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The unfettered growth in online gambling over the past decade has brought with it a largely invisible addiction crisis. And with under-18s reporting betting habits that alarm experts, there are fears that the problem will become more prevalent

BY LAURA SLATTERY

GAMBLING GRIPS A NEW GENERATION

The State's new gambling regulator has started work, but experts warn that the ages of those seeking help for addiction is 'skewing lower all the time' while women are also increasingly affected

By Laura Slattery

It's the "bookie in your pocket" or the "casino in your hand" – the opportunity to gamble that follows us everywhere our mobile devices do from bed to desk to toilet, never closing its doors.

The unfettered growth in popularity of online gambling over the past decade has brought with it a deepening concern that problem gambling has become a largely invisible health crisis, marked by secrecy and stigma.

The State is now at a turning point on gambling. Last autumn the first comprehensive Irish legislation since 1956 passed into law after 17 years of stop-start government debate and much industry lobbying.

Last month the Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland (GRAI), the sector's first dedicated watchdog, was established. New consumer protections will come into effect next year.

With gambling harms now estimated to affect a much wider group than previously thought and with under-18s reporting betting habits that alarm experts, there are fears that the prevalence of problem gambling could still worsen.

"I'm just worried, you know. The pace of everything with this has been too slow," says psychiatrist Colin O'Gara, who is head of addiction services at St John of God Hospital.

He had watched in frustration as regulation fell off the political radar for years, while the "gambification" of society continued apace.

"We have a generation that are now in their teens and early 20s who are fully 'gambified'," O'Gara says, referencing how this age group sees online gambling as entirely normal.

He cites an Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) study that in 2023 found that problem gambling affected one in 30 adults or 130,000 people. This 3.3 per cent rate, based on a survey conducted anonymously online, was 10 times higher than the rate reported by a 2019 study that used face-to-face interviews. Perhaps most worryingly, the ESRI said it thought the figure might still be an underestimate.

"People said I was exaggerating. I wasn't, because I had my finger on the pulse of this," O'Gara says. "And the thing is that's only the very severely affected."

The ESRI study estimated that a further 7.1 per cent, or 279,000 adults, showed "moderate evidence" of problem gambling, and a wider group still, 15 per cent of adults or 590,000 people, reported "at least one negative experience or behaviour".

In his clinics, O'Gara sees people

who are ill. Their neural circuits are dysregulated. They often have issues with frustration tolerance, distress tolerance, emotional regulation and impulse control.

Once people in the grip of a gambling addiction start chasing their losses, it can accelerate to the point that they are betting 24/7. When funds run out then indebtedness, theft, suicide ideation and suicidal behaviour can follow.

Even among less severe cases, problem gambling is associated with relationship difficulties and disordered moods. "The person will feel fantastic, then it's crash, bang, wallop," O'Gara says.

The full impact remains hidden, however, because people find it so hard to come forward for treatment.

Chris Joyce (31), who has been in recovery from gambling and alcohol addiction for six-and-a-half years, says: "With gambling addiction, it's so secretive. You can do it in the bathroom on your lunch break, and that's what I would have done."

Gambling is "the unspoken one", he says. His addictions spiralled when he began earning his own money from a supermarket job in Galway, aged 19. In 2016 he sought help from Gamblers Anonymous, but his drinking "really got out of control" soon after, then he

■ **Former Armagh GAA footballer and current Wicklow manager Oisín McConville went public with his gambling addiction in 2007 and has since used his GAA profile to help others.**
Photograph: Dara MacDónaill

also "slipped" in the gambling.

When his mother found a letter with details of a bank loan, he denied he was borrowing money to fund his betting. That night he went for a walk and he believes that if he hadn't brought his dog with him then he wouldn't have returned home.

The crisis prompted Joyce, then 24, to reach out to Oisín McConville, the former Armagh GAA footballer and current Wicklow manager, who had gone public with his gambling addiction a decade earlier. He will be "forever grateful" to McConville for getting him into a residential treatment programme at the Rutland Centre, Dublin, in late 2018.

"My head was completely fried. I remember being in the Rutland Centre





on Christmas Eve and thinking I could walk home to Galway for Christmas.”

Joyce, who made a speech last September at the Knocklyon-based centre’s annual medallion ceremony for people marking recovery milestones, recently became a father and now wants to share his story with as many young people as he can.

Emma Kavanagh, head of clinical services at the Rutland Centre, says: “Sports betting tends to be an entry point for people, but what we see is that as their gambling progresses, people will take a bet on anything. People will gamble on the most mundane-seeming things.

“Gambling is seen as benign because it’s not something we ingest into our bodies. I think it’s very normal-

ised, too, through the power of advertising, and because it’s legal.”

In March the treatment centre launched the State’s first fully funded outpatient programme specifically for gambling and gaming addiction.

The 10-week rolling programme includes group therapy, one-to-one counselling, seminars on topics such as relapse prevention, support for families and “robust” aftercare. “It’s really important that care doesn’t fall off a cliff,” she says.

When people move from recreational to problem gambling, it’s often because their activity has initially satisfied some otherwise unmet need in their lives – they might see betting as a balm, distraction or escape. Part of

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the recovery process, Kavanagh says, is about exploring what that unmet need might be.

For McConville, who ran up heavy debts before he stopped gambling in 2005, there was a competitive aspect.

“I felt really comfortable on the football pitch, and I felt I could add value, and I would feel the same way walking into a bookies. Then the competitive thing kicked in. I felt the bookie was getting the better of me, so I had to go back in,” he says. “I thought the way out of my addiction was through my addiction.”

Since he went public in 2007, McConville has used his GAA profile to help others. He started working with the industry-funded Gambling Awareness Trust (GamblingCare.ie) last year.

He’s conscious that much gambling now takes place online, so habits are becoming ingrained at ever younger ages.

“If I go into schools and talk to 16- to 18-year-olds and I ask them how many of them have been in a bookies before, maybe 10 per cent will put their hands up. But if I ask how many have had a bet before, maybe 60-70 per cent will say they have.”

Teachers increasingly want him to talk to third-year or transition-year pupils, rather than 17- to 18-year-olds.

The ages of people seeking help is “skewing lower all the time”, says addiction counsellor Barry Grant, who founded the charity Problem Gambling Ireland, now Extern Problem Gambling, in 2016. ➡

❖ Back then, the people he helped were predominantly men in their 30s and 40s, their gambling often brought to light by a mortgage application. Today, with mortgages out of reach for so many, and rents often prohibitively high, younger people living at home sometimes feel they might as well gamble. “They think ‘I could emigrate, or I could stay here, but I’m not going to get my own place here, so is there any point in me saving this money at all?’ There can be a bit of that,” he says.

Despite an Institute of Public Health study finding in 2023 that one in four 16-year-olds had gambled, the State has “never” done a public health campaign on gambling, Grant says.

Problem gambling now extends well beyond the traditional image of the bookie regular in another way: more women are suffering from it. In an echo of UK data, the ESRI found that 2.9 per cent of women engage in problem gambling, not far behind the men’s rate of 3.6 per cent.

Extern Problem Gambling, part of social justice charity Extern, has responded to this by launching the EmpowerHER Recovery Network, a free and confidential service offering support to women affected by their own gambling.

Opportunities and inducements to gamble are now so embedded in our online environment that another ESRI study reported last year that the link between problem gambling and having a parent who gambled has weakened among the under-40s.

What was once a crucial factor for determining whether a child will go on to develop problem gambling may have been superseded by the always-on internet – a boon to an industry that secures €6 billion to €8 billion in annual revenues in the Irish market.

This stark backdrop is guiding the priorities of the new regulator. It has been a busy spring for GRAI. Its 20 employees have just moved out of the Department of Justice to the organisation’s own office space on Mount Street Lower, Dublin.

“We hope to go up to 35 [staff] in the coming months,” GRAI chief executive Anne Marie Caulfield says. “We anticipate that when we’re at full tilt, when we’re fully operational, we will need 120 staff.”

GRAI, which will operate a new licensing regime for gambling operators, intends to accept applications from December under a phased process. “All going well”, it will grant its first licences in July 2026.

“So the restrictions and consumer protections will apply at that stage,” Caulfield says.

The legislation that set up GRAI notably did not include an outright ban on inducements such as “free bets”, instead only prohibiting offers targeted at particular individuals or groups. Its advertising watershed, which will banish gambling ads from television and radio between 5.30am and 9pm, also fell short of the blanket ban that some advocates had sought.

But O’Gara says: “There’s absolutely no sense in having any advertising out there. I guess over the years we



were just beaten down. It was really hard to get anything in.”

Extern director of services Deirdre O’Driscoll, who would also like to see inducements fully prohibited, said: “Very few teenagers are going to bed at 9 o’clock [when the daily curbs on advertising are lifted].

“I do think that we have a duty of care for future generations. We need to stop making it easy.”

McConville, too, believes inducements “really and truly need to be totally and utterly done away with”. The current wording creates “that little grey area” that leaves the landscape less safe than it could be.

Still, he takes the “something is better than nothing” approach to the legislation, and it’s a feeling shared by others, with O’Gara calling it a “starting point” and O’Driscoll hailing the advent of GRAI as “very important”. There’s optimism that new rules on online advertising will have a material effect.

At GRAI, Caulfield says it will publish a code of practice on inducements to bet. The subject is a sensitive one.

“In the past inducements were sent to people demonstrating the signs of problem gambling, and we need to make sure that practice doesn’t repeat itself here in the Irish market,” she says.

By giving the seven-member authority responsibility to address “exces-

“I do think that we have a duty of care for future generations. We need to stop making it easy



■ Clockwise from far left: Chris Joyce celebrating five years of recovery from gambling and alcohol addiction at the Rutland Centre’s medalion ceremony last year; Anne Marie Caulfield, chief executive of the new Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland; Barry Grant of Extern Problem Gambling; Emma Kavanagh, head of clinical services at Rutland Centre.

Photographs: Marc O’Sullivan, Conor McCabe Photography, Dan Sheridan/Inpho, Nick Bradshaw

sive or compulsive gambling”, the legislation is future-proofed, she says.

GRAI’s in-tray includes issuing advice to parents, working with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on gambling education for junior-cycle and transition-year students, and researching the use of potentially stigmatising language.

Addiction experts dislike the line “please gamble responsibly”, for instance, arguing that it subtly shifts the blame for problem gambling to individuals, away from product design or lax regulation.

Caulfield would like to “generate more discussion” on the issue, especially if the language used is deterring people from asking for help.

GRAI is also working with consultancy Deloitte on establishing a national gambling exclusion register, which will strengthen the piecemeal system of voluntary self-exclusion tools offered by the bigger operators as well as blocking services available from banks such as AIB and Revolut.

But it’s the promised arrival of a social impact fund, paid for via a levy on company revenues, that people who provide addiction treatment and recovery services welcome most. “Behavioural addictions like gambling addiction were just financially left out in the cold up until this legislation, so that’s going to be huge,” Grant says.

GRAI, through state agency Pobal, is seeking views on how the money should be spent.

“We’ve done research into what sort of fund will be generated by different percentages of turnover and we will make that available to the Minister [for Justice],” Caulfield says.

“As soon as the licences begin, we will start to collect that levy. Ultimately it is a matter for the Minister to decide on how much, but [it is likely to be] 1-2 per cent, somewhere in that range.”

Caulfield says GRAI is “at a really positive stage now” as it prepares to take a leading role in the protection of children and people experiencing gambling harms.

For his part, O’Gara is keen to emphasise that medical understanding of addiction is improving all the time. “I’ve sat in this office for about 20 years and I can assure you that one of the most rewarding things about it is seeing people who are at rock bottom getting to full recovery,” he says.

Help is available

Gamblingcare.ie 1800 936 725
Gamblers Anonymous:
gamblersanonymous.ie
HSE Addiction Services: hse.ie
Addiction Counsellors of Ireland:
addictioncounsellors.ie
Family Addiction Support Network:
fasn.ie