

Gambling and gambling-related problems in France

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ABSTRACT

Aims To provide an overview of the gambling landscape and gambling-related problems in France, including the history, legislation, gambling policy and epidemiological data on excessive gambling. **Method** A literature review, using Medline, PsycInfo and Toxibase/OFDT databases, based on the systematic monitoring of scientific literature since 2008 (including French and international papers). **Results** Since 1776 and the creation of the royal lottery, state monopoly has been the main pillar of gambling policy in France. Increases in gambling venues and opportunities, growing evidence of gambling-related problems, pressures from the European Commission and the growth of on-line gambling have led to major changes in this policy: while land-based gambling remains mainly in the form of a state monopoly, on-line gambling was partially liberalized in 2010, and regulation authorities were established. The first epidemiological survey was conducted in 2010. Rates of problematic gambling in France are within the average of other European countries. Treatment has begun to be made available within addiction centres. **Conclusion** A majority of on-line gamblers in France use legal websites, which was one of the initial goals of liberalization. Recent studies confirm that the prevalence of problem gambling in France is far higher among on-line gamblers than among land-based gamblers; however, this difference cannot be attributed only to greater addictiveness of on-line gambling.

Keywords France, gambling, history, on-line gambling, policy, prevalence, problem gambling.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes gambling and pathological gambling in France by examining available recently published literature. Scientific monitoring was launched in 2008, when INSERM (National Institute for Science and Medical Research) published a collective expert report procedure on gambling (contexts and addictions) [1]. Therefore, the documentation centre of Marmottan Hospital began the systematic monitoring of the topic in journals, newspapers and relevant websites. We also searched Medline, PsycInfo and Toxibase/OFDT databases (for the years 2010–14). The following search terms were used: 'pathological gambling', 'excessive gambling', 'gambling policy' and 'France'. Fewer than 25 papers were found to be relevant for this review.

HISTORY

The history of gambling in France from the Middle Ages to the present reflects the perpetual tension between a very prohibitionist framework and exceptions to this [2–4]. There are diverse influences supporting prohibition. First,

the roots of prohibition are theological: it is unlawful to 'put God to the test' for the sole purpose of seeking pleasure. This theological aspect of prohibition has endured despite the acknowledgement by Saint Thomas Aquinas of a purely 'distributive fate' [5], and also despite the early works of Girolamo Cardano (1501–76), who anticipated the idea of 'randomness'. Even after the works of Pascal (1623–62) and Fermat (1601?–65) laid the foundations of probability theory, the sacrilegious aspect of gambling would long permeate legal writings on gambling.

A second reason for prohibition is that gambling is considered immoral: it seeks to appropriate other people's money and thus stems from greed and miserliness. Not even the judgements of Cardano or Paschasius Justus [6] would be enough to damage Aristotle's opinion, that gambling was the product of greed and miserliness.

Finally, prohibition is related to the perception that gambling is at the root of disorder and disruption to law and order. Frequent unrest, disputes, swearing, blasphemy and cursing during gambling sessions reinforce the idea of gambling as 'diabolical'.

However, there are also multiple reasons for a certain level of tolerance for gambling. First, gambling is a popular form of entertainment almost impossible to ban totally. Moreover, for a long time there has been no marked difference between gambling and what we refer to today as simple 'parlour' games or sport. In addition, there are often avid gamblers among the nobility, those in power and even royalty, to whom it would be difficult to apply the severity of the law.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, tolerating certain forms of gambling would gradually become a way for the government to introduce a particular tax, the famous 'voluntary tax' [3]. During the reign of Louis XIV the creation of the Royal Lottery in 1776 finally acknowledged that it was better to receive smaller amounts of income from a large number of citizens, including the poor, than larger amounts from very rich citizens. This 'voluntary tax' was the basis of the control mechanism that is still prevalent in France and most other countries: gambling remains prohibited, other than in the situation of dispensations accorded by the state, most often to the state. The Lottery disappeared in 1836 during a period of a return to moral order, but reappeared in the form of the National Lottery in 1933 after the economic slump of 1929. In 1976, the National Lottery became the Française des Jeux (FDJ), and the lottery changed its name to Loto.

A second exception to prohibition concerned casinos, which were authorized in 1806, initially in seaside and spa towns. There are currently 196 casinos in mainland France, mostly in coastal areas. Betting on horses was also authorized in 1891 in the form of a tote system. Betting on horse races 'off-track' was also authorized in the form of a monopoly granted to the Pari Mutuel Urbain (PMU), under the French Ministry of Agriculture, and intended to finance the breeding of horses.

Recent developments and the spread of gambling (1987–2006)

The monopolistic model—with a state lottery run by the Française des Jeux under the mantle of the French Treasury (Ministry of Finances), betting on horse races controlled by the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Finances and strict licensing of gaming tables in casinos controlled by the French Home Office—began to evolve dramatically after 1987, when slot machines were introduced into casinos. By 1989, 35.9% of casino revenue came from slot machines, which rapidly became the main casino activity, over and above that of table games. By 2006, 93.8% of casino gross profit came from slot machines [8].

Within the space of a decade, the nature of gambling and games of chance had evolved significantly. Casinos had now become places frequented on a daily basis by working-class clientele. There was also a change in the nature of the games offered. Instead of just the major lotteries offering 'dream gambling', a wide scale of 'high-sensation' gambling, played more frequently and with instant results, was introduced [7].

During the 10-year period from 1987 to 2006, other operators also launched 'sensation-seeking' games intended for a very wide market. Française des Jeux (at the time with approximately 40 000 sales outlets) began marketing scratchcards and 'Rapido', an on-screen lottery with frequent draws. PMU (with approximately 10 000 sales outlets) provided more widespread betting on horses in outlets equipped with a dedicated television channel. The whole market experienced this enlargement and transformation. Figure 1 describes the evolution of the gambling gross revenues for the different operators: the casinos' gross revenue increased between 1997 (legalization of slot machines) and 2007 (promotion of responsible gambling and prohibition of smoking in public areas).

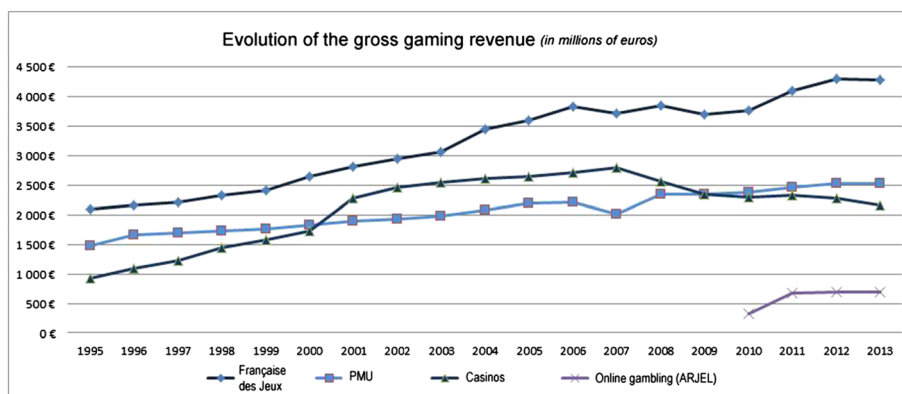


Figure 1 Evolution of the gross gaming revenue (in millions of euros). Source: Observatoire Des Jeux (data from Ministry of Finances, Bureau des recettes—Secteur des jeux). Available at: <http://www.economie.gouv.fr/observatoire-des-jeux/evolution-produit-brut-des-jeux> (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6X5uxWYfQ>) (accessed 17 March 2015)

These changes were significant enough to rekindle old debates concerning the dual role of the state as gaming operator and regulator. The question of a monopoly being the only way to protect the consumer was raised once more. In February 2006, the Department of the Treasury established the COJER (Comité pour le Jeu responsable/Committee for Responsible Gambling) to evaluate the programs of the Française Des Jeux. COJER led to gambling prohibition for people aged less than 18 years and advocated for statistics monitoring the spread of gambling [1,8,9].

Pressures for more stringent regulatory changes continued: the European Commission had allowed free movement of goods and services between European countries [8], and advocated against the state monopoly of gambling. Furthermore, the increase in gambling via the internet was a major problem despite the fact that it was officially prohibited. Gambling websites outside France flourished.

The 2010 Act: a new regulatory model

Following often heated debates, new legislation bringing about profound changes in the regulatory framework was introduced in May 2010 [10]. The stated purpose of the legislation was to 'protect young people and combat addiction', but the intention was also to ensure the integrity of gambling operations and to protect players from fraud.

The liberal aspect of the Act included the possibility for private operators to conduct on-line gambling, although only offering poker, sports betting and horse-race betting. The Act retained prohibition of other forms of on-line gambling, particularly casino games such as slot machines (except for lottery games opened on the internet by FDJ prior to the 2010 Act).

The legislation included a regulatory body, ARJEL, the French On-line Gaming Regulation Authority (Autorité de Régulation du Jeu en Ligne), to grant licences to organizations that met certain conditions: security of technical devices, guarantees for payment of winnings and use of regulatory devices such as upper betting limits and warning messages. ARJEL was also granted extensive watchdog powers and could observe all on-line gambling transactions.

At the same time, whereas the new legislation concerned only on-line gambling, the Consultative Committee for Gambling was set up to coordinate actions related to 'land-based' gambling. This committee included a Monitoring Centre for Gambling (ODJ) in charge of coordinating and giving impetus to research, to create effective monitoring of gambling and excessive gambling.

Therefore, the gambling situation in France since 2010 is as follows:

- For 'land-based' gambling, activities remain under monopoly control or, in the case of casinos, subject to very strict licensing. Française des Jeux retain the monopoly concerning lotteries, draws, scratchcards and sports

betting, with PMU responsible for betting on horses. Casinos retain the monopoly for table games and slotmachines. They can even offer poker in their establishments.

- For on-line gambling, Française des Jeux is solely responsible for lotteries and draws. Where sports betting, poker and horse-race betting are concerned, there is an open competitive market between all licensed operators.

Prevalence of gambling and problem gambling

The first scientific study of gambling in France was published in 2011 [11], based on data collected in 2010 just before the change in the law. A survey (part of a national representative health survey) was carried out on 25 034 French citizens aged between 15 and 75 years, taken from a cross-section of the population. The survey reported that 47.8% had played for money in the previous 12 months, 51.3% of whom were men and 44.4% women. Gambling was most common in the 25–34-year age group, decreasing after that. Active players represented 12.2% of the sample. They were either regular players (10.9%), defined as those having played at least 52 times during the year, or 'big spenders' defined as those having spent at least €500 during the year, or a mix of both. These active players were mainly men (62.7%), and generally older than occasional players with an average age of 47. They also tended to be less well educated. Only lottery games and slot machines were played by equal numbers of men and women. Scratchcards were the only form of gambling practised by more women than men. Other forms of gambling, particularly horse-race betting, sports betting and poker, were clearly practised more by men.

The Problem Gambling Severity Index of the Canadian Problem Gaming Index (CPGI) [12] was used to categorize these active players: 12.2% were classed as 'low risk', 7.1% as 'moderate risk' and 3.7% as 'excessive gamblers' (score of 8 or more). Problem gamblers (moderate and excessive) were much more likely to be men (75.5%) and young (average age of 41), with few qualifications and financially challenged (57.8% earning less than the minimum wage compared to 34.7% of active players). Their games of choice were Rapido, horse-race betting, sports betting and poker.

Extrapolating these results to the French population, the prevalence of 'possible pathological gamblers' (excessive) is estimated to be 0.4%, to which could be added a percentage of 0.8% for 'problem gamblers' (moderate risk). In this respect, France's results were comparable with most European countries, slightly more than the Netherlands [13] and slightly less than Sweden [14].

The intention is to carry out further surveys, specifically to assess the impact of legislation changes concerning gambling practices and problem gambling. A new study has been

released, based on data collected in 2014 among French people aged between 15 and 75 years ($n = 16\,000$) [15].

On-line gambling

In 2012, two surveys were conducted to assess on-line gambling practices following the partial liberalization in May 2010 [16–18]. The first study, based on a representative sample ($n = 2761$) of the adult population (more than 18 years) found that 3.7% of the population, or 2 million people, has participated in internet gambling. This relatively small percentage led to a second survey, aimed specifically at internet users, to ascertain more clearly their habits and evaluate any associated problems. The survey addressed two important questions: first, had legislation achieved its main objective, the reduction or eradication of illegal gambling on unauthorized websites? Secondly, were on-line gamblers more ‘at risk’ or ‘pathological’ than ‘land-based’ gamblers?

In answer to the first question, it appeared that fewer than 10% of on-line gamblers played illegal games such as slot machines and casino games. Only poker was played substantially on unauthorized sites (10.2% of poker players). The better odds offered by non-legal sites for horse and sport betting are not particularly attractive, but legal poker, despite very high payouts, remains on a purely national level, which is unappealing. However, there was a significant ‘grey area’. There were games claiming to be free, therefore by-passing any regulations, that were in reality paying. The study therefore concluded that the legal market predominates, but is not exclusive.

The answer to the second question was positive: among on-line gamblers, 23.8% presented a low risk, 10.4% a moderate risk and 6.6% a high risk of gambling problems. Compared with the land-based gamblers, the problem risk for this group was nearly six times higher. The risk of gambling addiction was definitely increased by characteristics unique to ‘on-line’ gambling, such as accessibility, lack of external pressure, the possibility of smoking and drinking. However, here we could have a significant selection bias: on-line gamblers could belong to the group of the most intensive gamblers in the sample.

It can be concluded that there is a definite relationship between on-line and problem gambling. This link is consistent with previous studies concerning the addictive factors of on-line gambling [19]. However, it should not be forgotten that current studies concern a fairly limited sample of mainly intensive players.

Treatment of problem gamblers: research

Self-exclusion from casinos has, for a long time (since 1959), been the only way to protect gamblers. This ban, brought about at the player’s request, cannot be lifted for

a period of 3 years and is valid for both casinos and on-line games. The therapeutic treatment options for gamblers are only just beginning to take shape.

Recently, addiction treatment has begun to be available through the setting-up of ‘general’ centres capable of treating all addictive behaviour, with or without substance abuse. They are able, in the best-case scenario, to apply a variety of multi-modal and multi-disciplinary treatments.

With regard to research, in addition to studies carried out by the Monitoring Centre for Gambling, numerous studies are under way, undertaken by academic services concerning problem gambling. The Monitoring Centre is working to build a grant mechanism of research contracts.

CONCLUSION

Since 2010, the effect of a new regulatory model in France will lead to important research in the field of gambling policy. The effect of regulatory measures on addictive behaviour is always debated, and difficult to determine [20]. In this respect, gambling is no different from other forms of addiction. The prohibition of drugs is hardly based on scientific data [21], and it is clear that there are complex questions, both historical and cultural, for which scientific evidence will never hold all the answers [22].

Studies on the social costs of gambling should take into consideration the negative but also the positive aspects of gambling, on an economic as well as social and human level [23]. Other gambling-related problems—such as money-laundering [24] and integrity of sport [25]—have to be addressed.

The debate as to whether these ‘illnesses’ (behavioural addictions) are real and if we succeed in looking beyond the short-term institutional interests, will serve to demonstrate the importance of taking an alternative view of existing scientific approaches. This could be a major contribution of research into ‘drugless’ addictions to the field of addiction as a whole.

These debates serve to remind us that all addictions, with or without drugs, will never just be a simple technical, clinical or public health problem. They are a problem for society and, as such, a political issue in its truest sense.

Declaration of interests

None.

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