



Gambling Self-Exclusion Programmes in Australia: Are They Really Effective?

Juan Zhang

This non-peer reviewed entry is published as part of the Critical Gambling Studies Blog. Visit an interactive version of this blog at: <https://criticalgamblingstudies.blogspot.com/2021/09/gambling-self-exclusion-programmes-in.html>

Problem Gambling and Self-Exclusion in Australia

In Australia, problem gambling has been recognised as a “serious problem” for the past two decades with [widely recorded negative impacts on individuals, communities, and society](#). Gambling has been directly associated with problems of addiction, crime, financial hardship, mental health, family and relationship breakdowns, costing the public at least \$7 billion according to a [2017 report](#) published by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

To address the challenges presented by problem gambling, self-exclusion programs have been rolled out across Australia in different gaming venues as a primary method of targeting problem gambling since the 1990s (Gainsbury, 2014; Nowatzki & Williams, 2002). Self-exclusion allows individuals to formally ban themselves from entering gaming venues or from betting on specific games (Blaszczynski et al., 2007). This approach could potentially limit gamblers’ easy access to gambling venues and facilities – a clearly identified risk factor associated with problem gambling – and thereby reduce the risk and harm associated with gambling accessibility (VRGF, 2015). Initially an industry-driven intervention, this approach has become one of the most widely adopted risk minimisation solutions available in gambling venues worldwide for the past 35 years.

The Australian government has invested increasing amounts of funding and support for a nation-wide gambling harm-minimisation agenda, championing self-exclusion as a best-practice strategy. Such a strong and consistent push for early intervention and risk mitigation, however, saw very little positive results. Australia’s gambling losses continued to grow exponentially during the same period, reaching \$24.9 billion in 2017-18, with an average loss of \$1,292 for each gambling adult (QGSO, 2019). For some time now, Australia have been among the [world’s “biggest losers” with the highest losses per capita](#), dwarfing other casino hubs such as the United States and Singapore.

Critiques of Self-Exclusion Programs

Serious questions have been asked about the effectiveness of self-exclusion programs, while rising concerns over issues of public awareness, under-utilisation, exclusion enforcement, and frequent



breach of agreement have been widely reported (Gainsbury, 2014; Fogarty & Taylor-Rodgers, 2016). An early evaluation report of self-exclusion in South Australia called this approach a “bluff” maintained by industry and government regulatory authorities (SACES, 2003). Within political circles, Senator Nick Xenophon openly discredited self-exclusion as “a joke”, one that “doesn’t work and the industry knows it” (Norrie, 2011). Some of the identified weaknesses and challenges are not unique to the Australian context as evidence of the limits of self-exclusion can be found in Canada, the US and Europe (see Blaszczynski et al., 2007; Hancock & Smith, 2017; Hayer & Myer, 2010; Tremblay et al., 2008). However, the Australian gambling industry continues to highlight locally-based self-exclusion as a core component of its latest “[responsible gambling strategy](#)”, supported by claims of psychological benefits to gamblers and observed behavioural improvement (Hing & Nuske, 2012; Ladouceur et al., 2007). Money, effort, and faith continue to be poured into self-exclusion programs across states and territories without alternatives considered or strategies in place to address their identified limitations.

The program’s under-utilisation points to a persistent lack of understanding on why gambling individuals make conscious decisions to reject or avoid programs designed to help them. Both the gambling industry and policy makers often work under the assumption that once a risk-reduction program is set in place, it will be automatically welcomed and taken up by target users. In reality, however, this is rarely the case. Fogarty and Taylor-Rodgers (2016) reported that public awareness of self-exclusion remains very limited. Even among those who already know about these programs, few decide to take part due to a range of personal reasons and preferences. It remains to be explained why self-exclusion works for some individuals and not for others. A more nuanced understanding is also needed on who is motivated to engage with self-exclusion programs, who is disinterested in participating, and exactly how harm or risk can be minimised under very different individual and social circumstances.

In-venue based detection and exclusion, [enforcement also remains ineffective](#) across contexts. Breaches and early termination of such exclusion agreements are very common (Fogarty & Taylor-Rodgers, 2016). Currently, there is no strategy in place to keep self-excluded gamblers away from undertaking other forms of gambling, or to stop them from gambling elsewhere (e.g., online betting or gambling in overseas destinations). Gambling venue employees find it particularly difficult to carry out in-venue detection, identification, and exclusion enforcement. The experiences of gambling service providers remain largely unknown, especially the different kinds of incentives and disincentives they face in the context of enforcing self-exclusion orders on a daily basis. Kingma (2015) notes a fundamental paradox in the gambling risk management agenda – gambling venues are supposed to do the policing, turning away customers who bring profits to their business. [This paradox reflects a major conflict of interest when the gambling industry acts as its own gatekeeper to turn customers away](#). This conflict of interest puts service staff in a difficult position; they may demonstrate strong hesitation in exercising strict enforcement (also see Hancock, 2012; Hancock & Smith, 2017).

Gambling Mobility Poses Further Challenges

A further problem with current self-exclusion measures is a lack of understanding on gambler mobility. When exclusion orders are limited only to a single venue, or multiple venues within reachable proximity (e.g., in neighbouring cities or states), such orders perform symbolic functions



and offer no real effective deterrence. Individuals can easily cross city or state boundaries to gamble in venues unidentified in their agreements. They can also engage with online gambling platforms or visit venues overseas. These challenges will likely undo any governmental efforts put in place to minimise gambling harm through voluntary self-exclusion measures.

Constrained by a sedentary perspective, studies of problem gambling continue to assume that gambling practices, harms and risks are bounded by place. Gamblers frequently cross state and national boundaries constantly in search of a new place to play and a new experience to enjoy. Indeed, it is no secret that Australians enjoy travelling overseas for the purpose of gambling, spending between \$64m-\$400m in a wide range of activities and locations including illegal offshore venues (DSS, 2021). Popular overseas destinations include Singapore, Macau S.A.R, Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Philippines. This growing trend presents major challenges to place-based exclusion programs when travelling gamblers spend money overseas and bring back possible debts and associated problems upon return. A mobile perspective is therefore urgently needed in gambling studies to assess the impact of physical and online gambler mobility on self-exclusion and other responsible gambling strategies, and to extend investigation of accessibility, gambling risk and harm beyond the bounds of national territories.

Understanding Gambling Risk Regimes with Ethnographic Approaches

A lack of first-hand experience of self-exclusion experiences, limited empirical knowledge on individual motivations and actions, and the restrictive sedentary view that ignores the increasingly mobile nature of gambling, generate serious empirical and theoretical gaps in knowledge on problem gambling and preventative strategies. Current research on self-exclusion still predominantly relies on large-scale surveys and one-off short interviews as a means of collecting primary data (e.g., Kotter et al., 2019; Lischer & Schwarz, 2018). While helpful, the research findings shed little light on individual agency, long-term motivations, and actions from a first-person, grounded perspective. Ethnographic approaches offer crucial insights, with a focus on long-term, sustained engagement and observation with individuals who are duly recognized as agentic actors capable of explaining their actions, understanding their circumstances, and making decisions about their future. Self-exclusion needs to be understood from an ethnographic perspective because it is not just simply a government program – it reflects human conflicts, tensions, different interests, and politics, as well as changing individual choices and actions.

In addition to ethnographic approaches critical investigation of notions such as access and accessibility, risk and responsibility, exclusion, and regulation at the core of the current policy framing on problem gambling in Australia and beyond is required. Michel Foucault's theories of different regimes of power and governmentality (1991) enable a focus on heterogeneous and dispersed forms of power that work through dominant risk management paradigms, with a specific emphasis on proactive risk reduction and containment (see also Keane, 2002, and Nicoll, 2019 on a Foucauldian approach to addiction and gambling in everyday life).

Instead of focusing on the individual or the industry as separate risky subjects with [different expectations of responsibility](#), applying a risk regime framework recognizes multiple forces in shaping gambling practices and gambling governance. This enables us to understand how risky subjects are



produced as a result of global forces and local social and economic policies. More nuanced accounts of how gamblers, gambling venues and government regulators develop different understandings and experiences of risk, reward and responsibility will lead to new insights on the different interests and positions of each party within gambling transactions.

Gambling related risks are complex and interlinked. These can be economic (e.g., business profitability), political (e.g., regulatory and government legitimacy), social (e.g., community welfare and crime) and health related (e.g., addiction), defined in different terms and conditions by different stakeholders. Current policy and research focused on gambling risks continues to lean heavily towards definitions from a regulatory perspective (e.g., Johansson et al., 2009). Within this public framing of gambling risk and responsibility, some gamblers are categorised as “problem gamblers”, some as “at risk”, and others as responsible and risk-free, reflecting a top-down “project of subjectification” (Huxley, 2008) that can be rigid and stigmatising. As an alternative, a risk regime perspective may bring forward an in-depth understanding of how gambling individuals develop their own notions of risk and exercise their own risk management strategies, which may look drastically different from government and expert-led approaches. The lived experiences of individuals help to shed light on risk and responsibility outside of the dominant perspective as individuals rationalise their interests and practices in a day-to-day context. It unveils how different individuals understand responsibility in different ways, and act in ways that are informed by both the dominant public discourse and their situated interpretations. These highly contextualised understandings and actions are needed to provide empirically grounded knowledge useful for the improvement of current gambling policies and the development of more targeted programs.

Ethnographic understanding will also unveil the interlinked paradoxes and tensions in the current gambling risk minimisation strategies. It helps, for example, to interrogate how voluntariness in self-exclusion is understood and exercised, and how gatekeeping by service providers is performed and challenged on the ground. And it highlights everyday conflicts and tensions take place in the context of gambling self-exclusion, and how service staff exercise judgements and strategies to practice in-venue exclusion situationally and flexibly. Individuals involved in self-exclusion agreements are not just problem gamblers or venue service providers; they are embedded in multiple social and professional roles, as consumers, workers, managers, consultants, and regulators. Depending on the structural positions available to subjects in the gambling risk regime, individuals have to make sense of what problem gambling and responsible gambling mean within their specific area of action and care.

I have argued that the critical issue of gambler mobility needs to be understood as central to transforming gambling practices and risk management as the industry grows globally. It may be time to move away from approaches that predominantly focus on state-centred, place-bounded practices of self-exclusion programs to examine how travelling bodies and differentiated national frameworks challenge the very basis of such programs. In the past ten years, gambling in the Asia Pacific has taken on transnational characteristics (Zhang, 2016) thanks to the transforming casinos and luxurious integrated resorts offering new leisure experiences to Australian gambling tourists (Lee, 2019). These latest developments radically defy conventional assumptions of gambling being a fixed and territorialised practice. Current research has yet to move away from a form of persistent “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002) that offers a skewed view on gambling risks and governance. New theoretical developments, methodologies, and empirical insights on the



increasingly mobile nature of gambling are therefore needed to shed light on heterogeneous experiences on the ground with a more reflexive understanding of responsabilisation and risk management for better policy making and service provision in future.

Juan Zhang is Senior Lecturer of Social Anthropology at the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Bristol. Her research interests include transnational mobilities, labour migration, and casinos as speculative urban development in Asia. She has published in journals including *Environment & Planning D, Environment & Planning A, Pacific Affairs*, and *Mobilities*, among others. She co-edited a book *The Art of Neighbouring: Making Relations Across China's Borders* with Amsterdam University Press, 2017.

References

Blaszczynski, A., Ladouceur, R., & Nower, L. (2007). Self-exclusion: A proposed gateway to treatment model. *International Gambling Studies* 7(1), 59-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459790601157830>

Browne, M, Greer, N, Armstrong, T, Doran, C, Kinchin, I, Langham, E & Rockloff, M. (2017). *The social cost of gambling to Victoria*, Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. <https://responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/resources/publications/the-social-cost-of-gambling-to-victoria-121/>

DSS. (2021). Gambling reforms. Media release from Department of Social Services. <https://www.dss.gov.au/communities-and-vulnerable-people/programmes-services/gambling>

Fogarty, M., & Taylor-Rodgers, E. (2016). *Understanding the self-Exclusion process in the ACT*. Centre for Gambling Research at The Australian National University https://www.gamblingandracing.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/898807/Understand-the-Self-Exclusion-Process-in-the-ACT.pdf

Foucault, M. (1991). Governmentality. In G. Burchell, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 87-104). University of Chicago Press.

Gainsbury, S. M. (2014). Review of self-exclusion from gambling venues as an intervention for problem gambling. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 30, 229-251. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-013-9362-0>

Hancock, L. (2012). *Regulatory failure? The case of Crown Casino*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Hancock, L., & Smith, G. (2017). Critiquing the Reno Model I-IV international influence on regulators and governments (2004–2015)—the distorted reality of “responsible gambling”. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 15(6), 1151-1176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-017-9746-y>

Hayer, T., & Meyer, G. (2010). Self-exclusion as a harm minimization strategy: Evidence for the casino sector from selected European countries. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 27, 685-700. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-010-9227-8>



- Hing, N., & Nuske, E. (2012). The self-exclusion experience for problem gamblers in South Australia. *Australian Social Work* 65(4), 457-473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0312407X.2011.594955>
- Huxley, M. (2008). Space and government: Governmentality and geography. *Geography Compass* 2(5), 1635-1658. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2008.00133.x>
- Johansson, A., Grant, J. E., Kim, S. W., Odlaug, B. L., & Gotestam, K. G. (2009). Risk factors for problematic gambling: A critical literature review. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 25,67-92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-008-9088-6>
- Keane, H. (2002). *What's wrong with addiction?* Melbourne University Press.
- Kingma, S. F. (2015). Paradoxes of risk management: Social responsibility and self-exclusion in Dutch casinos. *Culture and Organization* 21(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2013.795152>
- Kotter, R., Kräplin, A., Pittig, A., & Buhringer, G. (2019). A systematic review of land-based self-exclusion programs: Demographics, gambling behavior, gambling problems, mental symptoms, and mental health. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 35, 367–394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-018-9777-8>
- Ladouceur, R., Sylvain, C., & Gosselin, P. (2007). Self-exclusion program: A longitudinal evaluation study. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 23, 85-94. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-006-9032-6>
- Lee, K. W. (2019). *Las Vegas in Singapore: Violence, progress and the crisis of nationalist modernity*. NUS Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvf3w2xj>
- Lischer, S., & Schwarz, J. (2018). Self-exclusion and imposed exclusion as strategies for reducing harm: Data from three Swiss casinos. *Journal of Gambling Issues* 40, 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.4309/jgi.2018.40.2>
- McCauley, D. (2017, February 14). Scary Graph Shows How Australians Are the Biggest Losers. *News.com.au*. Accessed 3 Feb 2017. <https://www.news.com.au/finance/money/costs/scary-graph-shows-how-australians-are-the-biggest-losers/news-story/4a437cd5f735b87988549b37af12917f>
- Nicoll, F. (2019). *Gambling in everyday life: Spaces, moments and products of enjoyment*. London and New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772646>
- Norrie, J. (2011, June 5). Gamblers defy self-imposed ban. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Accessed 5 Feb 2017. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/gamblers-defy-self-imposed-ban-20110604-1fm4e.html>
- Nowatzki, N., & Williams, R. J. (2002). Casino self-exclusion programmes: A review of the issues. *International Gambling Studies* 2,3-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459790208732297>
- QGSO. (2019). *Queensland Treasury, Australian Gambling Statistics 1992–93 to 2017–18, 35th edition*. Queensland Government Statistician's Office. <https://www.qgso.qld.gov.au/issues/2646/australian-gambling-statistics-35th-edn-1992-93-2017-18.pdf>
- SACES. (2003). *Evaluation of self-exclusion programs and harm minimisation measures Report A*. The South Australian Centre for Economic Studies. Adelaide & Flinders Universities. <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/saces/ua/media/40/completereportselfexclusiona.pdf>



Tremblay, N., Boutin, C., & Ladouceur, R. (2008). Improved self-exclusion program: Preliminary results. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 24, 505-518. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-008-9110-z>

VRGF. (2015). Background paper: *Risk factors for problem gambling: Environmental, geographic, social, cultural, demographic, socio-economic, family and household*. Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. <https://responsiblegambling.vic.gov.au/documents/22/risk-factors-for-problem-gambling.pdf>

Wardle, H., Reith, G., Langham, E., & Rogers, R. D. (2019). Gambling and public health: We need policy action to prevent harm. *BMJ* 365, 1807. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.l1807>

Wimmer, A., & Glick Schiller, N. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation–state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Networks* 2(4), 301-334. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>

Zhang, J. (2016). Integrated mega-casinos and speculative urbanism in Southeast Asia. *Pacific Affairs* 90, 651-674. <https://doi.org/10.5509/2017904651>