

# Australia gambles like no other country

MARK  
GAETANI



AUSTRALIA is a nation of gamblers who are more likely to lose than win.

Statistics show losing bets total \$25 billion each year, the highest per capita spend in the world.

In the latest disturbing development, Australians now outspend the citizens of every other country on online gambling, often with the simple use of their phone, the casino in everyone's pocket.

St Vincent de Paul Society members, who volunteer at the community's front lines, are well acquainted with the impacts of problem gambling - broken families, kids left hungry, households struggling to pay rent or mortgages, homelessness a real threat.

We understand that a flutter can be enjoyable and don't oppose gambling per se. Wins are exciting, losses unfortunate, but life goes on ... except for those who become addicted to gambling's dopamine high and find it difficult to stop, regardless of the impacts on the individual, their family life, work and finances.

The feelings of guilt and desperation after major losses can have a significant impact on mental health. Statistics from the Victorian Coroner show that from 2009-2016 at least 184 suicides were directly related to gambling and 17 other suicides were by affected others such as family members.

The true numbers could be much higher.

Whatever the game, the house always wins. The NSW government's GambleAware says you can never predict a win on the pokies, whether you play a machine straight after someone else has a big payout or one that has not had a jackpot in ages. Days of the week or times of the day make no difference.

The Queensland government rates the chances of winning top prize on a poker machine at around one in 7,000,000.

While most who gamble don't have a problem, too many people are coming to grief, and



The recommendations of the late Peta Murphy's gambling house committee go unheeded. Picture by Keegan Carroll

**The [Vincent de Paul] society urges an end to the widespread advertising of online gambling, which conflates betting and sports events, exposes and normalises audiences of all ages to gambling culture.**

we welcome recent comments by the ACT's Gambling and Racing Commission that bet and load-up limits on poker machines could reduce the risk of problem gamblers having large losses and consequent harmful impacts. We support the Alliance for Gambling Reform, a registered health promotion char-

ity and the only national peak body working to reduce gambling harm.

The society urges an end to the widespread advertising of online gambling, which conflates betting and sports events, exposes and normalises audiences of all ages to gambling culture, and pulls in individuals who are at risk of, or who are already, experiencing gambling harm.

Some 44 per cent of all Australian adults report gambling on sports and/or racing, with most placing their bets using a smart phone or computer.

Online gambling has taken Australia and a good deal of the world by storm. The diversity of betting options is mind boggling, all just a few clicks away.

In 2022, the Australian Institute of Family Studies found 68 per cent of online gamblers who regularly bet online on sports/races were at risk of gambling harm, with younger age groups (18-34 years) at the highest risk. A recent financial story about a merger of major wagering groups said the combined new entity aimed at tripling the number of under-35 customers on the platform.

The research said one in four online gamblers used credit cards to gamble, more than half had multiple online accounts, many of those at risk gambled in the late-night hours of midnight to 8am and only 6 per cent had sought help, with embarrassment being the commonest reason for not doing so.

To explore this latest phenomenon, the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives standing committee on social policy and legal affairs held an inquiry that in mid-2023 reported that online gambling is wreaking havoc in our communities.

The report, *You win some, you lose more - Online gambling and its impacts on those experiencing gambling harm*, added that around two-thirds of all participants who gambled on sports, racing and electronic gaming machines were at risk of harm.

"Online gambling is unlike other forms of entertainment because of its potential to cause psychological, health, relationship, legal and financial harm to individuals and those around them, and tragically, gambling is a key risk factor for suicide," it said.

"A person's gambling can progress to the behavioural addiction of gambling disorder, which is like addictions to substances. There are currently few safeguards to protect people with gambling disorder from online gambling harm."

The inquiry's chair was Labor MP the late Peta Murphy, admired across the parliamentary aisle, yet none of her committee's 31 recommendations, which include "a comprehensive national strategy on online gambling harm reduction", has yet received a response from the Albanese government or the opposition. Independent MPs Zoe Daniel and Kate Chaney have pushed for an end to online gambling ads, to no avail.

St Vincent de Paul Society believes the report offers a sound foundation for addressing the exposure to harmful gambling by vulnerable people whose losses are having devastating consequences for individuals, families and the community in general.

■ Mark Gaetani is the national president of St Vincent de Paul Society, Australia.