

CRITICAL gambling studies



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Book Review

Sulkunen, P., Babor, T., Cisneros Örnberg, J., Egerer, M., Hellman, M., Livingstone, C., Marionneau, V., Nikkinen, J., Orford, J., Room, R. & Rossow, I. (2019). *Setting Limits: Gambling, Sciences and Public Policy*. Oxford University Press. 232 pp. £36.99UK. ISBN: 9780198817321 (paperback).

Setting Limits, authored by an international group of experts, provides a comprehensive review of research on worldwide gambling trends, industry strategies, regulation and related consequences on society. This multidisciplinary book is intended for policy-makers and to foster evidence-based ways of 'setting limits' on gambling operations, supported by numerous tables, charts and diagrams. Most of the figures are included in chapters three to seven, and support relatively well the authors' arguments by providing the reader, for example, a glimpse of the growing availability of gambling products over time or a summary of impact studies of increased/reduced availability of gambling in different countries. The originality of *Setting Limits* lies in its exhaustive overview of gambling research – epidemiological, social, economic and policy research evidence are addressed – and in its public interest perspective. The latter is concerned with harm in populations, and does not focus on the individuals. The involvement of commercial actors and other beneficiaries of gambling revenue in policy-making is attended to, as they bear a great responsibility for the prevalence of problem gambling. The authors complete this compendium with three main conclusions. First, gambling's benign and malign outcomes go together. An increase in the gambling revenue would result in an increase of gambling-related harms. Implementing effective strategies to prevent excessive gambling would reduce gambling proceeds. Second, the distribution of gambling-related harms is skewed, as financial harms are more prevalent among low-income social groups and problem gambling concerns a very small population. Third, gambling problems tend to reinforce other vulnerabilities.

Chapters one through three provide a useful background for understanding the history of gambling and the rise of this industry over time. Chapter three is of particular interest as it describes the structures of the current global gambling sector. It points out the growing commercialization of gambling products, the globalization of the market, its rampant privatization and deregulation. Another characteristic has been the growing availability of

gambling products (e.g., electronic gambling machines or online gambling).

Chapters four through seven offer an extensive review of international research on gambling practices and problem gambling, with an emphasis on the influence of socio-economic background and gambling product availability on gambling-related harms. Chapters four and five point to the association between class, gambling expenditure and gambling-related harms, as well as the effects of problem gambling on family disruption, homelessness and personal bankruptcy. Chapters six and seven present a vast body of research that deals with the positive association between mean population gambling and extent of excessive gambling, lending empirical support to the validity of the total consumption model with regard to gambling.

Chapters eight through twelve provide evidence-based suggestions for public health professionals and policy-makers to implement effective measures to curb gambling-related problems. In chapter eight, much of the focus is on reviewing research on game inducement in electronic gambling machines (EGMs), casino, and online gambling environments, and on describing the effects of the corresponding regulation. Marketing, game features and venue characteristics are strategies that aim to increase corporate profit, but they can lead to a host of gambling problems. Research on policy levers suggests that policy measures must be comprehensive in order to be effective, and that one should bear in mind that curbing gambling-related issues will reduce gambling revenue.

Chapter nine underscores the inefficiency of most measures implemented by the gambling industry to prevent excessive gambling. The authors discuss research evidence on pre-commitment tools, as they are the most commonly applied 'responsible gambling' strategies, and make four suggestions to improve it. Chapter ten introduces the different types of gambling control regimes and control structures, and examines the effectiveness of gambling provisions allocation and the related dependencies that stem from each system. It also suggests that

policy-makers reflect on whether good causes and public services could not be funded through less harmful activities

In chapter eleven, existing research on the treatment of gambling-related issues is comprehensively reviewed. The chapter sets out an interesting summary of the effectiveness of such treatments, at both the individual and population levels. It is concluded that gambling disorder is treatable, notably by cognitive behaviour therapy or other brief treatments. However, in most countries treatment for gambling problems remains scant or merely a pious wish.

Chapter twelve summarizes the main conclusions of the book. The liberalization of gambling took root in the advent of neoliberal policies across the world since the late 1980s. This process has resulted in the ubiquity of gambling products and of commercially driven objectives, at the expense of harm prevention. The authors conclude that there is a need for enhanced global governance, and they suggest 13 evidence-based recommendations to policy-makers on how to reduce gambling-related harms.

Setting Limits covers a broad spectrum of themes concerning gambling and problem gambling by drawing upon a careful scrutiny of existing research. The effects of gambling on inequalities are thoroughly reviewed, and the book places great emphasis on corporate responsibility and ineffective social policy in the development of problem gambling. Thus, *Setting Limits'* approach to gambling is in line with the concept of commercial determinants of health (e.g., Kickbusch et al., 2016; Knai et al., 2018), defined as 'strategies and approaches used by the private sector to promote products and choices that are detrimental to health' (Kickbusch et al., 2016), which argues that non-communicable diseases are mostly 'conceptualized in terms of individual-level risk factors' (Knai et al., 2018, p. 478), and puts a focus instead on corporate actors and system-level analysis. This is in keeping with research on commercial determinants of harms in gambling (e.g., Wardle et al., 2019; Livingstone & Rintoul, 2020; McCarthy et al., 2021), which aims at understanding how commercial determinants (e.g., accessibility of gambling products, exposure to advertising and promotions) might influence gambling behaviours and gambling-related issues. One of *Setting Limits'* greatest contributions is that it provides a comprehensive review of existing literature dealing with the commercial structures of gambling embeddedness and its effects on levels of gambling and problem gambling. In particular, chapters seven and eight give a convincing example of how, e.g., product and venue designs or large-scale changes in availability can have considerable consequences on gambling consumption and gambling-related harms.

I have only two comments to make on this stimulating collective work. As gambling policies and

market trends change very quickly, the book would need some more recent data. It contains figures that include projections for 2019-2022, notably with regard to the share of online gambling in Europe and in the world, and it could not account for the marked rise of online gambling prevalence globally since 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It would also benefit from an extension of the scope of the review to South American and African continents, which are considered by the industry as the future of gambling markets (especially the latter, see Reith et al., 2019). To conclude, this policy-oriented book is of particular interest to policy-makers, public health professionals and gambling experts. Yet, the clarity of the text and the significance of the addressed topics make this book an easy read even to the layperson. It is highly recommended for anyone with an interest in gambling or in public health.

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Sébastien Berret is conducting a PhD in sociology at the University of Helsinki. His thesis investigates how the gambling surplus efficiency depends on gambling suppliers' cost structure and the institutional context, and how it might affect gambling-related harms. His research interest focuses mainly on the political economy of gambling and the prevention of gambling harms. He has been involved in several projects centered on comparisons of gambling policies and gambling providers in Europe.