

Why it is important to conduct gambling research that is fair and free from conflicts of interest

We are writing to assert the importance of gambling research that is both free from bias and informed by a diversity of perspectives, including those who have direct experience of gambling-related harm. Gambling has become a pervasive element in UK society [1], with wide-ranging harmful consequences [2–4]. Research biased by conflicts of interest or that fails to include the perspective of those affected may obscure the genuine impacts of gambling, indirectly leading to policies that fail to protect individuals and communities from harm [5]. The UK government White Paper in 2023 did not provide adequate reference to potential bias in gambling research [6].

Quality research on gambling-related harms is critical to understand who is most at risk, the factors external to the individual that contribute (e.g. gambling availability, design features, and advertising) and the most effective approaches for preventing and reducing harm. Historically, in the United Kingdom, funding for gambling research has not been a priority for national research funding bodies [7]. As a result, many researchers have turned to alternative sources to fund their research, which includes the gambling industry [8–10]. When research is funded by those with a vested interest in its results, there is a risk that the questions posed, the populations selected, the ways in which the studies are conducted, the results that are obtained and the ways the findings are disseminated may be biased. Further, frequently absent from such conflicted research is the voices of those harmed. In this regard, the history of alcohol and tobacco research offers a cautionary tale [11].

Conflict-free funding helps to increase the probability that research findings are accurate, reliable and free from bias. Individual studies contribute to a body of knowledge that is essential for evidence-based policymaking and implementing appropriate and effective public health initiatives. Without it, there is risk research may be produced that under-reports harms, overstates benefits or inaccurately suggests uncertainty when there is emerging consensus, depending on the agenda of funding bodies or other influencing stakeholders [9].

We, the authors, represent the Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling (AFSG). The AFSG was created in 2021 as a collaborative body to promote transparency and integrity and encourage a diversity of voices in gambling research in the United Kingdom and internationally. It now has more than 200 members [12]. The AFSG is funded from regulatory settlements levied by the UK Gambling Commission [13].

Central to the AFSG's core mission is to encourage research that is free from commercial or other influences that could compromise scientific objectivity and includes the perspectives of people effected

by gambling. To this end, since 2021 the AFSG has distributed almost half a million pounds in independent gambling research funds via a transparent, peer-review process modelled after the procedures employed by research councils in the United Kingdom, Canada and elsewhere [14], includes a rigorous conflict-of-interest screening procedure and includes demands regarding the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience. In addition to research funding, members of the AFSG Executive are currently developing an instrument that can be used to measure risk of funding-related bias in gambling research [15] and a suite of tools and services aimed at encouraging the meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in research investigating gambling related harms.

Through initiatives like these, the AFSG is enabling the field to produce findings that can be confidently used to guide effective public policy, improve treatment and inform social interventions.

KEYWORDS

Academic forum study gambling, conflicts of interest, funding, gambling, gambling harms, gambling research, industry, White Paper

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Amanda Roberts: Conceptualization (equal); writing—original draft (equal). **Jim Rogers:** Conceptualization (equal); writing—original draft (equal). **Steve Sharman:** Conceptualization (equal). **Sasha Stark:** Conceptualization (equal). **Simon Dymond:** Conceptualization (equal). **Elliot A. Ludvig:** Conceptualization (equal). **Richard J. Tunney:** Conceptualization (equal). **Matthew O'Reilly:** Conceptualization (equal). **Matthew M. Young:** Conceptualization (equal).

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Greo Evidence Insights

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

A.R. is Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Academic Forum for the Study Gambling (AFSG). Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission and is administered by Greo

Evidence Insights (Greco). A.R. has received funding from the Society for the Study of Addiction (SSA), Greco, National Institute of Health Research (NIHR), Lincolnshire County Council, Ashfield District Council, Health and Care Research Wales, Public Health Lincoln and Santander. She does not have any potential conflicts of interest in relation to gambling or the gambling industry. J.R. is Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Academic Forum for the Study Gambling (AFSG). Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission, and is administered by Greco. He does not have any potential conflicts of interest in relation to gambling or the gambling industry. S.S. is part of the Executive Committee of the Academic Forum for the Study Gambling (AFSG). Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission, and is administered by Greco. He is a trustee for the Society for the Study of Addiction and member of the Advisory Board for Safer Gambling (ABSG), who provide advice to, and is remunerated by, the Gambling Commission. S.S. has received funding from Greco, the NIHR, and is currently funded by a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship. He does not have any potential conflicts of interest in relation to gambling or the gambling industry. S. Stark is the Director of Research and Evidence Services at Greco. Greco has received funds in the last 5 years from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (Canada), non-profits, charities and post-secondary institutions (Canada). Greco has also received funds from social responsibility arms of Canadian crown corporations (i.e. state monopolies) that conduct and manage provincial/territorial gambling, regulatory settlement funds (Great Britain), third-sector charities (Great Britain) and international regulators. Prior to 2022, S. Stark was employed at the Responsible Gambling Council where, in the past 5 years, she worked on projects funded by the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (Canada), Carleton University (Canada), Greco Evidence Insights (Canada/Great Britain), the International Center for Responsible Gaming (USA), MGM Resorts International (USA), GambleAware (Great Britain), Camelot Group (Great Britain) and Playtech (Great Britain). S.D. is the Outreach Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Academic Forum for the Study Gambling (AFSG), for which he receives an annual honorarium. Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission and is administered by Greco. In the last 5 years, S.D. has received funding from Health and Care Research Wales, Welsh Government Office for Science—Ser Cymru, Research Wales Infrastructure Fund, GambleAware, Gambling Commission (regulatory settlements), Greco Evidence Insights, RAF Benevolent Fund, Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, Office for Veterans' Affairs Health Innovation Fund, British Academy/Leverhulme Trust, Bristol Hub for Gambling Harms Research and the International Center for Responsible Gaming. He is the Director of the Gambling Research, Education and Treatment (GREAT) Network Wales, which is funded by Welsh Government through Health and Care Research Wales (HCRW). The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of HCRW or Welsh Government. E.L. is the research co-chair of the

Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling (AFSG). Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission and is administered by Greco. In the past 5 years, he has also received external funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, UK), the Alberta Gambling Research Institute (AGRI), Greco and the Bailey Thomas Charitable Fund. R.T. is the co-chair of research for the Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling (AFSG). Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission and is administered by Greco. He has received external funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, UK) and Greco. He is a trustee of Aquarius who provide services for people affected by drugs, alcohol and gambling. Aquarius receives funding from GambleAware and local government. M.M.Y. is the Chief Research Officer at Greco. Greco has received funds in the last 5 years from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (Canada), non-profits, charities, and post-secondary institutions (Canada). Greco has also received funds from social responsibility arms of Canadian crown corporations (i.e. state monopolies) that conduct and manage provincial/territorial gambling, regulatory settlement funds (Great Britain), third-sector charities (Great Britain), and international regulators. M.M.Y. was employed for 12 years by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, which received funding from the Government of Canada.

Matthew O'Reilly is the Coordinator of the Academic Forum for the Study Gambling (AFSG). Funding for the AFSG is derived from regulatory settlements for socially responsible purposes that are approved by the Gambling Commission and is administered by Greco. He does not have any potential conflicts of interest in relation to gambling or the gambling industry.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There is no data in this letter.

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