

# Addressing the link between gambling and family violence

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*Submission to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee*



## Acknowledgment of Country

No to Violence acknowledges First Nations Peoples across these lands; the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters. We pay respect to all Elders, past, present, and emerging. We acknowledge a deep connection with country which has existed over 60,000 years. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and this was and always will be First Nation's land.



Contact NTV:

Please forward inquiries about this paper to No to Violence:

Email: [policyandresearch@ntv.org.au](mailto:policyandresearch@ntv.org.au)

Phone: 03 9487 4500

Men's Referral Service – for men concerned about their behaviour

1300 766 491

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## Executive summary

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No to Violence (NTV) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the *Inquiry into the Victorian Auditor-General's reports no. 99: Follow up of Regulating Gambling and Liquor (2019) and no. 213: Reducing the Harm Caused by Gambling (2021)*. This submission explores the progress that has been made towards addressing the link between gambling and family violence in response to the Auditor-General's 2021 recommendations for the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation (VRGF). Our feedback focuses on three key areas: understanding gambling harm, preventing gambling harm and treating gambling harm.

Despite research showing there is a clear link between gambling and family violence, NTV notes that there has been little attention given to ensuring services can address these issues when they co-occur. Gambling help and family violence services remain mostly siloed from each other, limiting the effectiveness of responses and creating an unnecessary burden on families who are left to navigate a fragmented service system.

We believe there are opportunities for the Victorian Government to collaborate with NTV to create greater coordination between the work being done to address gambling harm and family violence in Victoria, including through:

- building the evidence base on the nature and extent of the intersection between gambling harm and family violence
- exploring prevention initiatives that address the social and cultural norms that perpetuate both gambling harm and family violence
- exploring treatment approaches that integrate responses to problem gambling and family violence.

This submission has been developed through consultation with NTV's Victorian members, including those who provide both family violence and gambling services, and those who have incorporated a gambling harm component into their men's behaviour change programs. We value the knowledge and expertise of our members and want to highlight the innovative work being done to respond to problem gambling and family violence using a coordinated approach. Our hope is that the Victorian Government will reflect upon the practice knowledge shared in this submission, and that our collective call for greater integration between gambling and family violence interventions is listened to and acted upon.

NTV looks forward to working with the Victorian Government to support our members and contribute to a stronger integration between gambling and family violence interventions. Our workforce development team are well placed to lead training that covers the link between gambling harm and family violence, including how to identify and respond to these forms of harm as co-occurring issues.

# Summary of recommendations

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No to Violence recommends that the Victorian Government invests in the following initiatives to strengthen responses to address gambling harm and family violence:

## **Understanding gambling harm**

1. Fund research to develop the evidence base on the intersection between family violence and gambling
2. Fund research that examines how online gambling impacts and intersects with family violence
3. Fund collaborative work between family violence and gambling help services

## **Preventing gambling harm**

4. Establish prevention campaigns that target the link between gambling and family violence prevention
5. Ensure prevention campaigns have clear aims and measures of success for addressing risk factors

## **Treating gambling harm**

6. Establish systems-level referral processes between gambling help and family violence services
7. Explore integrated family violence and gambling treatment services
8. Develop and deliver training for practitioners on the link between family violence and gambling

No To Violence welcomes the opportunity to support the initiatives of Government to strengthen responses to address gambling harm and family violence.

# The link between gambling and family violence

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There is a strong and clear link between gambling harm and family violence. In Australia, people with gambling problems are more than twice as likely as non-problem gamblers to perpetrate or experience family violence.<sup>1</sup> As a result, family violence is a commonly co-occurring issue for people seeking treatment for gambling harm. More than one third of problem gamblers report being victims of physical intimate partner violence (IPV) (38.1%) or perpetrators of physical IPV (36.5%).<sup>2</sup>

While research is still emerging, there are explanations for the link between gambling and family violence. Problem gambling and the perpetration of family violence have several common risk factors, including male gender, young age, impulsivity, and antisocial behaviour.<sup>3</sup> However, the causality of the relationship is uncertain as gambling can be both a driver and an outcome of family violence. Gambling can precede and increase the likelihood of violence, influenced by factors such as anger and stress following gambling losses.<sup>4</sup> Patterns of coercive and controlling behaviours can also precede gambling, which can then exacerbate the frequency and severity of violence.<sup>5</sup> Victim-survivors may engage in gambling behaviours to cope with violence-induced trauma, as reflected by the high rates of victimisation amongst people experiencing gambling harm.<sup>6</sup> These factors demonstrate that the relationship between family violence and gambling is complex, and that highly skilled and resourced services are required to address the co-occurring issues.

## Understanding gambling harm

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### 1. Fund research to develop the evidence base on the intersection between family violence and gambling

There are significant gaps in the evidence base regarding how gambling and family violence intersect. To address this, No to Violence encourages the VRGF to fund research aimed at developing a greater understanding of the relationship between gambling and family violence. This should include examining the relationship between gambling and coercive control, including how contextual gambling factors impact the nature and extent of family violence, and how economic abuse is linked to gambling.

Existing research has predominantly focused on co-occurrence prevalence, with minimal attention paid to how gambling influences the type, frequency, and patterns of violence. Gambling studies are yet to attempt to measure coercive control, meaning information has not been captured as to how problem gambling intersects with victim-survivors' experiences of fear, enforced isolation, restricted decision-making, and lack of control over their lives.<sup>7</sup> Considering that much of the family violence that women experience is characterised by patterns of coercion and control, the evidence base of the intersection between gambling and family violence would greatly benefit from measuring coercive control.

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<sup>1</sup> Dowling et al., 2018

<sup>2</sup> Dowling et al., 2016

<sup>3</sup> Sumoi et al., 2019

<sup>4</sup> Hing et al., 2022

<sup>5</sup> Hing et al., 2022

<sup>6</sup> Sumoi et al., 2019

<sup>7</sup> Hing et al., 2022

There is also a need to examine how contextual gambling factors – such as gambling products, practices, environments and marketing – are contributing to family violence.<sup>8</sup> Most existing research on the intersection between family violence and gambling is focused at the individual and relationship level, which does not align to the public health approach employed by the VRGF. Developing a greater understanding of how contextual gambling factors contribute and respond to family violence will enable more informed and effective prevention and harm reduction efforts.

Another significant gap in the evidence base is the link between economic abuse and gambling. While practitioners have highlighted that economic abuse is associated with gambling, gambling research has not explored the extent or nature of this intersection.<sup>9</sup> Gambling research does not adequately recognise economic abuse as a form of family violence, despite it being a common tactic used by perpetrators to assert power and control over victim-survivors. Exploring the link between economic abuse and gambling would help provide a more comprehensive understanding of how problem gambling influences family violence perpetration and victimisation.

## **2. Fund research that examines how online gambling impacts and intersects with family violence**

There is a need for future research to explore the relationship between online gambling and family violence. Although online gambling is becoming increasingly prevalent, no research has examined the different ways that it relates to family violence compared to other forms of gambling.

During consultations with NTV member organisations in Victoria, service providers shared insights into some of the different ways online gambling can influence family violence. We heard that problem online gamblers can be more withdrawn and passive in the home, culminating in disdainful and dismissive behaviour when confronted about their gambling. We also heard that online gambling is strongly associated with gambling advertisements that regularly reinforce gendered stereotypes and values that drive family violence. Offshore betting sites are becoming increasingly accessible and create additional barriers to intervention due to the lack of regulation and government oversight. Gambling help practitioners told us that targeted treatments are required to respond to online gambling and associated family violence harm, however these cannot be developed until we understand the true extent and nature of the link between online gambling and family violence.

## **3. Fund collaborative work between family violence and gambling help services**

Historically there has been nominal collaboration between the gambling help and family violence sectors. Our members have advised that beyond piecemeal cross-program discussions within organisations, gambling help service providers do not work with family violence service providers. The respective treatment services are siloed from one another, meaning organisations have developed limited understandings of how the co-occurring issues intersect and how the other service sector operates.

To overcome the current siloed approach, it is recommended that the VRGF fund gambling help organisations to collaborate with family violence organisations. This will enable service providers to learn from each other, including by creating opportunities for exposure to different client engagement, treatment, and governance approaches. Service providers have a wealth of practice knowledge that could help other organisations develop a greater understanding of the link between

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<sup>8</sup> Hing et al., 2022

<sup>9</sup> Hing et al., 2022



gambling and family violence, and structured collaboration is needed for this knowledge to be translated. Supports to create greater collaboration between these services will enhance the collective commitment to addressing the co-occurrence of family violence and problem gambling and will lead to more effective coordination across the service system.

## Preventing gambling harm

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### 4. Establish prevention campaigns that target the link between gambling and family violence prevention

To date, the VRGF's prevention campaigns have not addressed the link between gambling and family violence, despite low levels of community awareness about the common co-occurrence of these issues.<sup>10</sup> No to Violence believes there are opportunities for VRGF to develop campaigns aimed at increasing community knowledge and understanding of the link between gambling and family violence, including the causes and consequences when these issues co-occur. We recognise that further evidence is needed to support these prevention initiatives and suggest that any research commissioned in this area must include a component that contributes to developing a state-wide community awareness strategy (see Recommendations 1 and 2).

Campaigns should provide education on how to identify early signs of gambling harm and family violence, highlighting that economic abuse is a form of violence which commonly co-occurs with problem gambling. Campaigns should also aim to address the 'double stigma' of problem gambling and family violence and promote help-seeking. If developed with outcome measures and effectively implemented, these campaigns have the potential to prevent gambling-related family violence before it occurs.

### 5. Ensure prevention campaigns have clear aims and measures of success for addressing risk factors

While the VRGF's Outcomes Framework outlines measures to assess prevention programs' capacity to increase community understanding of gambling harm, it does not identify how addressing risk factors will be monitored. The Outcomes Framework subsequently only partially responds to VAGO Recommendation 3, maintaining a focus on raising general awareness of gambling harm instead. This increases the potential that risk factors such as family violence are not defined or addressed in prevention programs.

Setting clear aims and measures of success for prevention campaigns that target the link between family violence and gambling will be critical to implementation effectiveness. Shifting the gendered drivers that underpin gambling-related family violence will not be easy as they are held in place by deeply ingrained social and cultural norms. For prevention programs to meaningfully tackle these gendered drivers, they must go beyond raising general awareness and target socialisation. Programs will need to be well-designed to achieve this, with thorough evaluation mechanisms in place to monitor progress.

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<sup>10</sup> Hing et al., 2020

# Treating gambling harm

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## 6. Establish systems-level referral processes between gambling help and family violence services

There remains a lack of coordination between gambling help and family violence services. During NTV member consultations, service providers said they feel they are ‘all working a little bit differently’ when it comes to how people with gambling problems are referred to and from family violence services. Service providers identified that informal referral pathways were common, including between programs within multi-faceted service organisations and between service providers that are locally connected. These informal referral pathways are heavily reliant on an organisation’s service offerings and local networks. Because of this, there can be little confidence that service users with gambling harm and family violence issues receive consistent support across Victoria. A large burden of responsibility is also placed on individuals within service providers to establish, develop and maintain relationships with other services. Service providers highlighted that they require individuals who are willing to go ‘above and beyond’ their responsibilities to ensure informal referral pathways are effective and maintained over time. Systems-level referral processes would help lighten this burden and ensure service users receive consistent support.

Service providers have been advised that the VRGF is developing a state-wide referral system in response to Recommendation 8 of the Reducing the Harm Caused by Gambling report.<sup>11</sup> However, there has not been any consultation on the design of the referral system or its implementation. This raises concerns that the referral system will have a top-down approach that fails to make use of the knowledge and expertise developed through existing informal referral processes. For example, during NTV’s recent member consultations we heard from service providers with specific expertise in supporting clients dealing with the ‘double stigma’ of problem gambling and family violence, and how to reduce barriers to seeking help for co-occurring issues. The VRGF needs to work more closely with service providers to ensure the referral system includes the expertise and knowledge that has been developed through informal referral pathways.

## 7. Explore integrated family violence and gambling treatment services

Despite the strong link between problem gambling and family violence, treatment services for the often-co-occurring issues are siloed. The VRGF should explore integrated treatment services because they have the potential to address the needs of service users more effectively and holistically. Integrated approaches could include partnering with family violence service providers to integrate gambling help components into services such as men’s behaviour change programs and incorporating family violence modules into gambling help programs.

There are several likely benefits from taking an integrated approach to treatment services. Integration would increase awareness among service users of how the behaviours relate, helping them to understand the risks of harm. This should support increased visibility and recognition of the co-occurring issues, as well as facilitating deeper reflection of how societal and gender norms shape behaviour. Integrated approaches will ultimately improve safety outcomes for service users and their families who often struggle to navigate complex and siloed service systems.<sup>12</sup> For example, during

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<sup>11</sup> Recommendation 8 stated that the VRGF, DJCS, DoH, and DFFH should establish systems and protocols for gamblers with co-occurring conditions that enable the Foundation and its funded entities to undertake holistic screening assessments and refer cases to appropriate services across mental health, alcohol and other drugs, homelessness and family violence services.

<sup>12</sup> State of Victoria, 2016

NTV's member consultations, we heard that integrated approaches help to reduce the administrative burden faced by people accessing both family violence and gambling supports, including by limiting the number of times a client has to provide intake information and reiterate their story.

Integrated treatment approaches can also help instil a gender equality lens to gambling harm work, which practitioners told NTV is too often absent. Considering that gambling is highly gendered, this should improve the capacity of gambling help services to understand and address the behaviour of all clients and not only those with co-occurring family violence.

While there has been no systems-level support for integrated treatment services, some service providers have taken initiative to develop their own approaches. Gateway Health is a pioneer in this space, having integrated a gambling harm component into their men's behaviour change program since 2019. The intensive gambling module is delivered halfway through the program, which enables men to digest principles of accountability and behaviour change before considering how these might apply to gambling.<sup>13</sup> The program has been a considerable success and Gateway Health has regularly been asked to share practice insights. These learnings provide the VRGF with a foundation for expanding the provision of integrated treatment services.

## 8. Develop and deliver training for practitioners on the link between family violence and gambling

The VRGF should partner with gambling help services and family violence services to develop and deliver training on the intersection of gambling and family violence. This should aim to translate the academic evidence base into practice understanding, enabling more effective identification and treatment when the issues co-occur. Training should be developed for gambling help and family violence practitioners, as there are knowledge gaps in both service sectors. The destructive (and often cumulative) link between gambling harm and family violence cannot be addressed until practitioners in both sectors are equipped with knowledge of how to address it.

Despite a growing evidence base of the relationship between family violence and gambling, there has been minimal effort to translate this into gambling help practice. VRGF-funded research has recommended that gambling help services require tailored training and resources to identify and respond to family violence, however this training is yet to be delivered.<sup>14</sup> Gambling help practitioners told us that while services notice obvious experiences of family violence perpetration or victimisation, more concealed experiences such as coercive control are often missed. This indicates that the translation of evidence about family violence has remained surface level. Service providers require a greater understanding of the nature of the relationship between family violence and gambling harm, as well as evidence-based approaches to addressing it.

Meanwhile, greater education of gambling harm is also needed within the family violence service system. During our consultations with members, we heard that frontline family violence workers have a limited understanding of how to respond to gambling harm. Men's family violence practitioners noted that screening for gambling harm was not something that they regularly do. This is in part due to the Family Violence Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework (MARAM), which gives minimal attention to gambling problems as a risk factor for family violence. Targeted training would help to address this service gap and improve the family violence service sector's capacity to identify and respond to gambling harm.

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond Gill, 2022

<sup>14</sup> Cowlshaw et al., 2021

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