

# ***Strategy for gambling harm prevention in the ACT: A public health approach 2019-2024***

## ***Interim Evaluation 2019-2022***

### **Key contact**

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**Knowledge translation for health  
and wellbeing impact**

The ACT Gambling and Racing Commission's vision is 'a Canberra free from gambling harm'. The Commission's [Strategy for gambling harm prevention in the ACT: A public health approach 2019-2024](#) provides a guide for developing, implementing and monitoring initiatives designed to prevent and reduce gambling harm in ACT over five financial years from 2019-20 to 2023-24.

The Strategy has five objectives and is to be implemented according to a suite of principles.

#### **Strategy Objectives**

1. Ensuring Government policy and initiatives prevent and reduce gambling harm.
2. Increasing understanding about gambling harm amongst government, gambling industry, communities, families and individuals.
3. Providing a wide range of accessible, responsive and effective services and initiatives that prevent and reduce gambling harm.
4. Ensuring gambling environments and providers prevent and reduce gambling harm.
5. Supporting and building the evidence base for gambling harm prevention strategies and initiatives.

#### **Strategy Principles**

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## **About the evaluation**

Interim evaluation of the Strategy used a mixed and participatory methods approach, comprised of critical review of documents and analysis of quantitative and qualitative information derived from existing information, and focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders.

The Strategy seeks to reduce gambling harm by preventing and reducing the risks of gambling harm through a public health approach. To achieve the Commission's vision requires addressing all the evidence-based factors that can influence the risk of gambling harm. The evaluation includes only those outcomes and impacts that can be attributed in part or fully to the Strategy. Thus, a number of factors that can influence the risk of gambling are not included in the evaluation. Specifically, this includes some components of gambling-specific factors related to the environment, exposure to gambling and the different types of gambling products, as well as general sociocultural and individual factors.

## Evaluation findings

Changing population prevalence of gambling harm in the ACT will take many years. The risk of gambling harm has been reduced through implementation of the Strategy between 2019-20 and 2021-22. The Strategy has reduced some of the risks of gambling harm for some people in the ACT, with substantial opportunities for further gains to be made.

*For almost all clients of the ACT gambling support services, counselling reduced the risks and impacts of gambling harm* and increased the clients' capacity to manage the issues they sought help for. Counselling reduced the impact of gambling for 90 per cent of clients. Between 2020-21 and 2021-22, there was a 20 per cent increase in the number of people provided counselling support and 56 per cent increase in the number of gambling harm support sessions provided.

In 2019 it is estimated that there were about 3000 people in the ACT who would be classified as 'problem gamblers', with a total of about 44,000 people reporting having experienced harm from their own or someone else's gambling. In 2019, about 6000 adults, 1.5 per cent of gamblers, in the ACT had ever sought help for their gambling.

People seeking help to reduce gambling harm can access counselling services, self-exclude themselves from gambling venues and/or access services provided by the ACT Gambling Support Service, National Gambling Helpline, Gambling Help Online, as well as other more general support and information services.

Gambling support counselling, funded from the Gambling Harm Prevention Mitigation Fund in accordance with the Strategy, was provided to 365 people in 2021-22. On 30 June 2022 there were 163 active licensee exclusions and 482 active self-exclusions, a total of 645 exclusions. In 2021-22 there were 245 calls from ACT residents to the National Gambling Helpline to answer gambling harm related enquiries, and follow up support provided to 81 callers.

*A public health approach to gambling harm prevention takes a broad perspective about responsibility and areas for action.* Consistent with this approach, a wide spectrum of initiatives was undertaken in the first three years of the Strategy. The initiatives broadly addressed gambling harm by people who gamble, their families and the community, and encompassed prevention, harm reduction and community awareness, and building the evidence base to inform further harm prevention initiatives.

The Strategy increased focus on gambling harm prevention by the Commission and the Commission Board, including through provision of resourcing and support to obtain the required skill sets. The Strategy provided a publicly available platform for the public health approach to prevent gambling harm, enabling discussions with a broader range of stakeholders at strategic level and for specific initiatives. The Strategy provided consistent terminology for all stakeholders, the evidence-informed rationale for policies and initiatives, and consistent expectations of and for industry.

*A partnership approach to gambling harm prevention* has developed between the Commission, across Access Canberra, the ACT Government, funded gambling support services, industry and community sector organisations that address issues that can co-occur with gambling harm. The partnerships involve two-way engagement between stakeholders, including the Commission. The partnerships are developing and in particular are stronger with some parts of industry than with others.

The Strategy has accelerated change. A cultural shift towards understanding gambling harm and implementing gambling harm reduction activities as part of a public health approach has occurred in some individual licensed venues and representative bodies for clubs. Some increased their leadership in this regard; others began engagement and collaboration.

*ACT and Commonwealth government policies and initiatives have been influenced through implementation of the Strategy.* The Commission has taken a broader whole of ACT Government engagement approach about gambling harm prevention over the three years of the Strategy. The Commission has ongoing engagement with multiple Directorates of the ACT Government, and with governments of the other Australian jurisdictions and with the Commonwealth Government through membership of national committees and working groups. Within the ACT Government, engagement and influence have been with Justice and Community Safety Directorate; Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Policy team; Preventive and Population Health; and Education Directorate. The Commission CEO meets with the Gaming and Business and Better Regulation Ministers of the ACT Government and relevant Justice and Community Safety Directorate executives regularly and is a member of the Community Clubs Ministerial Advisory Council.

*The understanding of gambling harm and the public health approach amongst government, gambling industry and the community sector has increased through formal training, and outreach and engagement with these stakeholders.* A Community of Practice was initiated with community organisations that address co-occurring issues, with inclusion of a broad range of organisations. Through formal training, licensee Gambling Contact Officers' knowledge and capacity to act increased, as a cornerstone of gambling harm minimisation in licensed venues. The GCO training provides industry a platform to build the experience of GCOs to undertake their responsibilities with confidence and impact.

However, the increased understanding of gambling harm varies markedly between individuals in the gambling industry, gambling venues and representative bodies for clubs. The level of understanding of the general public is unknown but will be assessed in 2024.

*The exclusion scheme is a major initiative to prevent and reduce gambling harm in gambling environments.* Gambling harm minimisation programs, both industry-led and industry and gambling support service collaboratives, also support gambling harm prevention. The exclusion scheme is accessible for patrons and venues. However, there are functional challenges for some venues in implementing the exclusion scheme and meeting the requirements of the Code of Practice, which can affect both venues and patrons. These principally relate to the requirement for manual recognition of patrons who are self or licensee-excluded, in the absence of technological solutions facilitating the exclusion of patrons from gambling in venues under the Code of Practice. The Code of Practice specifies that licensees 'must keep a record of problem gambling incidents'. The legislative requirements for recording 'problem gambling' incidents in the register pre-date the Commission's adoption and communications surrounding a public health approach, including a shift in focus to addressing gambling harm. A small number of licensees have indicated confusion when recording signs in the incident register.

The ACT Gambling Exclusion Database (ACTGED) was substantially redeveloped, with activation in July 2022. The Territory-wide database is supported by stakeholders and enables improved monitoring and reporting procedures for venues and the Commission, ultimately providing a long-term harm prevention resource for the ACT.

*The Commission is actively engaged in supporting and building the evidence base for gambling harm prevention.* To focus research to meet the Commission's needs, under the Gambling Harm Prevention and Mitigation Fund there has been increased promotion and utilisation of the fund for harm prevention research, projects and events, and the release of the Commission's Research Agenda 2021-2024. The Commission's partnership with the ANU Centre for Gambling Research has been reviewed, with research priorities being overseen by a steering committee comprising of independent members and representatives from the Commission and the ANU. In addition, the Commission actively works with national and jurisdiction working groups to advance national research and evidence-informed policy and practice.

Funded research projects include the *2019 ACT Gambling Survey*, development of resources incorporating lived experience stories, research investigating gambling harm literacy and potential development of a population gambling harm literacy measure, and assessment of the impact of policy and regulatory settings on the risk of gambling harm.

## Challenges

There have been several functional and implementation challenges hindering achievement of the Strategy. The five main challenges were 1) COVID-19 restrictions; 2) challenges implementing the exclusion scheme for some licensees at some venues; 3) the legislation requiring licensees to record 'problem gambling' incidents pre-dating the adoption of the public health approach to gambling harm; 4) licensee use of the incident recording register; and 5) the Commission influences, but is not responsible for ACT Government legislation and policies. It is important to note that while the Commission has some influence to reduce these limitations, many factors are beyond the control or responsibility of the Commission.

## Conclusion

The Strategy has been delivered according to the principles of the Strategy. The Strategy, with some modification particularly to align the objectives with the level of influence of the Commission, is highly suitable to continue for the remaining two years of the Strategy and to form the basis of subsequent strategies.

Stakeholders who participated in focus groups and interviews expressed their gratitude to the Commission for the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of the Strategy. Many stakeholders congratulated the Commission for undertaking this evaluation. In addition, many stakeholders acknowledged the value to their own organisation through participating in the evaluation.