

# CRITICAL gambling studies



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## EDITORIAL

### Editors' Introduction to the Issue

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Welcome to the October 2025 issue of *Critical Gambling Studies*! Each of the papers published in this issue seeks to galvanise many of the themes central to critical gambling studies. Against the backdrop of new initiatives around harm reduction, state gambling and a range of ongoing global economic crises, these papers all remind us that thinking critically about gambling is as important as ever.

Each of the papers shares a common insistence that effective accounts of gambling motivations and experience require ever evolving and innovative methodological and theoretical approaches. They note the persistence of gambling and gambling related harms and ongoing social and political debates around levies and regulatory crackdown. In the UK, the gambling industry continues to see record profits. The government has recently introduced a statutory levy on gambling profits partly in order to fund research. It is likely that this will have a significant impact on the future of gambling studies in the UK and beyond, with UK grant schemes requiring 'lived experience' approaches to research. We are hopeful that this will ultimately feed into a diverse range of critical accounts of gambling, including a fresh emphasis on lived experience research as a growing field of study.

The papers in this issue remind us of the importance of lived experience research in gambling. Of central importance to the papers is the diverse discursive presentation of gambling harms both within academic scholarship and official policy documentation. The papers in various ways also explore the individual versus

public and state representations of harm. The ways in which state-run gambling seeks to build acceptance via legitimisation projects is central to this. All the papers in this issue serve as a reminder that the gambling industry remains controversial. In various ways, the gambling industry seeks to pre-empt criticism of its products in moral terms. The increased ubiquity of online gambling is another core theme of the papers, with authors examining the increasing number of jurisdictions introducing licensing schemes to allow transnational online gambling operators to provide platforms. The papers explore the relationships between a range of gambling stakeholders, industry, and regulators, highlighting that these relationships often occur with the complicity of the academic community. The global regulatory context of online gambling also emerges as a theme. As international gambling markets continue to open up, the papers remind us of the need for local and international regulation and thinking through how existing regulatory models can be improved on. They underscore how legislative changes are often paralleled with shifting discursive formations and institutional practices.

Mills et al.'s paper *Reframing Gambling Harms as the Product of a Predatory Industry: A Habermasian Interpretation of a Lived Experience-Led 'Counterpublic'* offers an application of the German social theorist Jurgen Habermas's critical theory in order to expose the normative legacy of lived experience gambling campaigns. The paper discusses the findings of a recent study which concluded that public health professionals have much to learn by collaborating with people



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exposed to gambling related harms. They argue that this could enhance public health approaches to gambling in a myriad of ways, including by raising awareness, engaging with social movements and the industries that produce them. Qualitative interviews with a range of public health professionals and people with lived experience of gambling related harms are explored via a Habermasian analysis, notably focusing on Habermas's "system-life world" scheme. The paper develops knowledge on the intersections between state bureaucracy, market institutions, the public sphere, social relations and culture involved in gambling.

Caruana et al.'s paper, *Squaring a Circle? Sustainability Reports as a Legitimacy-Seeking Strategy in State Gambling Monopolies*, expands on the ways in which state gambling organisations operate as monopolies. Acknowledging that gambling is a controversial industry, the paper offers interesting insights into the sustainability reports published over two years for Canadian and Finnish gambling monopolies. Making use of a content analysis of the reports, the paper uncovers various strategies intended to enhance legitimacy. This legitimacy feeds directly into an earnings strategy which is of course directed towards maximising profits for stakeholders. The paper offers a fascinating account of the interconnections between legitimacy seeking, the state and an increasingly fragmented and hard to regulate global gambling market.

The topic of regulation is again picked up in Marionneau et al.'s paper *Responsibilities for harm reduction and prevention in online gambling: Evidence from newly regulated license-based markets*. Here, gambling harm prevention and reduction are situated within a broad network of policy makers, regulators, health professionals and industry. Drawing on a range of restrictions across Europe and Canada, the paper explores the licensed online gambling market in order to interrogate the networks of responsibility for harm prevention and reduction. The paper

indicates that at present this is marked by a separating out of policy makers, regulators and gamblers themselves in terms of treatment policies. It concludes by arguing that effective harm prevention is increasingly inhibited by a system which is infused with conflicting interests around industry, harm prevention resource resources, and offshore gambling provision. Improved harm prevention would necessitate a more symmetrical range of responsibilities, priorities and power relations among key stakeholders.

Harm is further explored in Korfitsen et al's paper *Why, by whom and how? Representations of gambling problems and their solutions in Swedish general administrative court cases*. Here, the focus is on legislative changes in 2018 designed to facilitate support for those suffering gambling related harms in Sweden. Examining 69 appeals concerning gambling treatment within the general administrative court, the paper draws on research which scrutinises court judgements. The paper offers fascinating insights into the ways in which discursive, objectifying and often material consequences of court representations vary quite significantly, often leading to uneven welfare interventions and treatment provision. It is a unique paper filling a gap in existing gambling research which has tended to overlook the ways in which gambling "responsibility" also operates within court systems.

All of the papers in this issue argue for the increasingly urgent requirement of fresh methodological interventions into the study of gambling and gambling related harm. The emphasis on lived experience is especially welcome as is the location of gambling related harm interventions within complex systems of power relations, including legislation, public health initiatives, harm reduction policies, commerce and the state. It reminds us that far from gambling harms being the experience of a minority of isolated individuals, gamblers are instead situated within wide networks of political, social and economic structures and inequalities.

This issue of the journal concludes with Rob Aitken's insightful review of Douglas Unger's novel *Dream City*. The book centres the role of Las Vegas casinos in shifting variants of the American dream—from frontier dreams of opportunity, across working class dreams of decently paid construction jobs, through to executive dreams of casinos as globalised expressions of financial power. Aitken uses the book to (re)think the relationship between finance and gambling, as mutually imbricated. In-so-doing, he connects with scholars in critical finance studies and urban geography who have examined the way that gambling haunts accounts of legitimate finance, even as it is often simplistically cast as the excessively indulgent counterpart to rational investment.

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Fiona Nicoll is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta and the author of *Gambling in Everyday Life: Spaces, Moments and Products of Enjoyment* (2019) and numerous publications on gambling and the politics of reconciliation, race and whiteness in Australia and Canada.

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Kate Bedford is Professor of Law and Political Economy at the University of Birmingham. Her second book, *Bingo Capitalism: The Law and Political Economy of Everyday Gambling* (2019), was awarded the 2020 Hart-Socio-Legal Studies Association book prize and the 2020 International Political Economy book prize of the British International Studies Association. Her research explores how law and regulation distribute resources, and how they can impact inequalities.