of social media. During this life stage, the risks of gambling and the subtleties of gambling promotions are not well understood.
- ▶ Within the UK, high numbers of young people are exposed to gambling ads through social media. This exposure is recognised as normalising gambling at a young developmental age.



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- A concerning insight from the evidence reviewed is the high level of self-reported exposure to gambling adverts on or relating to social media, among children.
  - Social media advertising is reinforced by the saturation of gambling advertising in sport, at events, on TV and on football strips of high-profile teams in the UK.
  - Sport broadcasts enable gambling companies to avoid the post-watershed guidelines, meaning that children and young people are further exposed to gambling adverts and promotions when watching popular sports on TV.

## Social media influencer-driven gambling promotions and “flexing culture”

One of the more recent trends within social media gambling advertising is the rise of social media influencer (SMI)-driven gambling promotions. Increasingly, gambling operators use SMIs to market their products, targeting children and young people, who are vulnerable to such content<sup>129</sup>. The use of acutely tailored music, humour, and celebrity endorsements within SMI-driven gambling promotions make them especially relevant and culturally appealing to young people<sup>130</sup>.

We note a lack of UK-based studies on the theme of SMI-driven gambling promotion. An in-depth 2024 qualitative study from Australia, however, highlights three important insights from young people (aged 11- to 17-years-old) relating to the effectiveness of SMIs in promoting gambling<sup>131</sup>. First, young people perceived that celebrities and SMIs created additional appeal and recall of gambling advertisements because they were attention grabbing and familiar. Second, young people thought that celebrities and SMIs increased the trust, legitimacy and social acceptance of gambling. Third, the use of celebrities and SMIs lowered the perceptions of risk associated with gambling<sup>131</sup>.

In addition to high levels of trust in influencers, young people’s limited capacity to critically evaluate digital content is also evidenced as a factor in their susceptibility to gambling through social media<sup>132, 133</sup>. Inter-related with SMI-driven gambling promotions, young men also experience adverse pressures of modern depictions of masculinity, within absorbing and addictive social media “flexing culture”<sup>107</sup>. Within this review we take the position that SMIs within flexing culture may not explicitly promote gambling companies but can shape a cultural context that encourages gambling among young men. SMIs in this space are often referred to as “masculinity influencers”. Flexing culture SMIs, or masculinity influencers publish online content depicting hyper-competitiveness, risk-taking overall<sup>134</sup>, high-stakes gambling<sup>135, 136</sup>, luxury brands and material goods<sup>137, 138</sup>, affluent and successful



lifestyles<sup>139</sup>, sexual attractiveness<sup>140, 141</sup>, alcohol use and misuse<sup>142</sup> and unrealistic male body aesthetics<sup>143, 144</sup>.

These traits are frequently socially valorised among young men and are further reinforced by a popular subset of masculinity influencers whose content amplifies norms of hyper-competitiveness, dominance and glamorised consumption as described, but also intersecting with toxic and misogynistic narratives<sup>145</sup>. Navigating this digital environment, young men may internalise these narrow ideals of success and masculinity, aspiring to emulate the lifestyles and social status performed by masculinity influencers<sup>146</sup>, while simultaneously recognising the inaccessibility of the portrayed wealth, confidence and recognition<sup>147</sup>. This dissonance has been described as influencing feelings of inadequacy, frustration and diminished self-worth among impressionable young men, with potential adverse implications for mental health<sup>148</sup>. The desire for such lifestyles may further encourage gambling as a quick means of achieving the portrayed wealth and status of masculinity influencers, however we note a lack of UK-based evidence examining this.

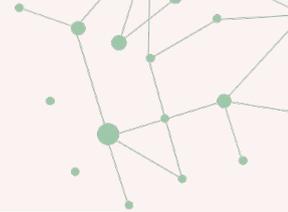
Overall, despite plausible theoretical pathways linking flexing culture and masculinity influencers to risk-taking behaviours, this evidence review does not establish a direct causal relationship between exposure to SMI-driven flexing culture and increased risk of problem gambling among young men. Given the relative novelty and rapid evolution of masculine depictions and flexing culture within social media ecosystems, the lack of evidence in this field reflects an important gap that warrants further investigation in future research.

## Key points and reflections

### *Social media influencer-driven gambling promotions and “flexing culture”*

- ▶ Gambling operators are increasingly using Social Media Influencers (SMIs) to market their products.
- ▶ Young men also experience adverse pressures of modern depictions of masculinity, within absorbing and addictive social media “flexing culture”. SMIs in this space are often referred to as “masculinity influencers”.
- ▶ Masculinity influencers reinforce gambling through performing depictions of high-stakes gambling, hyper-competitiveness, risk-taking, successful lifestyles, sexual attractiveness, alcohol use and unrealistic male body aesthetics.
- ▶ Given the rapid evolution of flexing culture within social media ecosystems, it is unsurprising that there is a lack of direct evidence linking it to problem gambling; this represents an important gap for future studies within this field.





## Cryptocurrency online gambling platforms

Cryptocurrency has become increasingly embedded in online gambling ecosystems, with particularly strong uptake among young people<sup>149</sup>. Its appeal stems from several intertwined socio-technical factors – the anonymity and frictionless nature of crypto transactions, access to offshore platforms that bypass UK regulatory safeguards, and the seamless integration of crypto with broader digital cultures such as gaming, esports, online trading, and influencer gambling communities<sup>149, 150</sup>. For young men who are already technologically confident and active in these online spaces, crypto gambling is framed as accessible, innovative, and aligned with contemporary digital identities<sup>150, 151</sup>.

The volatility of cryptocurrency markets, combined with the gamified interfaces of crypto casinos, appears to amplify the sense of excitement and reward among young gamblers<sup>152</sup>. SMI marketing, especially on platforms like Twitch, YouTube, Kick, and TikTok, has further normalised crypto gambling among this demographic by presenting it as aspirational, skill-based, and socially endorsed<sup>153</sup>. Such messaging intersects with behavioural traits already described and observed among young male gamblers, including sensation seeking, risk-taking, and a desire for rapid financial gain or status<sup>154</sup>. The rhetoric surrounding crypto also promotes a misleading sense of control or technical competence, despite the fundamentally chance-based nature of the activities<sup>152</sup>.

However, the unregulated or lightly regulated status of many crypto gambling platforms significantly increases exposure to harm<sup>155</sup>. These sites typically lack age verification, affordability checks, deposit limits, or meaningful consumer protection, leaving young men who may already be vulnerable to social, psychological, or developmental pressures at heightened risk of problematic engagement<sup>156</sup>. As a result, crypto casinos and gambling represent a convergence of technological innovation, online youth culture, and structural regulatory gaps, with important implications for public health and gambling-harm prevention.

We report very limited evidence on the associations between cryptocurrency gambling platforms and casinos and problem gambling. However, a 2023 scoping review found clear associations between cryptocurrency trading and problem gambling, associations between cryptocurrency trading and adverse mental health outcomes were less certain<sup>157</sup>.

### Key points and reflections

#### *Cryptocurrency online gambling platforms*

- ▶ Cryptocurrency has become increasingly embedded in online gambling ecosystems, with particularly strong uptake among young people.
- ▶ Cryptocurrency offers anonymity within transactions, access to offshore platforms, and seamless integration with broader digital cultures such as gaming, esports, online trading, and influencer gambling communities.





- ▶ The volatility of cryptocurrency markets, alongside the gamified interfaces of crypto casinos, amplify the sense of excitement and reward among young gamblers.
- ▶ SMI marketing on social media has further normalised crypto gambling among this demographic by presenting it as aspirational, skill-based, and socially endorsed.
- ▶ There is extremely limited evidence on the profile of crypto gamblers and the associations between crypto gambling and problem gambling among young men.



# What this study adds

This rapid review extends the existing evidence base on gambling harms by providing a focussed and contemporary examination of problem gambling among young men, a population group identified as requiring specific attention within the 2025 Public Health Scotland publication *Healthcare Needs Assessment of Gambling Harm in Scotland (PHS-HCNA)*. The Needs Assessment highlights limitations in the current epidemiological evidence and calls for further research into groups at heightened risk, and this review responds directly to that call by synthesising emerging UK-relevant evidence on the cultural, commercial, digital and psychosocial environments shaping gambling behaviour among young men.

This review makes an important and timely contribution to understanding problem gambling among young men in the UK by synthesising diverse and emerging strands of research into a coherent narrative that reflects contemporary lived realities. By explicitly situating problem gambling within the wider environments that young men navigate in 2026, the review moves beyond narrow behavioural framings and offers a contextually grounded account of gambling harms.

The review is culturally sensitive and attuned to the everyday experiences of young men, including their engagement with video games, social media ecosystems, influencer cultures, online advertising, and emerging digital gambling platforms. In doing so, it captures the ways in which gambling is increasingly embedded within routine leisure, identity formation, and peer cultures, rather than occurring as an isolated activity. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how gambling behaviours are normalised, initiated and reinforced during adolescence and early adulthood.

By integrating evidence across seven thematic areas, the review highlights how problem gambling intersects with trauma, mental health difficulties, substance use, violence, disadvantage and contemporary masculine norms. This reinforces the conceptualisation of problem gambling as a public health issue characterised by clustering of harms and comorbidities, rather than as an individual moral failing or isolated addiction. The review therefore provides an important corrective to reductive narratives and underscores the need for empathy, compassion and holistic responses.

The findings and reflections presented are directly relevant to a wide range of stakeholders. For policy makers and public health leaders, the review offers insight into emerging risks, evidence gaps and priority areas for regulation, prevention and research. For practitioners across primary care, secondary care, mental health services and specialist gambling support services, the review enhances understanding of the broader contexts shaping young men's gambling behaviours, supporting more effective identification, engagement and intervention. Charities and third-sector organisations working on the ground may also find the synthesis valuable in tailoring support, advocacy and awareness-raising efforts.



Overall, while not definitive, this rapid review provides leadership within an underdeveloped field by drawing attention to pressing and under-recognised influences on problem gambling among young men. It establishes a contemporary evidence-informed platform upon which future research, policy and practice can build.

## Limitations of this study

This study adopted a rapid review methodology in order to generate timely and policy- and practice-relevant insight into a fast-moving and underexamined field. As with all rapid reviews, this approach inevitably involved methodological trade-offs. Streamlining elements of systematic review processes, including search breadth, screening depth and critical appraisal, may have resulted in the omission of some relevant studies or nuanced findings. Consequently, the review should be interpreted as a high-level synthesis rather than an exhaustive or definitive account of the evidence base.

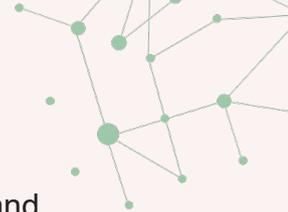
The review primarily prioritised UK-based literature published between 2015 and January 2026 to maximise relevance to current policy and practice. However, selected international studies were included where UK evidence was sparse or where high-quality reviews added weight to particular themes. This focus may underrepresent some relevant findings.

A further limitation is that several of the thematic areas examined remain characterised by significant evidence gaps and are, at present, under-theorised. In particular, limited UK-based empirical research constrains confident conclusions regarding the roles of masculinity influencers, flexing culture, cryptocurrency gambling platforms, and the interplay of poverty and digital gambling ecosystems. The absence of direct causal evidence in these areas should not be interpreted as evidence of no effect, but rather as highlighting priorities for future research.

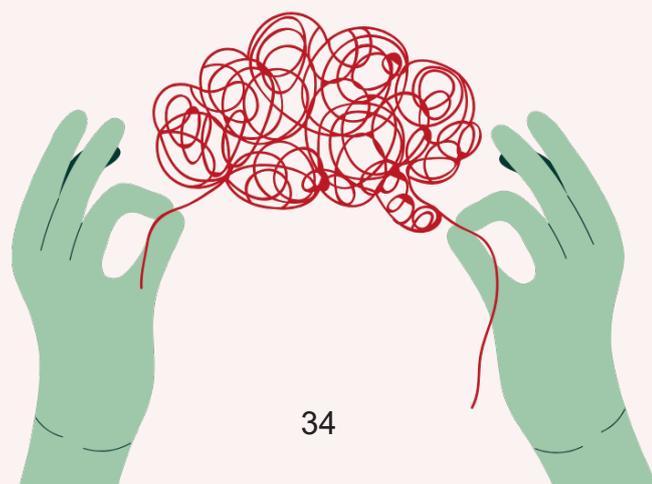
Finally, this rapid review did not directly incorporate lived experience accounts from young men, which limits insight into subjective meaning-making and personal trajectories. While the review nonetheless reflects the realities young men are likely to encounter, future work that centres on lived experience would substantially enrich understanding.

The evidence reviewed is also constrained by the narrow way in which “young men” are typically defined, with most studies relying on binary, biologically-based gender categories and giving no consideration to gender diversity or expression. Furthermore, limited attention is paid to intersecting characteristics such as ethnicity and disability, restricting the ability of the literature to fully capture differential risks and experiences of gambling harm across diverse populations.





Taken together, these limitations mean that while the review is insightful, current and valuable in guiding leadership, policy and practice, its findings cannot be considered definitive. Rather, it should be viewed as a foundational and agenda-setting contribution within a developing field.



# Discussion

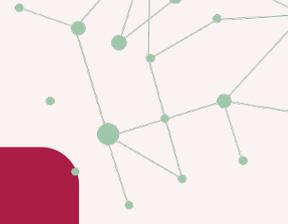
This rapid review set out to examine a complex and evolving evidence base that spans public health, psychology, digital cultures, addiction studies and sociology. In doing so, it has encountered substantial gaps in evidence, uneven methodological quality, and several domains that remain under-theorised within UK research. These limitations constrain the strength of causal inference that can be drawn. However, the themes identified through this synthesis are clearly current, societally relevant and of growing importance. Collectively, they point to a set of converging risks that require recognition, scrutiny and action across policy, research and practice. The review surfaces credible and pressing signals that problem gambling among young men is shaped by a wider cultural and digital ecosystem that are both harmful and insufficiently regulated.

## Problem gambling as part of a wider constellation of harm

One of the most consistent and important insights from this review is that problem gambling among young men rarely exists in isolation. Across the evidence base, gambling harms are repeatedly associated with trauma exposure, adverse mental health outcomes, substance use, suicidality and intimate partner violence. These associations are not peripheral; they are central to understanding how gambling problems emerge, escalate and are experienced by young men and those around them.

The clustering of these harms suggests that problem gambling often functions within broader patterns of vulnerability and maladaptive coping. In contexts of trauma, chronic stress or emotional distress, gambling may offer temporary escape, distraction or a perceived mechanism of control, reinforcing cycles of dependency. Associations with suicide attempts and intimate partner violence underscore the severity of harm and the ripple effects on families and communities. Indeed, the corrosive effects on the emotional wellbeing of affected others, particularly spouses and cohabiting partners of individuals experiencing problem gambling, are well evidenced. The magnitude of this harm has been shown to correspond closely with the severity of the partner's problem gambling behaviours<sup>158</sup>. This body of evidence paints a stark picture of the human suffering caused by problem gambling, that demands responses grounded in empathy, compassion and trauma-informed practice.

From a service and policy perspective, these findings challenge narrow or siloed approaches. Treating gambling as a standalone behavioural issue risks obscuring underlying drivers and missing opportunities for early identification and holistic support. Instead, the evidence reinforces the need for integrated responses that recognise gambling harms alongside mental health difficulties, substance use and experiences of violence.



## Early exposure, normalisation and the grooming of future gamblers

Another area where the evidence is particularly strong concerns early exposure to gambling-like practices and the normalisation of gambling during childhood and adolescence. Of the seven themes examined, the associations between gambling-like features in video games, most notably loot boxes and skin gambling, and later problem gambling are among the most robust and consistent.

The evidence supports the conclusion that these practices act as a form of behavioural priming or grooming, conditioning young people to engage with chance-based monetisation systems long before legal gambling is permitted. These mechanisms closely mirror gambling in their psychological design while being embedded within products marketed to children and adolescents. From legal, moral and ethical standpoints, this constitutes a predatory commercial practice that sits uneasily with UK societal values and child protection principles.

Beyond video games, the review highlights the saturation of gambling advertising across social media, sport and digital platforms. A particularly concerning finding is the extent to which children are exposed to gambling promotions online, often repeatedly and through channels that blur distinctions between entertainment, sport and advertising. Such exposure contributes to the normalisation of gambling at a developmental stage characterised by limited critical thinking and heightened susceptibility to social influence.

Taken together, these influences suggest that many young men are immersed from an early age in environments that frame gambling as routine, desirable and low risk. This normalisation is likely to shape attitudes, expectations and behaviours well before harm becomes visible or recognised.

## Digital cultures, masculinity and risk amplification

The review also draws attention to the broader digital and cultural contexts in which gambling is embedded, particularly those shaped by social media influencer cultures and contemporary performances of masculinity. While direct causal evidence linking masculinity influencers or flexing culture to problem gambling is currently lacking, the review identifies plausible and concerning pathways of influence.

Young men engage with social media during a critical developmental period marked by sensation seeking, identity formation and high trust in influencers. Within this context, content that valorises risk-taking, hyper-competitiveness, material success and high-stakes lifestyles may amplify susceptibility to gambling-related behaviours. Even where gambling





is not explicitly promoted, these cultural narratives can reinforce norms that align closely with gambling risk.

The absence of direct evidence should not diminish the importance of the digital and cultural landscape young men exist within and problem gambling. Rather, it reflects the rapid evolution of digital cultures and a lag in empirical research. The convergence of influencer marketing, aspirational masculinity and gambling promotion represents a challenging and potentially hazardous environment that warrants policy attention and further study.

## **Emerging dangers within digital gambling ecosystems**

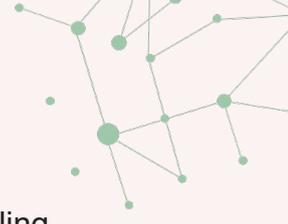
The growth of cryptocurrency-based gambling platforms exemplifies the speed at which new gambling modalities are developing relative to the evidence base. While current research does not allow firm conclusions about associations with problem gambling among young men, the characteristics of these platforms – anonymity, volatility, gamification and weak regulation – present clear potential risks.

These platforms often operate beyond UK regulatory safeguards and are promoted through influencer-driven digital spaces that resonate strongly with young male audiences. The lack of age verification, affordability checks and consumer protections raises significant public health concerns. The intersection of cryptocurrency gambling with broader digital cultures, including gaming and online trading, highlights an urgent need for independent UK-based research and regulatory oversight.

## **Structural drivers, inequality and public responsibility**

Estimating the prevalence of problem gambling among young men remains challenging, with evidence suggesting significant under-identification and unmet need. These difficulties are compounded by limited UK research examining how poverty, disadvantage and contemporary digital gambling environments interact. Wider evidence suggests that gambling harms are socially patterned, yet the specific pathways affecting young men, particularly relating to modern digital gambling platforms, remain insufficiently explored in the UK context. Relatedly, the absence of intersectional analysis constrains understanding of how gambling harms may be unevenly distributed across diverse groups of young men, and limits the capacity of research to inform inclusive, culturally competent and equitable prevention and support responses.





At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the economic role of the gambling industry. Gambling and betting companies contribute substantial tax revenues to the UK government, supporting wider public services (in 2025/26 it is estimated that betting and gaming duties will raise £3.8 billion)<sup>G</sup>. However, this fiscal benefit exists alongside significant social and health costs. Gambling-related harms exacerbate mental health problems, strain family relationships, contribute to violence and place additional pressure on an already stretched NHS. A balanced public policy approach must therefore account for both economic considerations and the moral responsibility to protect citizens from preventable harm.

In summary, this discussion highlights that while clear evidence gaps persist, the issues raised by this rapid review are neither speculative nor marginal and merit urgent attention. They represent interconnected and escalating challenges that require coordinated responses. Recognising problem gambling among young men as embedded within wider cultural, digital and structural contexts is essential if policy and practice are to respond effectively and ethically.

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<sup>G</sup> <https://obr.uk/forecasts-in-depth/tax-by-tax-spend-by-spend/betting-gaming-duties/>

# Implications of the evidence reviewed

At a strategic and population-health level, the 2025 *Inequality Landscape: Health and Socio-economic Inequality in Scotland*<sup>H</sup>, published by the Scottish Health Equity Research Unit (SHERU) in collaboration with the University of Strathclyde and supported by the Health Foundation, identifies a persistent policy “blind spot” affecting a subset of young men in Scotland who are at heightened risk of preventable harm and premature mortality. The clustering of harms described in this rapid review, including problem gambling, mental ill-health, substance use and wider psychosocial adversity, aligns closely with the patterns of compounding disadvantage associated with markedly reduced life expectancy among young men in the most deprived communities.

While it was beyond the scope of the Inequality Landscape analysis to determine the specific contribution of problem gambling, or of the wider toxic and addictive landscape outlined in this review, to these mortality trends, it is reasonable to conclude that gambling-related harms will have formed part of the lived realities of some of the young men represented within these figures, including in the deterioration of mental health and, in some cases, in lives cut tragically short.

In this context, the following implications for policy and practice seek to address problem gambling among young men, not in isolation, but as one component of a broader constellation of intersecting risks that demand earlier, more coordinated and preventative responses.

## Implications for policy development and policy-makers working within problem gambling prevention and recovery among young men

### **Policy responses must be grounded in an understanding of the contemporary gambling ecosystem.**

Effective prevention policy requires explicit recognition of the digital, commercial and cultural environments in which young men encounter gambling, including online platforms, video game monetisation, social media marketing and influencer-driven normalisation.

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<sup>H</sup> <https://scothealthequity.org/2025-inequality-landscape/>



Without this awareness, policy responses risk being outdated and misaligned with where and how harms actually emerge.

**Primary prevention should be prioritised through regulation of exposure and normalisation.**

The evidence reviewed supports stronger regulatory approaches to gambling-like features in youth-oriented digital spaces, particularly loot boxes, skin gambling and targeted social media advertising. This implication of the evidence reviewed directly responds to the 2025 PHS-HCNA call for upstream action to reduce harm before it occurs.

**Young men should be treated as a distinct priority population within gambling harms policy.**

The PHS-HCNA identifies the need for further research and targeted responses for younger gamblers. This review demonstrates that young men experience specific pathways into harm shaped by masculinity norms, risk amplification and digital cultures, justifying tailored prevention strategies rather than generic population-wide approaches.

**Investment in independent research and surveillance must keep pace with emerging risks.**

Rapidly evolving gambling technologies, including cryptocurrency-based platforms, remain under-regulated and under-researched. Policy leadership is required to ensure that statutory levy funding supports timely research capable of informing responsive regulation and prevention.

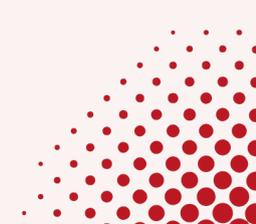
## **Implications for service delivery and practitioners working with young men in the prevention of, and recovery from, problem gambling**

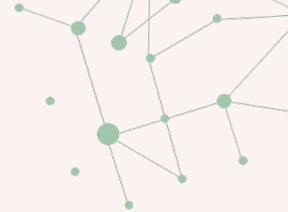
**Practice must be trauma-informed, holistic and attuned to co-occurring harms.**

The strong clustering of gambling harms with trauma, mental ill-health, substance use and violence underscores the need for integrated support approaches. This aligns with the PHS-HCNA's emphasis on person-centred care and flexible pathways rather than siloed interventions.

**Understanding the cultural context of young men's gambling is essential for engagement and recovery.**

Awareness of digital cultures, masculinity norms, social media influences and status-driven narratives enables practitioners to engage young men more authentically and effectively, reduce stigma, and support meaningful disclosure and sustained recovery.





**Recovery support should anticipate relapse triggers embedded in everyday digital environments.**

Unlike traditional gambling settings, contemporary risks are persistent and ubiquitous. Practitioners should be supported to address ongoing exposure to gambling cues, influencer marketing and online peer norms as part of recovery planning with young men.

**Early identification and intervention require proactive, non-judgemental engagement.**

Consistent with the PHS-HCNA's findings on delayed help-seeking, practitioners should not rely on self-identification of gambling problems. Screening and conversations about gambling should be embedded within wider mental health, youth, addiction and community services.



# Conclusion

This rapid review has synthesised contemporary evidence to illuminate the complex and often toxic landscape shaping problem gambling among young men in the UK. While clear gaps and uncertainties remain, particularly in relation to emerging digital and social influences, the review identifies consistent and troubling patterns of harm, normalisation and vulnerability.

By situating problem gambling within broader contexts of trauma, mental health, masculinity and digital culture, the review challenges narrow framings and underscores the need for compassionate, holistic and forward-looking responses. The insights generated provide a valuable foundation for policy makers, public health leaders and practitioners to engage more authentically with young men's experiences.

With targeted regulation, increased research investment and activity and culturally attuned prevention and support strategies, the evidence highlighted here can be translated into meaningful action. In doing so, there is genuine opportunity to reduce harm, support recovery and improve the wellbeing of young men, their families and communities.



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**Glasgow Centre for Population Health**  
Clarice Pears Building, 90 Byres Road,  
University of Glasgow,  
Glasgow G12 8TB

**Web:** [www.gcph.co.uk](http://www.gcph.co.uk)

**Bluesky:** [@theGCPH](https://bsky.app/profile/theGCPH)

**LinkedIn:** [/theGCPH](https://www.linkedin.com/company/theGCPH)

**For more information on this report, please  
contact:** [Christopher.Harkins@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Christopher.Harkins@glasgow.ac.uk)