

opinion

Cards on the Table: The Huge Growth in Online Gambling During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Portugal

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Introduction

In the words of the philosopher Seneca, work drives away the vices that come from idleness. The COVID-19 pandemic stopped the world, causing a disruption in the routine of millions of people. Many were faced with more free time or greater flexibility in organizing working hours combined with the absence of peer or managerial surveillance. This less scheduled but not carefree period promotes the search for leisure, pleasure, or something that temporarily removes insecurity and uncertainty. The consumption of psychoactive substances and the repetition of behaviours associated with short-term reward have a recognized role in this process.

Preliminary data from the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) indicate that the current pandemic is likely to make it difficult to start or maintain substance use due to reduced accessibility (EMCDDA, 2020). However, the impact on behaviours with addictive potential (gambling, sex, shopping) that are more accessible and generalizable than drug use has not been studied in this context. Among these behaviours, the practice of gambling figures as the most common behavioural dependence that can be studied through indirect data provided by governmental entities. The decline in traditional gambling with confinement and the closure of casinos was predictable, but the opposite trend was expected with online gambling. A report by Research and Markets predicted a growth rate of 13.2% in the global online gambling market, from €58.9 billion in 2019 to €66.7 billion in 2020 (The Business Research Company, 2020). In fact, in Portugal and according to the published report by the Game Regulation and Inspection Service (Serviço de Regulamentação e Inspecção de Jogo [SRIJ, 2020a]),

in the first trimester of 2020, the total volume of bets on online games (games of fortune and sports betting) was €1.110 million, €370 million more than in the same period in 2019 (Table 1). Gross gaming revenue increased 47.5% to €69.8 million when compared with the same quarter of 2019. In other words, this volume of betting means €110 spent on online bets per capita in Portugal. In the same period, there were 435,800 active players, with a year-over-year increase of 25.8% in new players and 47.2% (52,100) in requests for self-exclusion from online games and bets (SRIJ, 2020). In Spain, the gambling services report for the first trimester showed only a modest increase, 3.45% in the total betting volume (Dirección General de Ordenación del Juego, 2020a). However, there was an increase in the number of calls to gambling addiction help lines, and concern about possible growth in pathological gambling behaviour has led to the rapid adoption of special legal measures. Spanish law (Real Decreto-ley 11/2020, 2020) established urgent measures to protect consumers from compulsive gambling by banning all advertising for online gambling that referred to the pandemic and individualized communication via email or social networks, as well as by limiting advertising for online games from 1 to 5 a.m. It also defined the temporary abolition of bonuses, promotions, and special offers for new customers.

The example of Spain inspired a law project proposing the regulation of access to online gaming platforms during the state of emergency. This proposal did not fit into the basic principles of drug policy adopted by Portugal since the 1980s, whose results were applauded globally, nor does it go against the current work of the General Directorate for Intervention on Addictive Behaviours and Dependencies (SICAD) that privileges information and education over restriction or penalty. The establishment of restrictions in access to carefully regulated gambling and online gambling platforms and under strict surveillance would likely result in the use of illegal websites. In practice, although approved, these access rules were not defined until the state of emergency ended on May 2. In this ephemeral regulatory effort, legal advertising measures that, as in Spain's example, aim to protect consumers from pathological behaviour were not considered. In Portugal, the advertising law code (Decreto-Lei n.º66/2015, 2015) establishes that gambling and betting advertisements must protect vulnerable and at-risk groups. Ad content should not appeal to the attainment of easy money; suggest success, social success, or any other special achievements due to the effect of the game; or encourage excessive gambling or betting practices. During the state of emergency, the usual transmission of advertising spots to online gambling on open television channels was maintained, with no legally defined time window. In one of these ads, a famous Portuguese comedian portrays "The Teacher," the protagonist of the Spanish series *Money Heist*, which teaches a group of people to place multiple bets. This series, about a successful assault on the Spanish Mint, and whose last season was released during quarantine, is currently the most watched non-English series on Netflix and considered a worldwide phenomenon. In our view, this piece, among several others that have been broadcast, exemplifies advertising that glamorizes online gambling and is designed to especially attract the younger audience. The concern with gambling behaviour in Portugal was previously exposed in the scientific and media

community. In 2018, Portuguese psychiatrists drew attention to the steady increase in national sales of scratch cards that amounted to €1,594 million, which corresponds to about €160 spent per person in Portugal (Vilaverde & Morgado, 2020). In 2016, the poker community discussed the unexpected success of the launch of pokerstars.pt, which, for several weeks, had the third highest number of players in the online poker site traffic report (Carrapatoso, 2017).

In August, SRIJ presented a semi-annual report entitled “Impact of Covid-19 on Online Gambling,” which replaced the second trimester report (SRIJ, 2020b). The first semester of 2020 registered a 44.9% increase in gross game revenue when compared with the same period the previous year. Compared with that in 2019, an extra €95 was spent on online gambling per Portuguese citizen, whereas the equivalent annual change in Spain was an extra €6 per capita (Dirección General de Ordenación del Juego, 2020b) (Table 1). In disclosing this exponential growth in online gambling (Table 1), the document advances the closure of casinos as the sole explanation. Although this disclosure is customary, the report did not contain data

Table 1

Online Gambling Gross Game Revenue, Volume of Bets, and New Players in Portugal and Spain in the First Semester of 2020

Variable of interest	1T 2020		2T 2020		1S 2020	
	Portugal	Spain	Portugal	Spain	Portugal	Spain
GGR						
Million €	69.8	217.97	69.1	208.85	138.9	426.8
Annual change (%)	47.5	12.47	43.1	17.71	44.9	10.7
Sport (volume of bets)						
Million €	149.1	1,545.7	90.8	1,053.7	239.9	2,599.2
Annual change (%)	13.7	-14.9	-19	-40.38	-1.5	-27.5
Chance/Fortune (volume of bets)						
Million €	960.8	3,258.4	1,331.9	3,700	2,292.7	6,958.4
Annual change (%)	57.9	15.6	90.3	30.7	74.4	23.2
Total (volume of bets)						
Million €	1,110	4,804.1	1,422.6	4,753.7	2,532.6	9,557.8
Annual change (%)	50	3.64	75.2	3.39	62.5	3.52
New players						
N (thousand)	157.4	868	130.4	414	287.8	1,282
Annual change (%)	25.8	5.63	27.6	-41.0	26.5	-16.2
Volume of bets per capita^a						
€	111	107	138	101	247	203
Annual change (%), + € spent	50 (+37)	3.9 (+4)	74.6 (+59)	3.1 (+3)	62.5 (+95)	3.0 (+6)

Note. 1T = 1st trimester; 2T = 2nd trimester; 1S = 1st semester; GGR = gross game revenue. Gross revenue, sport, chance and fortune, and total volume of bets (millions of euros spent and year-over-year percentage change) were rounded to one decimal place. New players (number and annual percentage change) have been rounded to one decimal place. Per capita betting volume has been rounded to the nearest integer (euro). Annual Change is the relative change of the index in comparison with the corresponding time period 1 year ago.

^aConsidering the Portuguese population = 10.28 million and the Spanish population = 46.94 million.

Adapted from Serviço de Regulamentação e Inspeção de Jogo (2020a, 2020b) and Dirección General de Ordenación del Juego (2020a, 2020b).

on the characteristics of the players (distribution by age and gender) and game behaviour (number of self-exclusion requests) that would be important to substantiate a migration from traditional to online gambling. In fact, although a study in the North American population reported a migration rate from casino to online gambling of 26% (Kim et al., 2015), empirical data regarding the phenomenon is scarce. Notably, Griffiths and colleagues (2009) identified differences between the usual online player profile in relation to the traditional one: The online player is younger (under 35 years old), has a higher education level, and has an active professional occupation (Griffiths et al., 2009). In addition, traditional players get used to physical stimuli (visual, tactile) and to a social environment that online gambling is not able to reproduce (Cotte & Latour, 2008). Thus, the explanation presented by the SRIJ (2020b) report, centred on the diversion of gambling from casinos to online platforms, is, in our opinion, hasty and reductive.

Unlike other countries, Portugal does not provide a problem gambling helpline service in which the variation in the number of calls could help us understand how this exponential growth translates into pathological gambling behaviour (Turner, 2020). Nevertheless, we consider that the adequate transmission of information and the education of the population, basic principles in the protection against pathological behaviour, are called into question in this half-yearly report and by the current advertising for online gambling in Portugal.

This alarming increase in online gambling during the first half of 2020 needs the attention of the scientific community to perform adequate analysis and monitoring of the phenomenon and of the political community to refine the mechanisms that protect citizens from pathological gambling.

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