



Helping families and friends  
negatively affected by gambling:

Policy and practice  
recommendations from Adfam's  
research

[adfam.org.uk](https://adfam.org.uk)

© Adfam 2022. Registered Charity

# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	3
Our research .....	3
The scoping survey .....	4
Survey on the effects of gambling and what support would be useful.....	4
Covid-19 and families affected by gambling .....	5
YouGov poll for people currently negatively affected by the gambling of a family member or friend .....	5
The voices of family members .....	7
Conclusion and recommendations .....	8

## Introduction

Adfam is the national charity working to improve life for families affected by drugs, alcohol and gambling. Adfam wants anyone affected by someone else's substance use or gambling to have the chance to benefit from healthy relationships, be part of a loving and supportive family, and enjoy mental and physical wellbeing. Substance use and gambling can threaten and destroy family relationships and wellbeing: Adfam empowers family members and carers, supports frontline workers and influences decision-makers to stop this happening. Central to all its work is a commitment to training and supporting family members and other affected others to advocate for themselves and each other, and to have their voices heard.

Adfam's focus as an organisation had previously been primarily on substance use; however, in 2019 GambleAware funded Adfam's Gambling and Families project. This was a three-year initiative to extend Adfam's pioneering work supporting the family members of substance misusers to the one million adults negatively affected by the gambling of a family member or friend in Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> The project embraced a range of activities including: practitioner training, peer support training, regional and national forums, good practice guides, roundtable events, research, advocacy and awareness-raising.

This brief report sets out the findings from a range of research activities including four specific gambling related surveys carried out as part of the project and identifies implications for policy and practice.

Adfam would like to thank all of the family members affected by the gambling of a loved one for taking the time to participate in the research studies highlighted in this report and for sharing their personal experiences.

## Our research

Over recent years Adfam has conducted four online surveys which looked at the effects of gambling on families and carers.

- A scoping survey before Adfam's project started to identify the need - 35 responses (Survey Monkey January 2018).
- A survey on the effects of gambling on families and what support would be beneficial – 36 responses (Survey Monkey June 2019).
- Examining the effects of COVID-19 on families affected by gambling - 7 responses (Survey Monkey March 2021). <https://adfam.org.uk/our-work/news-and-events/news/1047>
- A YouGov poll for people currently negatively affected by the gambling of a family member or friend – 42 responses (June 2021).

These surveys provided not only quantitative data on the scale of gambling's impact but also a qualitative picture of the affected other's experience. This was supplemented by a telephone interview with someone affected by a family member's gambling. This qualitative data is set out in the 'the voices of family members' section.

## Scoping survey

The initial national online survey was undertaken in 2018 and had 35 responses from people affected by a family member or friend's gambling. Just over a third of respondents were the partner or spouse of the gambler but other relationships included parent, sibling, or friend. The survey highlighted that:

- 71% of affected others described the situation as very difficult to deal with.
- 68% of affected others had received no support with the problem.
- 62% of the loved ones only had a problem with gambling but a small group also had problems with mental health (25%) or alcohol or drugs (12.5%).
- 52% said the gambling had impacted significantly on their relationship with the loved one.
- 64% said the gambling had impacted significantly on family finances.
- 52% said that they had experienced mental health problems as a result.
- 22% said that they had experience violence and/or abusive behaviour from their loved one.

When asked when they found out their family member had a gambling problem, the following circumstances were highlighted:

- *"At the age of 18 when they began to steal, get loans and changes in their behaviour."*
- *"When 80% of a full week's wage would be spent on gambling."*
- *"When they spent all of their University money and had to leave University."*
- *"When they openly admitted to stealing to continue their habit."*
- *"Constantly on the computer playing games and not coming home. The nail on the coffin was when I found his bank statement of numerous pay-outs for poker and casinos."*
- *"When they smashed a mirror out of anger and frustration. Six months into the relationship. They had gambled their student loan."*
- *"When they had a considerable amount in an online betting account and took out a mortgage to be able to borrow against it."*
- *"When he attempted suicide."*

## Survey on the effects of gambling on families & what support would be beneficial:

In June 2019 Adfam undertook a second online survey on gambling and families. This received 36 responses. 78% were from either partners or parents. Key points included:

- 81% had suffered financial impacts.
- 81% had suffered impact on their mental health.
- 58% had suffered impact on their physical health and wellbeing
- 57% said it had interfered with their future life plans
- 50% said it interfered with their work/other day-to-day activities
- 58% had received no support with the problem.
- 69% said it would be useful to receive peer-to-peer support from another affected family member.

## Covid-19 and families affected by gambling:

In March 2021, Adfam undertook a more detailed online survey with a smaller response rate (7 responses), which was focused on the impact of COVID-19 on gambling patterns and the impact on families. This found that:

- The main impacts during the pandemic were relationship difficulties and financial problems – these were experienced by all respondents.
- 75% of respondents felt that the loved one's gambling had increased during Covid, 25% felt it had no impact.

Respondents highlighted that the following interventions would be helpful:

- Specialist one to one support with a trained worker (online).
- One to one peer support with someone who has lived experience (face-to-face).
- GP support.
- Specialist mental health service.

Respondents also indicated what they would like to see the Government, local authorities and organisations like Adfam do to improve support for families negatively affected by gambling:

- Greater availability of support services for people negatively affected by gambling.
- Greater availability of support services for families of people negatively affected by gambling.
- More information and awareness around the harms related to gambling and the impact on families and friends.
- More information and awareness for families and friends of someone negatively affected by gambling, on what to do and how to get support.
- Improved understanding amongst frontline professionals, such as GP services, around the impact of gambling on people and those around them
- Tighter controls around availability of gambling
- Tighter controls around gambling advertising and marketing
- Recognition of gambling with harm as a public health issue
- Better co-ordination across frontline health services (mental health, substance use, young person's etc.) on how to support people negatively affected by gambling and their families/friends

## YouGov poll for people currently negatively affected by the gambling of a family member or friend:

In June 2021, Adfam commissioned a YouGov poll on the negative effects of drinking, drug use and gambling on families and friends. The findings were summarised in a report published in November 2021 called ['Overlooked: Why we should be doing more to support families and friends affected by someone else's drinking, drug use or gambling'](#). The survey had 42 responses from people negatively affected by a family member or friend's gambling specifically. Findings included:

- 40% felt that the gambling was more challenging as a result of Covid-19 restrictions.
- 55% felt that gambling problems were given insufficient attention in the media and by the public generally.
- 50% felt that more should be done by national and local government on these problems.
- 53% felt that there should be tighter controls around gambling marketing and availability.

- 78% said additional support would help them to cope - including the opportunity to talk to a trainer counsellor online (47%), the opportunity to talk to others facing similar problems via an online forum (38%) and a telephone helpline (30%).<sup>ii</sup>

Respondents felt that the following interventions would be particularly useful:

- Greater availability of support services for families/friends negatively affected by behaviours such as drugs, alcohol and gambling.
- More information and awareness for families and friends on how to cope and where to get support.
- A public awareness campaign for the general public to better understand the impact of behaviours such as drugs, alcohol and gambling on families/friends, and to reduce stigma.

## The voices of family members

The surveys also provided some very powerful voices articulating the impact of gambling on family and friends. To these have been added the comments of a family member who was interviewed as part of Adfam's gambling project:

- *"Late last year I discovered my father's gambling addiction of over 40 years. It has destroyed my relationship with him and turned my world upside down. He doesn't understand or acknowledge the impact of his addiction on the family."*
- *"My brother had a serious gambling addiction which affected us all as a family. My mother was the worst affected by my brother's actions. However, it made the whole family feel terrible. As he would be constantly pestering us all for money all day every day and would not stop texting us until we gave in."*
- *"It's been really isolating for me; my friends don't understand at all."*
- *"I was in a relationship with a gambling addict which was now ended. I have been impacted financially and was emotionally abused by the gambler."*
- *"I have been a single mum now for 14 years after my husband gambled away our home and his family and friends' money..."*
- *"It never stops. Living with an addict is very difficult. Never give them responsibility or access to money. You need counselling."*
- *"I have two teenage kids, so they're affected too. My son wants to stay in home and be settled but our daughter feels anger towards the situation."*
- *"My son has lost his job and run up huge debts due to gambling and is also in danger of losing his accommodation as rent hasn't been paid. He has a serious mental illness too, made worse by the gambling, which causes great stress and worry to the family."*
- *"My partners gambling, prior to my knowledge about it, is when we suffered the most harms. We were pushed away, let down and made to believe he was having an affair. He lied to, manipulated and stole from those he loved. Since recovery, our life is very different though it is happier. I manage the family finances and this can occasionally be stressful for us both."*
- *"My son has had a secret Gambling addiction for at least a decade, which is getting worse. I am working to fund his addiction, I try not to give him any money but he will phone and text all day until I back down. I am so worried what will happen to him if I don't give him the money. This is all day every day. He works full time, he also has a drinking and cannabis problem. I can't bring myself to confront about the mess he's in and I don't know how to get out of this cycle. He knows how to pull on my heart strings and I find it easier to give in rather than not."*
- *"My two sons are both in addiction to gambling. One is addicted to the high stake bandits in the bookies and the other is gambling on football via an app on his mobile phone. In both cases the results are the same. One has been aggressive and even violent when he has gambled and lost although no longer"*

*lives with me as I became scared of him. The other does not live at home either and is really honest about his addiction but is unable to stop."*

- *"My son had a hidden gambling addiction which we only found out about when he took his own life."*

The comments from affected others also focused on the need for better support for the affected others

- *"You need help with your self-esteem, learning how to detach, and support for if you do need to walk away. Practical support about finances when leaving someone would be really helpful."*
- *"I have previously looked for articles, blogs, online support etc. about parents with long-term gambling addictions but I struggle to find any that are similar to my situation. I would like to be able to speak to people who have a loved-one with a long-term addiction."*
- *"There's not enough help available...People are killing themselves and families are losing their homes but there's not enough money to help and the problem is just not being acknowledged...The problem needs to be acknowledged."*
- *"We need to ensure that the harm caused by gambling is more widely understood, and we need to remove the stigma attached, so people can seek help early."*
- *"There needs to be a focus on you as a family member, how you can cope and deal with the things that come from problem gambling...You need help with your self-esteem, learning how to detach, and support for if you do need to walk away. Practical support about finances when leaving someone would be really helpful."*
- *"I would really like to find one to one counselling for people living with addicts. Gambling is just as bad as other addictions if not worse, with drink and drugs you can see if someone is pass-out drunk whereas with gambling it's all in secret, you can't see it."*
- *"The first point of call for people shouldn't be a forum of peers, it should be one to one contact with a counsellor online. People should be able to speak to someone who can actually help first as so often you can go on to forum and post something but no one will actually help you."*

We also received a number of comments from those who received support and highlighted how valuable it was

- *"Extremely helpful. I felt they were there for me, encouraging me, listening, giving practical advice, leading me to further support on forums, through money advice lines etc. They have given me real strength at a very scary time, whilst not demonizing my husband."*
- *"Without support I hate to think what the future would have held for me. The counselling sessions have been a life line and made me a stronger person that can now help myself before putting other first. It has helped keep our family together."*
- *"I have learned how to deal with the situation and not to feel alone and out of my depth. I now know how to talk to my son, how to tackle the problem."*
- *"I found it helpful because it helps me understand how the addiction has affected my childhood and consequently me as a person. It helps me to understand where his addiction has come from. For me counselling allows me to talk openly with someone who will sympathize with my struggle as I find that very few people understand the addiction, additionally it is confirming for me that I am allowed to be upset and angry and that no one is to blame."*

## Conclusion and recommendations

Adfam's research highlights the impact that gambling can have on family members and friends. The numbers are small in the individual studies, but this can be seen as a reflection of the under recognition the issue has in public awareness. Greater awareness and understanding is needed to highlight the challenges that families can face.

Nonetheless, the existing responses paint a picture of real unmet need. As with substance misuse, often the family members and friends are suffering far more than the person with the addiction. They are experiencing anxiety, financial problems and abuse at a level that is destroying lives and undermining families.

However, our research also highlights more than just the impact of gambling on affected others. It highlights real calls from affected others for more services to meet their needs.

Therefore, the following nine policy and practice recommendations flow from the research:

- The needs of those affected by a loved one's gambling needs to be formally recognised by the government and addressed in any national strategic or policy initiatives focused on the harms caused by gambling.
- Gambling problems need to be recognised as a public health issue and addressed by local authority public health teams.
- Health promotion / awareness raising work is required both to prevent gambling problems but also to highlight the need for support for affected others.
- Greater recognition is needed of the stigma, mental health and financial impact of problem gambling on affected others and, in particular, risks such as suicide.
- Any family member of a gambler should be able to access both face to face and online help wherever they live in the country.
- The help available should embrace both group and one to one support including telephone support.
- Accredited training in supporting those affected by a loved one's gambling should be available nationally and rolled out to key professional groups such as primary care and mental health.
- Peer support should be a key part of the support to those affected by a loved one's gambling.
- Training should be nationally available to facilitate people with lived experience as an affected other providing peer support to others who are living with someone suffering gambling related harms.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://adfam.org.uk/files/Overlooked.pdf> (pg8)

<sup>ii</sup> [Families-in-lockdown.pdf](#) (adfam.org.uk)