



# Closing the Loop

## Gambling-related suicide in Victoria, Australia: a population-based cross-sectional study

This series is designed to 'close the loop' between research and policy by translating research evidence into policy directions and advice. These papers review key findings from National Suicide Prevention Research Fund projects and identifies evidence-based policy recommendations. This edition focuses on investigating gambling-related suicide in Victoria, Australia through a population-based cross-sectional study of suicides reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria between 2009 and 2016.

### Research summary

The research sought to address the ongoing gap in data on the role of gambling in suicide as a significant contributing psychosocial risk factor. While gambling is associated with serious harms to health, including suicide, gambling-related suicide are not routinely investigated by death investigators impacting accuracy of available public health datasets.

The study utilises a population-based cross-sectional study approach to examine the Victorian Suicide Register to identify gambling-related suicide deaths. Common factors contributing to underreporting of gambling-related suicides include concealing gambling behaviours from the person's family and friends, or the person's family and friends not disclosing the gambling behaviour to police or coroners due to shame and stigma.

#### Identifying gambling-related suicide

In order to identify gambling-related suicides in the Victorian Suicide Register, the researchers examined free text information entered into the Register for the variable 'financial stressor'. Additional terms related to gambling products, location, and providers was also undertaken to account for the potential for the deceased to be experiencing harm that is not necessarily related to financial distress.

Cases were classified as 'gambling-related' if gambling was identified in the evidence as a contributing factor in the decision to suicide, for example by the deceased in a suicide note or letter, by a witness, the police, and/or the coroner.

#### Findings

From 2009 to 2016 there were 4788 suicide deaths in Victoria. Of these, 184 were identified as direct gambling-related suicides and a further 17 were gambling-related suicide by 'affected others'. Together, these comprise 4.2% of all suicides in Victoria over the eight year period, which is an annual average rate of 5.13 gambling-related suicides per million Victorian adults.

Gambling-related suicides were significantly more likely to be male (n=153, 83%), than the Victorian population of total suicide deaths and significantly more likely to occur among those most disadvantaged.

Family members and friends were more likely than clinicians to know about the deceased gambling. Researchers found only 20% of cases suggested the clinician was aware of the deceased's gambling, signalling greater effort to reduce stigma and engage people experiencing the harms of gambling in healthcare is needed.

## Contributing factors

Gambling was rarely the only stressor the deceased was experiencing in the lead up to suicide. Mental ill health, substance use, conflict with partner and work-related stressors were found particularly prevalent. These factors were observed to intersect and exacerbate one another. These intersecting contributing factors highlight the need for holistic health and wellbeing treatment services for people experiencing the harms of gambling.

The relationship of socioeconomic inequity to gambling-related suicide identified in the study supports previous Victorian research which showed populations in disadvantaged areas are more likely to be exposed to high-intensity gambling. [1] The losses in these areas are substantially higher than in less disadvantaged areas, and 40% of the apparent effect of disadvantage was accounted for by the density of electronic gaming machines. [2]

## Policy implications

The findings of the research shine a light on gambling-related suicides, which is often a silent suicide risk. The researchers identify that the true number of gambling-related suicides was likely to be much higher, but is underreported due to shame, stigma, and lack of reporting methods that enable death investigators to identify gambling as a contributing factor in suicide deaths.

In Australia, coroners make determinations of death based on the information they receive from primary sources including police reports, toxicology/post mortem reports, and witness statements. If gambling is not identified in the information received, it is unable to be captured as a contributing factor in death determinations.

In Hong Kong, where the death is suspected to be either accidental, suicide or homicide, the police collect bank and other legal debtor statements and insurance policies from the families of the deceased. One study of gambling-related suicide in Hong Kong identified 19.4% of all suicides were gambling-related (233 gambling-related suicides of total 1201 suicide deaths in 2003). [3]

Without robust data, it is challenging to target suicide prevention to people experiencing the harms of gambling in Australia.

In September 2022, the Commonwealth Government launched an Inquiry into online gambling and its impacts on people experiencing the harms of gambling.

A Report was released by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs with 31 recommendations to Government detailing meaningful reforms and prioritisation of harm minimisation strategies for people who gamble. [4] The Commonwealth Government has yet to respond to the recommendations made in the Report.

Australia requires a rethink of the nation's approach to gambling by treating it as a public health issue requiring urgent reform.

## Key Policy Recommendations

1. The establishment of a Federal-State taskforce that is charged with preventing gambling suicides.
2. A national strategy for police and coroners to have access to a 'gambling data vault' to pick up gambling related deaths and identify the true extent of gambling-related suicides.
3. For gambling related suicides to be reported annually in Parliament, which means that every state coroner needs a unit investigating gambling related suicides.

## Research authors:

Rintoul, A., Dwyer, J., Millar, C., Bugeja, L. & Nguyen, H. (2023) Gambling-related suicide in Victoria, Australia: a population-based cross-sectional study. Victoria; Federation University. DOI: 10.1016/j.lanwpc.2023.100903

## Suggested citation

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<https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/closing-the-loop-series>.

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@FedUniAustralia

## References

1. Rintoul, A., Livingstone, C., Mellor, A. & Jolley, D. (2013). Modelling vulnerability to gambling-related harm: how disadvantage predicts gambling losses. *Addict Res Theory*, 1(4): 329-338.

2. Rintoul, A., et al., Modelling vulnerability to gambling related harm: how disadvantage predicts gambling losses. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 2013. 1(4): p. 329-38.

3. Wong, PW., Cheung, DY., Conner, KR., Conwell, Y. & Yip, PS. (2010). Gambling and completed suicide in Hong Kong: a review of coroner court files. *Prim Care Companion J Clin Psychiatry*, 12(6). DOI: [10.4088/PCC.09m00932blu](https://doi.org/10.4088/PCC.09m00932blu)

4. Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs. (2023). You win some, you lose more: online gambling and its impacts on those experiencing gambling harm. House of Representatives, Canberra.

Note: recommendations are proposed by Suicide Prevention Australia based on the above research, they are not recommendations of the researchers referenced.

**There are crisis services available 24/7 if you or someone you know is in distress**

**Lifeline: 13 11 14**  
[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467**  
[www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

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