

# End gambling harm

## 2024 ACT Election Platform

**Gambling is a source of significant social harm in the ACT, contributing to poverty, mental ill-health, suicide, and domestic and family violence. Electronic gaming machines (EGMs, also known as pokies) are the greatest source of gambling harm in the ACT, and are not regulated in a way to minimise this harm. A public health approach to gambling harm reduction is required across all demographics.**

**To reduce gambling harm, ACTCOSS calls on the incoming government to:**

- **Implement a stronger public health approach to reducing gambling harm**
- **Support diversification of clubs' revenue to drive a reduction in EGMs**
- **Improve transparency about the harms caused by individual gambling venues**
- **Implement Australia's safest cashless gaming card system, ensuring gambling venues take responsibility for protecting people vulnerable to harm**
- **Mandate safer gambling venue hours**
- **Fund a gambling harm advocacy peak**

### **Gambling harms in the ACT are significant and wide-ranging**

Australians spend more on gambling per capita than any other nation, with EGMs responsible for the most harms and accounting for over half of total gambling revenue.<sup>1</sup>

In 2023-24, Canberrans lost more than \$186 million to EGMs.<sup>2</sup> These losses represent a significant financial drain on individuals and families, resulting in a diverse range of harms including financial distress, mental ill health, family breakdown, domestic and family violence, reduced productivity, and greater risk of suicide.<sup>3</sup> These gambling harms disproportionately affect certain groups, exacerbating social, health and economic inequities.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the substantial and wide-ranging harms associated with gambling, government efforts to

better regulate and reduce gambling harm in the ACT have been piecemeal. EGMs remain ubiquitous and readily accessible in community venues. While the number of EGMs declined between 2015 and 2020, the total number of machines in operation has remained static over the past four years, with over 3500 EGMs operating in venues across the ACT.<sup>5</sup>

The need for more comprehensive policies to prevent gambling harm is driven by the significant and multifaceted impacts of gambling on individuals, families and the wider community. For the incoming ACT Government, adopting these policies should be a priority to reduce social and economic costs and promote a healthier, more equitable community.

# Policy priorities

## **Implement a stronger public health approach to reducing gambling harm across all demographics**

There is widespread evidence that gambling-related harms exist on a continuum of severity, with financial, social and health harms extending not only to those who gamble but also to their families, peers and the wider community. A public health approach moves beyond a narrow focus on 'individual responsibility' to encompass the prevention of the wide range of gambling harms experienced across the community. A public health perspective allows for a comprehensive, coordinated and evidence-based approach that emphasises harm prevention and reduction.

- Consider transferring oversight of the Gambling Harm Reduction Fund to ACT Health to manage and disburse to organisations without an inherent conflict of interest (e.g. those which do not have any gambling revenue). The purpose of the Fund should be resourcing evidence-based harm prevention and treatment programs and research into gambling harm reduction.

## **Support club diversification to drive a reduction in the number of EGMs**

The number of EGMs in the ACT remains excessive, with over 3500 machines in operation across a range of community club venues. The high visibility, availability and accessibility of EGMs contributes to the substantial community harms arising from EGMs and makes it easy for anyone with gambling addiction to lose substantial amounts of money. Some clubs are financially reliant on EGM losses to support themselves, and are therefore unwilling to reduce their gambling income without an alternative source of revenue.

- Implement a proactive strategy to help community clubs diversify their income and reduce their reliance on EGM revenue. To ensure policies reduce community harm from gambling, make government grants, subsidies, lease variation waivers or other rebates provided to clubs conditional on an overall reduction in the number of EGMs. The target should be a reduction of authorised EGMs to 2000 in the next term of government.

## **Improve transparency about the harms caused by individual gambling venues**

Harms caused by gambling venues are significant in the ACT and require appropriate public oversight. Currently, even basic information about gambling losses is not publicly available, preventing appropriate scrutiny. If gambling venues want the social license to operate, they need to be publicly accountable.

- Require annual public reporting of revenue by each gambling venue (total and per EGM), the number of people self-excluded by venue, and information about the implementation and results of compliance and red-flag audits of gambling venues.

## **Implement Australia's safest carded gaming system, ensuring gambling venues take responsibility for protecting vulnerable people**

Reducing community clubs' unhealthy reliance on EGMs is vital, but this needs to be supplemented by additional measures that reduce the harms experienced by those who gamble using EGMs. A registered cashless gaming card system with robust consumer protections would have a significant impact on preventing and reducing gambling harm in our communities. The only effective way to provide these benefits is with a central monitoring system, otherwise people can circumvent harm reduction measures by simply moving from one venue to the next.

- Commence a phased introduction of carded gaming for venues with EGMs, and which includes best-practice consumer protections. Facilitated by a central monitoring system, this should include daily and monthly betting caps; mandatory pre-commitment in all venues; mandated breaks after every hour of play; and a minimum spin rate of three seconds per game.

## **Mandate safer gambling venue hours**

There is evidence that the most harmful gambling occurs after midnight, yet many gambling venues remain open well past this time.

- Ban venues from operating EGMs between 1am and 10am each day.

## **Fund a gambling harm advocacy peak**

There is currently no organisation funded by ACT Government to advocate on behalf of individuals, families and organisations harmed by the gambling industry and to research and seek better outcomes for the Canberra community. The gambling industry has a seat at the table in policy development despite its conflict of interest, and can afford to lobby decision-makers heavily. Those on the side of harm reduction do not receive any funding for this work.

- Provide funding for a gambling harm reduction advocacy peak.

*Authorised by Dr Devin Bowles on behalf of the ACT Council of Social Service Inc (ACTCOSS)*

## End Notes

**ACTCOSS is a member of the [Canberra Gambling Reform Alliance \(CGRA\)](#). Our policy position on gambling draws on CGRA's policy platform.**

<sup>1</sup> Browne M, Delfabbro P, Thorne HB, Tulloch C, Rockloff MJ, Hing N, Dowling NA, Stevens M, Unambiguous evidence that over half of gambling problems in Australia are caused by electronic gambling machines: Results from a large-scale composite population study, *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 2023 Mar 30;12(1):182-93.

<sup>2</sup> ACT Gambling and Racing Commission, [Gaming machine revenue & tax information provided for financial year 2023–2024](#), ACT Government, 2024, accessed 10 September 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Suomi A, Kim J, Hahn M, Biddle, N, [Harm profiles associated with low-risk gambling: Longitudinal analysis of three datasets: final report](#). Centre for Gambling Research, Centre for Social Research and Methods, Australian National University, 2023, accessed 11 September 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Tulloch C, Hing N, Browne M, Russell AM, Rockloff M, Rawat V, Harm-to-self from gambling: A national study of Australian adults, *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 2024 May 14; 13(2): 635-649.

<sup>5</sup> ACT Gambling and Racing Commission, [Trading Scheme statistics](#), ACT Government, accessed 11 September 2024.