



The Influence of Family on Gambling Behaviours: A Rapid Review of Emergent Literature

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Abstract

The influence of the family on gambling behaviours has been widely explored. However, findings remain inconsistent, and with family structures evolving, updated evidence is needed to guide prevention strategies. A rapid review of empirical studies (2018–2024) explored the influence of the family on gambling in childhood and adulthood. Thirty-six studies, predominantly from the USA, revealed that families significantly impact gambling behaviours through two perspectives: Family Environment in Childhood and in Adulthood, respectively. Gambling may become normalised within families, and increase risk for gambling-related harm, compounded by factors such as parental relationships, income, violence, and maltreatment. Conversely, families can mitigate gambling-related harm through family-oriented interventions. Recent research on the interplay between families and gambling remains limited. Addressing this gap is crucial for developing effective harm-reduction strategies and family-based therapies. Future research should prioritise understanding the complexities of family influence on gambling behaviours.

Keywords Family influence · Childhood · Gambling harm

Gambling-related harm is a significant public health concern, associated with financial loss, relationship breakdown, and adverse effects on physical and mental health (Langham et al., 2016; Muggleton et al., 2021; Wardle et al., 2024). The global financial burden of gambling-related harm has been estimated to reach \$700 billion by 2028 (Wardle et al., 2023). Consequently, there is an ongoing need for research that investigates the diverse range of predictive and protective factors associated with gambling-related harm (Allami et al., 2021; Bowden-Jones et al., 2022; Ghelfi et al., 2024). From this perspective, the critical role of family influence represents an increasingly recognised concept in this domain. This influence is driven by various factors such as the family environment, structure, relationships, or overall processes (McComb & Sabiston, 2010). For example, Family Systems Theory proposes that the family unit is “a complex social system, in which members interact to influence each other’s behaviour. Any change in one individual within a family

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is likely to influence the entire system and may even lead to changes in other members” (Pfeiffer & In-Albon, 2022, p. 188).

The family is, therefore, central within numerous theoretical models of gambling harm, such as the Pathways Model of gambling (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Nower, Blaszczynski, et al., 2022a, 2022b). This model proposes three distinct subgroups of disordered gamblers, each influenced by different factors but displaying similar phenomenological features: (1) behaviourally conditioned, (2) emotionally vulnerable, and (3) antisocial impulsivist gamblers. Within the emotionally vulnerable pathway particularly, gambling behaviour is influenced through intergenerational patterns, early familial exposure, and potential genetic predispositions. Relatedly, supporting research indicates that family-influenced factors such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are highly comorbid with disordered patterns of gambling (Bristow et al., 2022; Lotzin et al., 2018).

It should be acknowledged that the influence of the family may not only contribute to gambling-related harm but foster protective effects as well (Dowling et al., 2017; Kourgiantakis & Ashcroft, 2018). For example, positive relationships with parents and involvement in meaningful activities can be protective against harmful levels of gambling involvement in youth (Pisarska & Ostaszewski, 2020). Furthermore, family involvement in treatment for gambling-related harm is associated with better treatment outcomes as well as improved individual and family function (Kourgiantakis et al., 2013), and there is supporting evidence for family-orientated therapeutic approaches (Paolini et al., 2018). Family functioning can also serve as a safeguard against potentially harmful gambling attitudes, positively shaping early values and behaviours towards gambling risk (Allami et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). These attributes, instilled during childhood, can often persist into adulthood, potentially mitigating the risk of developing gambling-related issues later on in life (Dowling et al., 2017).

The bidirectional impact of family influence and gambling behaviours is therefore complex and lacks clarity within the literature (Subramaniam et al., 2017). While some studies indicate that factors like family functioning and single-parent status have little impact on gambling behaviours (Ellenbogen et al., 2007), others show that parental separation or divorce during childhood increases the likelihood of disordered gambling (Bristow et al., 2022). Adding further complexity, ACEs significantly contribute to disordered gambling in adulthood but are not all equally predictive and may be mediated by additional factors such as emotional dysregulation (Poole et al., 2017). Additionally, given that both gambling landscapes and family dynamics are in constant flux, shaped by technological progress and evolving social factors respectively (Furstenberg, 2019; Stark & Robinson, 2021), timely evidence synthesis is warranted to elucidate the specific mechanisms involved. This understanding is imperative for developing effective harm-prevention strategies and family-oriented interventions.

Previous reviews have offered important insights into how gambling affects families, including the impact of parental gambling on children (Darbyshire et al., 2001; Suomi et al., 2022), adolescent gambling behaviours (McComb & Sabiston, 2010), and treatment considerations from a family systems perspective (Kourgiantakis et al., 2013; McComb et al., 2009). More recent work has also explored the broader impact of gambling harm on affected others (Irie & Kengo, 2022; Tulloch et al., 2022). However, many of these reviews have focused on specific subgroups (e.g., children or partners) or specific approaches (e.g., intervention), with aims distinct from the present review. This review seeks to understand how the family shapes gambling behaviours across the lifespan. In contrast to earlier reviews, a synthesis of emerging evidence published since 2018 is warranted, particularly one that adopts a lifespan perspective to explore how family dynamics may operate as both

risk and protective factors for gambling-related harm. By focusing on recent literature, we aim to identify contemporary patterns and gaps relevant to gambling behaviours, familial experiences, and their implications for policy and practice.

Therefore, this review aims to examine the recent literature exploring the role of family in shaping gambling behaviours. Specifically, we aim to focus on identifying familial risk or protective factors and consider both childhood and adult experiences. By synthesising current research, we seek to provide a comprehensive understanding of how family dynamics intersect with gambling behaviours across the lifespan.

Methods

Due to the dynamic nature of gambling and familial environments, we adopted a rapid review approach. This methodology, while not standardised, generally incorporates elements of a systematic review but with constraints on duration and scope (Haby et al., 2016; Tricco et al., 2018).

We focused on research from 2018 to 2024 to capture the rapidly transforming landscape of gambling behaviours and their impact on families. This period has witnessed a substantial shift toward online gambling, fuelled largely by the use of smartphones and digital platforms (Stark & Robinson, 2021). Simultaneously, research has moved away from seeing gambling as a personal issue and is now taking a broader public health approach that recognises the wide range of harms it can have on communities (Browne et al., 2021).

Additionally, families do not exist in isolation but are continually shaped by shifting social, cultural, economic, and political climates (Freidlin et al., 2021; Ito & Kaneko, 2021). Their experiences with gambling harm, and consequently their support needs, can reflect these changing contexts. While our approach excludes historical literature, it prioritises capturing emerging patterns in how gambling affects family systems today, helping the findings to remain relevant to today's policy making and support services. In effect, we intend for this research to complement and extend previous reviews with the date range chosen (i.e. Darbyshire et al., 2001; Kourgiantakis et al., 2013; McComb et al., 2009; Suomi et al., 2022), helping to demonstrate how understandings of gambling-related harm have developed and to situate our findings within both historical and contemporary contexts.

The rapid review protocol was registered via Prospero: ID- CRD42024569723.

Search Strategy

Following PRISMA guidelines (Tricco et al., 2018), a literature search for peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2024 was conducted. The literature search was performed using the academic databases SCOPUS, PsychINFO, and PubMed to identify any records that addressed family influence on gambling behaviours. To identify any further records, the research team screened the reference lists of eligible articles and conducted additional searches using Google Scholar (see Fig. 1). We utilised the following terms throughout the search strategy in conjunction with Boolean operators; "Famil*" OR "Family Characteristic" OR "Family Context" OR "Family Environment" OR "Family Climate" OR "Household" OR "parents" OR "siblings" OR "significant other" OR "Child") AND (gambl* OR "problem gambling" OR "gambling addiction" OR "pathological gambling" OR "compulsive gambling").

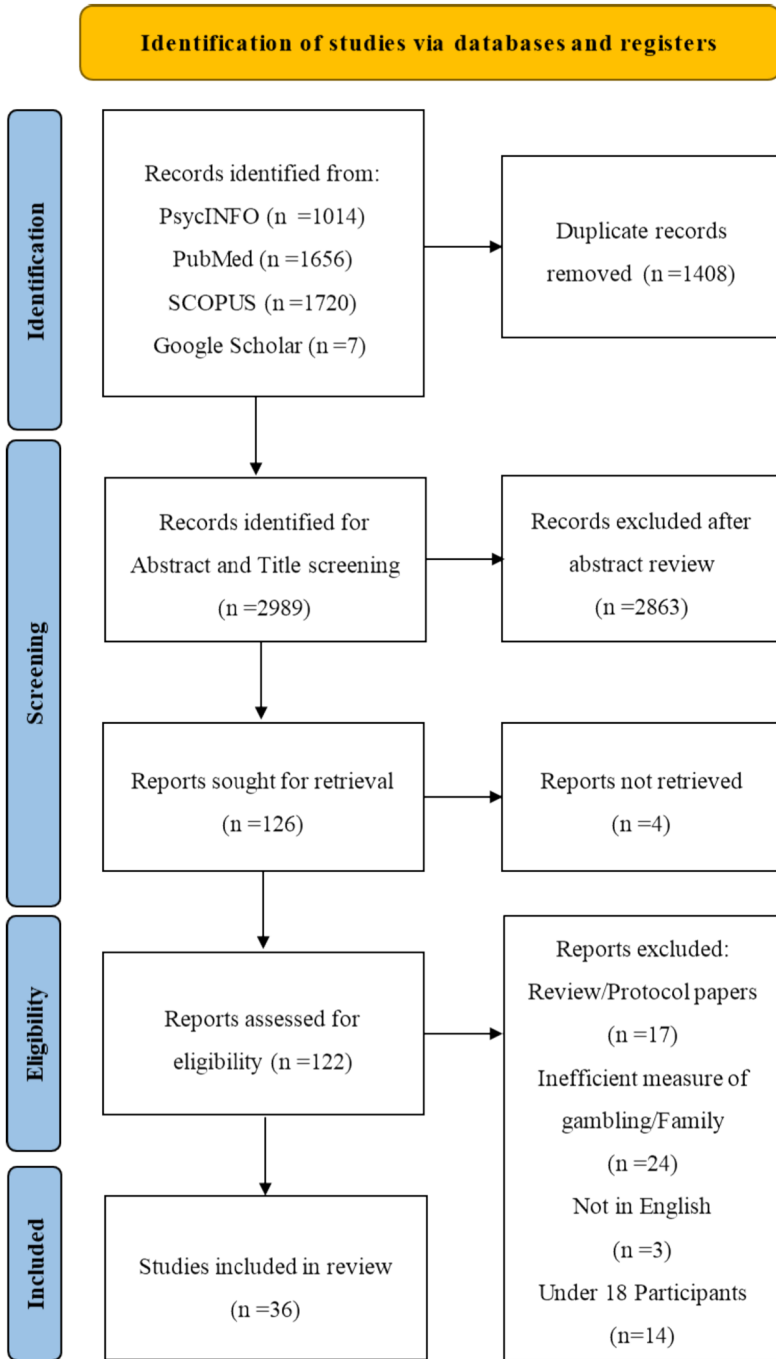


Fig. 1 Search strategy and study selection PRISMA flow diagram

Inclusion/exclusion criteria

Records were eligible for inclusion if they were published in English between 01/01/2018 and 01/07/2024, used a gambling-related measure, and focused on gambling behaviours in an adult population (18 years old and above). This was to ensure that the studies included in the review directly addressed gambling populations and provide consistency in how gambling was defined across studies. Studies involving adolescent participants were deliberately excluded to maintain methodological focus on retrospective investigations of family influences on established adult gambling patterns. This approach enabled examination of complete trajectories from childhood family dynamics to adult gambling behaviours and has been adopted in similar reviews focusing on substance use (Leza et al., 2021; Sebalo et al., 2023). By focusing on established rather than potentially transient adolescent gambling patterns, we envisaged that our synthesis would offer stronger clinical relevance for adult interventions while still capturing childhood family experiences through retrospective accounts. Studies were also required to have measured at least one family influence variable. Family influence was conceptualised across five domains that were informed by previous research (McComb & Sabiston, 2010) and agreed upon by the research team: (1) family sociodemographic factors, (2) general family climate, (3) family members' attitudes and behaviours, (4) parenting practices, and (5) family relationship characteristics. Records were excluded if they were published before 2018, involved participants under the age of 18, did not use a gambling-related measure or did not measure at least one family influence variable. Records were also excluded if not published in the English language.

Screening

After record retrieval via database searching ($n = 4391$) and using Google Scholar ($n = 6$), duplicates were removed. Initial title and abstract screening were undertaken ($n = 2989$), removing irrelevant or non-applicable records. The remaining records ($n = 126$) were full text screened by the research team (JS, JT, SW, GD). The process involved the first author reviewing all records before they were reviewed by an additional member of the research team. To ensure fidelity during this process, the reviewers regularly met to discuss their individual decisions and reasoning behind including or excluding records until a consensus was reached. A percentage agreement of 85.6% ($k = 0.71$, CI [0.62, 0.80]) between the first and second reviewers suggested a moderate to strong level of agreement. Subsequently, regular meetings were conducted to establish the reasoning behind inclusion/exclusion until 100% agreement was confirmed. Figure 1 provides further details of the retrieval and screening process.

Quality assessment

A final set of records ($n = 36$) were subjected to quality assessment using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Bartlett et al., 2018). The MMAT was selected for quality assessment due to its efficient evaluation of diverse methodological designs within a single instrument, making it ideal for rapid reviews (Tricco et al., 2016). Its streamlined checklist format enables consistent application across quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies, addressing the methodological heterogeneity in

gambling research. Our decision to implement the MMAT was also underpinned by its established reliability and widespread adoption in previous systematic and rapid reviews on gambling (Torrance et al., 2021; Killick & Griffiths., 2023; McGrane et al., 2025). It was concluded that all the final records were conducted with a high level of methodological rigour according to the MMAT (see Additional file 1) and were therefore included for data extraction.

Analysis/synthesis

Narrative synthesis was utilised to identify the key themes within the included articles (Popay et al., 2006). This procedure involved repeatedly reading the records and extracting the information pertinent to our aims, which was then condensed and organised into a tabular format (see Additional file 1). The data extraction was confirmed by the research team to ensure completeness, and the data was subsequently structured based on a thematic framework (Table 1). Specifically, our narrative synthesis followed an iterative process wherein the first author conducted initial coding of extracted data, identifying recurring patterns related to family influences on gambling (Lisy & Porritt., 2016). These initial codes were then grouped into preliminary categories based on their conceptual similarities and temporal dimensions (childhood versus adulthood).

Through team discussions, these categories were refined into two overarching themes: “Family Environment in Childhood” and “Family Environment in Adulthood”. Within each overarching theme, distinct sub-themes emerged from the data. The childhood environment theme encompassed three sub-themes: normalisation of gambling in childhood, structure of the family in childhood, and negative childhood experiences. The adulthood environment theme yielded three sub-themes: structure of the family in adulthood, domestic violence, and preservation and prevention. This framework was developed through constant comparative analysis, wherein newly extracted data was continuously compared with existing themes to ensure comprehensive representation of the findings across all included studies. The first author undertook the narrative synthesis, with regular consultations between the research team to ensure that the final themes were applicable, relevant, and grounded in the data. These themes and subthemes are discussed in relation to the respective studies below.

Results

Study Designs

Thirty-six studies were included in the review: 26 included quantitative studies, 8 took a mixed methods approach, and 2 were qualitative. The studies were conducted across 5 different settings, North America ($n = 16$), Europe excluding the UK ($n = 8$), the UK ($n = 5$), Oceania ($n = 5$), and Africa ($n = 2$). The most commonly utilised gambling measure was the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI; (Ferris & Wynne, 2001). For further details, please see Additional File 1.

Table 1 Summary of themes that emerged following narrative synthesis

| Overarching themes | Sub-theme | Example of key components | Studies |
|---------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Family Environment in Childhood | Normalisation of gambling in childhood | Many adults experiencing gambling-related harm reported being introduced to it at a young age through their family members | Bristow et al., 2022; Cavallera et al., 2018; Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Fasesan & Afe, 2024; Freeman et al., 2020; Keatley et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Mazar et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; Nower, et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021 |
| | | Structure of the family in childhood | Bristow et al., 2022; Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Fasesan & Afe, 2024; Goodrich et al., 2023; Grant & Chamberlain, 2020; Lotzin et al., 2018; Mazar et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2023 |
| | Negative childhood experiences | Childhood maltreatment and trauma were reported as common risk-factors for gambling-related harm in adulthood | Black & Allen, 2021; Bristow et al., 2022; Estévez et al., 2023; Freeman et al., 2020; Goghari et al., 2020; Horak et al., 2021; Kaya & Deveci, 2022; Lotzin et al., 2018; Mazar et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2021; Stefanovics et al., 2023; Tucker et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023 |

Table 1 (continued)

| Overarching themes | Sub-theme | Example of key components | Studies |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Family Environment in Adulthood | Structure of the family in adulthood | Factors such as divorce from a spouse, relationship conflict, and stressful care-giving responsibilities were commonly reported amongst those experiencing harmful gambling | Cavalera et al., 2018; Dighton et al., 2018; Elton-Marshall et al., 2018; Estévez et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Mazar et al., 2018; Ponti et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021; Topino et al., 2021; Wejbera et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023 |
| | Domestic violence | Experiencing violence from a spouse was positively correlated with gambling-related harm | Dighton et al., 2018; Dowling et al., 2018; Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Palmer du Prez et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2020 |
| | Preservation and prevention | The family played a key role in maintaining gambling behaviours through normalisation, but also served as important resources in treatment, such as including family members in the treatment therapy process | Côté et al., 2020; Estévez et al., 2023; Freeman et al., 2020; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Mazar et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; Tremblay et al., 2018, 2023 |

Theme 1: Family Environment in Childhood

The evidence indicated that an individual's upbringing, particularly in the family setting, represented a strong influence on gambling behaviours in later life. In total, 23 studies related to this theme. This encompassed 3 sub-themes: (1) Normalisation of gambling in childhood, (2) structure of the family in childhood, and (3) negative childhood experiences.

Normalisation of Gambling in Childhood

Many adults harmed by gambling reported being introduced to gambling at a young age via family, with 12 studies supporting this theme. For example, increased frequency of the household members' gambling, if the participant was present during the household members' gambling, and if the participant took part in gambling with the household member, all positively correlated with frequent reports of gambling-related harm (Nower et al., 2022).

Qualitative studies involving adults who reported experiencing gambling-related harm supported these findings, with a significant number of participants indicating that they were introduced to gambling at a young age and had a familial background in gambling (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Keatley et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2020). Relatedly, qualitative evidence indicated that being introduced to scratch cards as birthday presents by family members was often the catalyst for their gambling into adulthood (Keatley et al., 2019).

A recurring theme was that siblings or parents were often identified as the primary family members involved in gambling initiation (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Keatley et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Nower et al., 2022). Specifically, having a father, mother, or brother was linked to higher gambling frequency in adulthood. Sisters, grandparents, and other household members showed no significant effect on gambling behaviours (Nower et al., 2022). This is consistent with research that shows the father as the most reported family member to introduce individuals to gambling in their childhood (Cavalera et al., 2018; Keatley et al., 2019; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Nower et al., 2022).

There was a gendered aspect to reporting the father more frequently than other members of the family. Women were more likely to report gambling by their mother whereas men were more likely to report gambling by their brother (Nower et al., 2022). This was supported by the accounts of treatment-seeking individuals for gambling-related harm whereby reporting maternal gambling was more commonly reported by female participants (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Structure of the Family in Childhood

Eight studies focused on the structure of the family and how this influenced gambling-related harm. The most common characteristic examined in these studies involved the relationship status of the parents during childhood among those experiencing gambling-related harm in adulthood. For example, numerous methods showed a link between parental separation/divorce throughout childhood and an increased likelihood of experiencing gambling-related harm in adulthood (Bristow et al., 2022; Lotzin et al., 2018). These findings were also interconnected to the normalisation of gambling in childhood. For example, Dowling et al., (2021a, 2021b), illustrated that those who experienced gambling harms and

were raised in families where gambling was normalised were more likely to report parental separation and parental divorce than individuals with gambling-related harm raised in non-gambling families.

Another aspect of family structure relates to the framework in which the family operates. These factors were varied and were only briefly addressed within the included studies, with the primary example being the education level of the parents. Fasesan and Afe (2024) observed a significant relationship between gambling-related harm in adulthood and a father's decreasing level of education. Other examples linked to gambling-related harm included lower household income, a family history of mental health disorders, and drug/alcohol or behavioural addiction, which were all robust predictors of gambling harm (Grant & Chamberlain, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023). For example, a family history of substance use disorder was associated with more money lost via gambling in the past year and more at-risk gambling behaviours for young individuals experiencing gambling-related harm (Grant & Chamberlain, 2020).

Negative Childhood Experiences

In total, 13 studies explored adults experiencing gambling-related harm and self-reported negative childhood experiences. There was a relationship between childhood maltreatment, trauma, and an increasing risk for gambling-related harm (Black & Allen, 2021; Horak et al., 2021; Lotzin et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2023). For example, those with a high PGSI score were more prone to having experienced childhood trauma when compared to a control group of those who did not meet the criteria for disordered gambling (Goghari et al., 2020; Horak et al., 2021). Relatedly, numerous studies have exhibited a high frequency of ACEs in adults who engage in harmful gambling (Bristow et al., 2022; Goodrich et al., 2023; Lotzin et al., 2018). Notably, regarding a sample of individuals harmed by gambling, those who committed crimes to fund their gambling were more likely to have experienced childhood abuse, particularly sexual abuse and multiple instances of abuse, compared to non-offending participants (Roberts et al., 2021).

However, the relationship between negative childhood experiences and gambling-related harm is complex and multifaceted. For example, Horak et al. (2021) found that physical neglect, but not emotional neglect, significantly contributed to predicting gambling behaviour. Goodrich et al. (2023) and Bristow et al. (2022) suggested that "household challenges" had no significant impact on gambling behaviours. However, notable correlations with self-reported gambling-related harm were observed among individuals living with incarcerated household members, those who reported frequent physical altercations among adults, individuals coerced into sexual activity by someone at least five years older, and those who witnessed parental violence (Bristow et al., 2022). Additionally, Tucker et al. (2021) reported no correlation between ACEs or specific categories of ACE's and gambling. However, they identified a positive association between the total number of ACEs reported by an individual and gambling frequency.

Negative childhood experiences have also been explored in relation attachment types. Kaya and Devenci (2022) observed that individuals experiencing gambling-related harm reported high rates of parental rejection, hostility, and neglect during their childhoods. In particular, these individuals reported higher rates of rejection by fathers compared to mothers (Kaya & Devenci, 2022). Only two studies explored the theme of negative childhood experiences and their impact on gambling qualitatively.

Estévez et al. (2023) suggested that it was common for women to report childhood trauma as the catalyst for their harmful gambling behaviours later in life.

Lastly, there has been a small focus on negative childhood experiences within populations who may be particularly vulnerable to gambling harm, such as ex-military personnel. For example, studies have shown that veterans experiencing gambling-related harm report higher rates of adverse childhood experiences (Stefanovics et al., 2023). Correspondingly, increased childhood happiness has been highlighted as a protective factor against gambling-related harm in veterans (Freeman et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Family Environment in Adulthood

The included literature also indicated that the family environment was also influential upon gambling behaviours throughout adulthood. Three subthemes were identified, which included: Structure of the family, domestic violence, and preservation and prevention. Twenty-two studies were categorised into this overall theme.

Structure of the Family in Adulthood

Twelve studies investigated various facets of family structure and their interconnection with gambling-related harm in adulthood. A common factor involved marital status, the findings indicated that those experiencing harmful gambling were more likely to be single and less likely to be married (Cavalera et al., 2018; Elton-Marshall et al., 2018; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Roberts et al., 2021; Wejbera et al., 2021). Specifically, those who had experienced divorce exhibited the greatest levels of gambling-related harm across studies (Cavalera et al., 2018; Elton-Marshall et al., 2018).

Studies also highlighted that the way a relationship unfolded played a crucial role in shaping gambling behaviours. For example, Ponti et al. (2021) found couples experiencing gambling-related harm reported higher conflict, lower support, and lower security levels than couples not experiencing gambling-related harm (Ponti et al., 2021). Additionally, couples in which at least one person gambled harmfully exhibited insecure romantic attachments (Ponti et al., 2021). Another structural factor involved family functioning. Topino et al. (2021) found significant positive correlations between disordered gambling and enmeshed family functioning, characterised by spending too much time together. Additionally, two studies examined the role of family income as a contributing factor, whereby lower household incomes in adulthood were predictive of gambling-related harm (Mazar et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2023).

In relation to stress and the family structure, Estévez et al. (2023) reported that women often cited events such as the death of a mother, a child's disability, and overwhelming family caregiving responsibilities as contributors to their harmful gambling behaviour (Estévez et al., 2023). Studies also explored this concept regarding Armed Forces populations. Being in a relationship and living in non-service accommodation, accommodation not provided by the Armed Forces, was a significant protective factor against gambling-related harm (Jones et al., 2024). Notably, Dighton et al. (2018) found that male veterans were more likely to be married or cohabiting than non-veterans, though the study did not examine the relationship between marital status and gambling.

Domestic Violence

Five studies focused on reported violence within spousal and familial relationships in adulthood. There was a pattern whereby those involved in frequent gambling experienced family abuse or violence (Dowling et al., 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Palmer du Preez et al., 2018). Specifically, studies showed that adults experiencing gambling-related harm frequently identify a parent as the perpetrator of the violence they experienced when asked about incidents within the last twelve months (Dowling et al., 2018, 2021a, 2021b). Another common individual identified as perpetrating violence towards adults who experience gambling-related harm was their partner (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Palmer du Preez et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2020). In terms of gender, a higher number of female help-seekers harmed by gambling reported experiencing intimate partner abuse and family victimisation compared to male help-seekers (Palmer du Preez et al., 2018).

Preservation and Prevention in Adulthood

Eight studies were categorised into this sub-theme. Overall, it was evident in the included studies that the family was an important factor in preserving or maintaining gambling behaviours throughout childhood and into adulthood. A study on women revealed that although they were introduced to gambling at a young age, their peers and boyfriends played a significant role in facilitating their gambling activities once they reached the legal gambling age (McCarthy et al., 2020).

However, while the family in adulthood was an important influence in maintaining gambling behaviours, family could also play a crucial role in harm prevention (Côté et al., 2020; Estévez et al., 2023). Estévez et al. (2023) found that women harmed by gambling valued their family's support in overcoming shame and guilt, with mothers and children often playing key roles in their recovery. Alternatively, Côté et al. (2020) found that a partner's coping mechanisms, such as suggesting alternative activities or the threat of a breakup, significantly helped reduce a spouse's gambling urges.

Findings also suggested that involving the family in the therapeutic process was beneficial (Tremblay et al., 2018, 2023). Tremblay et al. (2018) found that couple treatment enhanced mutual understanding, improving support and helping partners better grasp the complexities of gambling cravings. In this process, it was reported that the partner became a more valuable source of support than the therapist (Tremblay et al., 2018). A similar study revealed that participants who engaged in couple therapy experienced greater improvements during follow-up sessions, including a more significant reduction in gambling cravings and enhanced well-being for both the individual and the couple (Tremblay et al., 2023).

Discussion

This review aimed to examine the recent literature (2018–2024) exploring the influential role of family in shaping gambling behaviours. The evidence suggests that the influence of the family on gambling can be understood through two distinct temporal perspectives: childhood experiences and adulthood experiences. This relationship manifests in several mirrored aspects across these life stages. For example, negative childhood experiences find

their adult counterpart in domestic violence (Black & Allen, 2021; Dowling et al., 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Palmer du Preez et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2023). The normalisation of gambling within the family during childhood can be translated to its maintenance in adulthood, though some familial protection was highlighted within the included studies as well (Mazar et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; Nower et al., 2022; Tremblay et al., 2023). Lastly, family structure remains a significant factor throughout both childhood and adulthood, such as parental separation and divorce, respectively (Elton-Marshall et al., 2018; Fasesan & Afe, 2024; Mazar et al., 2018). These parallels highlight the complex interplay between early life experiences and adult circumstances in the context of family-influenced gambling behaviours. The insight gained from the included literature provides further understanding of individuals who experience gambling-related harm as a result (in-part) of family influence (Lotzin et al., 2018). For example, it seems necessary for individuals who have a “high ACEs” profile to be offered integrated treatment that acknowledges the role of the family (Hodgins et al., 2010; Lotzin et al., 2018). Additionally, clinicians should be aware that childhood maltreatment is common in individuals who are experiencing gambling-related harm in adulthood (Black & Allen, 2021). While the findings of this review are predominantly grounded in recent empirical research, several psychological theories offer deeper explanatory power regarding the family’s role in gambling behaviour. Jacobs’ General Theory of Addictions (Jacobs, 1986) posits that addictive behaviours emerge from efforts to self-medicate emotional pain rooted in early adverse experiences. This framework aligns with the consistent presence of childhood trauma and high ACEs across the included studies, suggesting a pathway whereby early familial dysfunction contributes to maladaptive coping through gambling in adulthood.

Relatedly, there should also be an increased recognition within therapy services concerning the role of intimate partner violence in this context (Roberts et al., 2020). That is, there is a case for a more comprehensive and collaborative strategy that considers all relevant familial circumstances surrounding an individual experiencing gambling-related harm. Such an approach could substantially affect recovery as opposed to a targeted approach that exclusively focuses upon specific gambling behaviours or cognitions (Roberts et al., 2021). This was supported by studies highlighting that family-inclusive approaches such as couples therapy had greater success in reducing gambling cravings and behaviours compared to traditional therapy (Tremblay et al., 2018, 2023). The research indicates that couples therapy may assist both the gambler and their partner in restoring a healthy relationship and enhancing the efficacy of therapeutic intervention (Ponti et al., 2021). However, to date, there are no clinical trials that have explored treating gambling-related harm through couples therapy (Tremblay et al., 2018).

Subsequently, there is a critical need to better understand individuals experiencing gambling-related harm and to develop tailored therapeutic approaches (Lotzin et al., 2018). For example, fathers were frequently reported as key figures in normalising gambling during childhood (Cavalera et al., 2018; Keatley et al., 2019; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Nower et al., 2022), and research indicates that fathers often introduce children to high-intensity activities like poker (Keatley et al., 2019). This aligns with more recent research indicating that fathers, in particular, are more likely to hold positive attitudes towards adolescent gambling (Dittman et al., 2025). Dittman et al. (2025) elaborate on parental perspectives, noting that despite parents’ concerns about gambling, they reported that they often gambled in the presence of their adolescents. These findings indicate that some parents underestimate the risks and harms of gambling, highlighting an opportunity for targeted information and educational initiatives (Dittman et al., 2025). Additionally, it emphasises the need for further research to investigate the intergenerational transmission of

gambling-related harm within families, particularly focusing on the parent–child dyad and its implications for clinical practices (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Fasesan & Afe, 2024; Keatley et al., 2019).

The findings echo the core principles of Family Systems Theory. The observed patterns, such as the intergenerational transmission of gambling norms, the reciprocal impact of gambling on family relationships, and the therapeutic potential of couples-based interventions, reinforce the idea that individual gambling behaviours do not occur in isolation but are embedded within broader family dynamics. Pfeiffer and In-Albon (2022) highlight that a change in one member (e.g., a gambler seeking treatment or a family member setting boundaries) can initiate a ripple effect across the family system. This underscores the importance of therapeutic approaches that move beyond the individual, recognising that sustained change often requires engagement with the context in which gambling occurs.

Previous reviews have provided important insights into the impact of gambling on family systems (e.g., Darbyshire et al., 2001; Kourgiantakis et al., 2013; McComb & Sabiston, 2010; Suomi et al., 2022; Tulloch et al., 2022). Consistent with this earlier work, the review reaffirms that parental gambling remains a significant predictor of gambling-related harm (McComb & Sabiston, 2010). The review also identified that families facing multiple challenges, such as concurrent substance misuse, are at greater risk of experiencing gambling-related harm, akin to previous reviews (McComb & Sabiston, 2010). However, by focusing on studies published since 2018, our review captures emerging trends in gambling behaviour and adopts a lifespan perspective, allowing for comparisons of how gambling affects individuals at different life stages. This was reflected in the mirrored themes observed across both childhood and adulthood experiences. That is, the research underscores the family's dual role as both a source of risk and resilience, challenging one-dimensional narratives of harm. In line with previous reviews (McComb & Sabiston, 2010), it reinforces the importance of addressing gambling as a family-level issue. Despite this, the completeness and applicability of the extant literature are limited. The present review highlighted that factors such as family functioning, attachment styles, household challenges, childhood trauma, and ACEs are key to understanding gambling-related harm (Bristow et al., 2022; Goodrich et al., 2023; Ponti et al., 2021; Topino et al., 2021). However, many studies lack specificity, failing to differentiate between childhood and adulthood experiences, treating friends and family as a single variable, and not separating ACEs and household challenges into distinct factors (Freeman et al., 2020; Lelonek-Kuleta & Bartczuk, 2020; Mazar et al., 2018; McCarthy et al., 2020; O'Gorman & Roberts, 2017). Therefore, we propose that future research should prioritise the disaggregation of these variables. This approach would enable a more precise understanding of how familial relationships and home environment uniquely contribute to the development and persistence of gambling behaviours across different life stages. Additionally, there was a clear lack of diversity when it came to the included literature, with most studies focusing on male populations. That is, greater attention needs to be given to female gamblers, particularly regarding how gambling-related harm intersects with variables in their lives (Estévez et al., 2023; Wejbera et al., 2021). There was also a significant lack of qualitative research, with only two studies relying solely on qualitative methods in this review (Estévez et al., 2023; Tremblay et al., 2018). This aligns with other reviews that stress the scarcity of qualitative studies on gambling-related harm (Monson et al., 2023). Qualitative research offers valuable insights by enabling individuals to express their personal experiences (Monson et al., 2023). This approach is particularly effective for exploring complex and personal topics like the perceived influence of family on gambling behaviours. It allows participants to add depth, meaning, and context to their descriptions, making it an ideal method for such

a nuanced inquiry. We therefore also propose further qualitative research in this area as a future research priority.

Many of the included studies emphasised the need for longitudinal research to better capture the evolving nature of family influence and gambling-related harm over time (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b; Grant & Chamberlain, 2020; Palmer du Preez et al., 2018). Such research would help elucidate the relationship between gambling and family violence, offering a deeper understanding of how these factors interact and evolve (Dowling et al., 2021a, 2021b). While most studies highlighted the family's potential to either normalise or mitigate gambling harm, our review also revealed more nuanced and sometimes contradictory findings. For example, some research identified parental divorce as a common factor among individuals who experience gambling-related harm (Bristow et al., 2022; Lotzin et al., 2018), while other studies suggested it could reduce risk by limiting exposure to family/parental violence, which is a known predictor of harm (Goodrich et al., 2023). These differing findings suggest that the quality of family relationships, including levels of conflict, emotional support and communication, may be more influential than the structure of the family itself (Goldberg & Carlson, 2014; Marchand-Reilly & Yaure, 2019; van Eldik et al., 2020). This highlights the need to move beyond simplistic one-size-fits-all narratives when exploring gambling and family systems. Families are complex and shaped by their specific contexts, meaning that broad generalisations often fail to capture the full picture of how gambling-related harm is experienced and passed on.

This review underscores the particular need for research that examines diverse demographics that may be at a higher risk for gambling-related harm, such as military personnel. For example, among the six included studies focusing on this population, a notable gap was identified where two studies lacked depth in their exploration of military-specific contexts (Dighton et al., 2018; Freeman et al., 2020; Goodrich et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2024; Mazar et al., 2018; Stefanovics et al., 2023).

Limitations

The current review has various limitations. The rapid review process-imposed constraints on the number of databases examined and the time allocated for screening. Nonetheless, multiple researchers participated in the screening process to enhance the robustness of the existing methods and in the screening process to reduce potential bias and ensure consistency in study selection. Additionally, the review protocol was registered online, promoting transparency and accountability. These measures aimed to balance the need for speed with the rigour required for credible and reliable findings.

While this review focused primarily on the role of family in shaping gambling behaviours, it is important to acknowledge that this represents a limitation of the study's scope. The relationship between family dynamics and gambling is bi-directional, meaning that gambling harm can also have significant impacts on the family unit. Given the importance of this reciprocal influence, we suggest that future research should be dedicated to exploring the ways in which gambling-related harm affects family members. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between gambling and family life, complementing the focus of the current review.

The review included studies with participants from diverse cultural backgrounds, who may have varying attitudes toward gambling, and the way family influences gambling can vary because of these cultural differences (McComb & Sabiston, 2010; Raylu & Oei, 2004). However, this variation may have been overlooked in the combination of findings

to create the narrative synthesis, as most of the studies involved Caucasian populations, potentially neglecting minority group differences or alternative perspectives. Nevertheless, we envisage that this review can be used as a foundation for areas in need of further exploration. Therefore, our synthesis underscores the importance of examining family influence on gambling behaviour and its role in treatment strategies and harm reduction measures.

Conclusions

This review analyses the family's influence on gambling behaviours, showing that negative family environments can increase vulnerability to gambling-related harm in adulthood. Simultaneously, family involvement is crucial in treatment and prevention, prompting a push to more appropriately integrate it into therapy processes. There is a call for treatment providers and researchers to recognise family-based risk factors to better identify and support at-risk individuals. Our findings here demonstrate how this work could support future research on familial influence in at-risk groups, where such exploration remains limited. Increasing awareness of family influence can improve prevention, treatment, and support for gambling-related harm.

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Author Contribution • Jessica Smith: conceptualisation, methodology; software; formal analysis; investigation; writing — original draft; writing — review and editing.

- Simon Wright: validation, writing — review and editing.
- Glen Dighton: validation, writing — review and editing.
- Simon Dymond: supervision, validation, writing — review and editing.
- Jamie Torrance: supervision, validation, writing — review and editing.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics Statement This rapid review did not require ethical approval.

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