

## Gambling addiction rises under Labour

The number of people with gambling problems has risen by 25 per cent since Labour relaxed the gambling laws.

By Ben Leach

Last Updated: 8:08AM BST 16 Oct 2008

Last year almost 38,000 people called a betting addiction hotline, compared with just over 30,000 the year before.

The average amount of debt also soared, from £13,800 to £17,500, up nearly £4,000 in 12 months, with seven per cent of callers admitting to owing more than £100,000. The figures, from gambling addiction charity Gamcare, follow a boom in online betting, which in turn follows a huge increase in bets on sports events since Labour came to power.

They will fuel concern among opposition MPs and charities over the Government's loosening of gambling regulations.

They warned that the problem will only get worse as the economy goes into free-fall and hard-pressed families struggled to cope.

They urged Culture Secretary Andy Burnham to tighten up the laws to protect the vulnerable from getting into difficulties. Gambling is worth in the region of £100billion to the UK economy.

Ministers have relaxed the rules to allow the first TV ads for casinos, bookmakers and betting websites - prompting doctors to warn of a 'devastating' surge in addiction, debt and family breakdown.

It has also become easier to join a casino or play on fixed odds terminals in betting shops. The Government has been accused of 'shameful irresponsibility' for giving the green light to 16 huge regional casinos with slot machines offering £4,000 jackpots.

Gamcare's annual report said the record 37,806 calls to its helpline last year was a 25 per cent increase on 2006. There were also 1,407 requests for help to online advisers.

Most commonly, those seeking help were aged between 26 and 35. Worryingly, a small proportion - between 3 and 4 per cent - were under 18.

The number of women problem gamblers ringing the helpline jumped from 13 to 18 per cent to comprise nearly a fifth of callers.

**Almost 60 per cent of those calling by phone were involved in gambling on fixed odds terminals**, usually found in betting shops, or staking money over the counter on horses, greyhounds and football. Another fifth played fruit machines.

Thirty per cent of those seeking help via the website said they had problems with 'table games' - poker, roulette and other card games often played on internet sites.

Around 50 per cent placed their bets in bookmakers' shops while nearly one in seven gambled on the internet.

Women problem gamblers were more likely to fritter away money on 'games of chance' - table games, fruit

machines, bingo or scratchcards.

The number of counselling sessions offered by Gamcare increased to 9,594 last year, up 36 per cent.

Shadow Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt said: 'This just shows how worrying it is that the Government has put in place absolutely no strategy to deal with problem gambling.

'At a time of increasing economic uncertainty, addictive gambling risks fuelling indebtedness. By liberalising the gambling laws the Government has made the problem worse. Something needs to be done before more lives are ruined.'

Mike Judge, spokesman for the Christian Institute, said: "We always said relaxing the gambling laws would lead to more problems, and it gives us no pleasure to say we seem to have been proved right.

"Gambling leads to the misery of crime, family breakdown, debt, ill health and even suicide, and with the economic crisis upon us more people who have been lured into addiction will simply not be able to cope."

The Culture Department said research showed problem gambling was at the same levels as in 1999.

A spokesman said: "The increase in calls to Gamcare shows the measures in the Gambling Act requiring operators to display prominent information about responsible gambling, such as helplines, are being followed.

"It is encouraging to see that people at risk are seeking advice and help."

---

[Back to top](#)

---

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2008