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**COMMENTARY**

# Betting shops in the public eye: A commentary

Peter Jones<sup>1</sup> | Daphne Comfort<sup>1</sup> | Tim Hall<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>School of Business, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK<sup>2</sup>Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Studies, University of Winchester, Winchester, UK**Correspondence**Peter Jones, School of Business, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK.  
Email: pjones@glos.ac.uk

Betting shops are a familiar feature in towns and cities throughout the UK. However, in recent years, increasing social and political concerns have been expressed about the presence of betting shops in high streets and about the role of betting shops in encouraging gambling. Such concerns include the concentration of betting shops in areas of social deprivation, the impact of such shops on the vitality of and viability of town centres, the perceived links between betting shops and both anti-social behaviour and criminal activity and the presence of Fixed Odds Betting Terminals in betting shops. This commentary paper outlines the origin and characteristics of betting shops, explores some of the recent concerns betting shops have attracted and offers some brief concluding reflections on the impact of policy responses to these concerns.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Newspaper article headlines such as “*Britain's betting out of control*” (The Guardian January 21, 2020) and “*We can't turn a blind eye to the gambling epidemic any longer*” (Sunday Mail February 2, 2020) suggest that gambling is very much in the public eye. Such media headlines certainly seem to reflect deeper social and political concerns, and betting shops, for many people the public face of gambling, have been under particular scrutiny. Gambling is probably as old as society but the first betting shops in the UK were opened in 1961 following the passage of the 1960 Betting and Gaming Act. This commentary paper outlines the origin and characteristics of betting shops, explores some of the recent concerns betting shops have attracted and offers some brief concluding reflections on the impact of policy responses to these concerns.

## 2 | ORIGINS AND CHANGING CHARACTERISTICS OF BETTING SHOPS

Within the UK, formal betting at sporting events, principally on horse racing and boxing, was increasingly common from the seventeenth century (by the 1840s). Huggins (2000) suggested “*there was already a clear culture of urban betting*” and argued that “*betting had already moved from a pre-industrial informal sporting model to an urban*

*industrialized, commercialized mass-market model.*” Increases in the speed of newspaper circulation and the development of the telegraph system in the 1890s, which made horse racing results more widely and immediately available, and improved economic conditions, which increased the general population's spending power, all served to stimulate the popularity of off-course betting.

Despite its growing popularity, such betting was illegal following the introduction of a series of legislative measures from the 1850s, which sought to curtail and control gambling because of the paternalistic view that gambling encouraged absence from work, an anti-work ethic and criminal activity fuelled by gambling losses. However, by the start of the twentieth century, sporting betting was an integral part of working-class culture and it was highly organised. Up to the early 1960s, illegal sporting betting flourished via “street bookies” and “bookies runners” who accepted bets, supposedly secretly, in back streets, on street corners and in houses, pubs and factories.

All was to change with the passage of the 1960 Betting and Gaming Act, which formally, if begrudgingly, recognised the existence of this extensive gambling market and sanctioned the opening of betting shops. The first betting shops were opened in 1961 and by the end of the decade, bookmakers were trading from almost 16,000 outlets. Initially, existing local bookmakers, who took the opportunity presented by the 1960 legislation to ply their trade legally, ran the vast majority of these betting shops. At this time, both the location and the service environment offered to customers was strongly influenced by the

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enabling legislation, which sought to affirm that betting should not be an enjoyable activity and that there should be no stimulation to encourage people to gamble. Betting shops were not to be situated on high streets with side streets considered a more appropriate location and they offered spartan and austere environments, limited information on horse and greyhound racing, and basic betting facilities, which did not encourage customers to linger. At the same time, many of the independent bookmakers who traded from the early shops lacked the financial resources to acquire costly premises in prime retail locations.

During the 1970s and 1980s, concentration continued apace as a small number of betting shop companies, principally William Hill, Ladbrokes and Corals, became the dominant players in the market, and the total number of shops declined to some 10,000 by 1990. By 2019, betting shop provision was highly concentrated, with the market dominated by William Hill, Ladbrokes/Corals (the two previously separate companies merged in 2016 but continued to trade under their original names), Betfred and Paddy Power. At that time, William Hill had 2,264 shops and the corresponding figures for Ladbrokes, Corals, Betfred and Paddy Power were 1,828, 1,529, 1,620 and 350, respectively, and the four companies accounted for almost 90% of all betting shops (Gambling Commission, 2019). There were over 700 independents, including Jennings Bet, which had some 100 shops principally in the South East of England, Corbett Bookmakers, which had 55 shops largely in the North West of England and North Wales, Megabet, which had 92 shops across the UK, and Mark Jarvis, which had 47 shops across the Midlands and South Yorkshire.

In growing their market share and moving into well-appointed premises on the high street, the leading betting shop companies had effectively looked to shake off the old-fashioned image of betting, to modernise the industry and to emphasise the social acceptability of gambling. Over time, the introduction of more liberal government legislation saw improvements in the quality of the service environment and the facilities for customers within betting shops. During the 1980s and 1990s, for example, live television coverage of sporting events, comfortable seating facilities, air conditioning, tea, coffee and soft drinks, and toilets were all introduced into betting shops. Additionally, betting shops were able to open in the evenings and on Sundays and to advertise betting prices on sporting events from their windows. During this period, the locational pattern of betting shops also began to change from “back street, to side street to high street” (Jones, Hillier, & Turner, 1994) as the leading betting shop companies opened many larger new shops in more prominent retail locations.

From 2001, the introduction of legislation which permitted up to four Fixed Odds Betting Terminals (FOBTs) in betting shops, effectively revolutionised the offer available to customers. These machines included a variety of games, including roulette, accepted bets up to a maximum stake of £100 on a single bet, which could be placed every 20 s, and paid out according to fixed odds on the simulated outcomes of games. At the same time, the increasingly widespread availability and adoption of personal mobile communication technologies also brought challenges for betting shops. Here betting shops face difficulties in both retaining and attracting customers due to the availability

of mobile apps that can be used anywhere. Deloitte (2014), for example, argued that mobile communications “not only provide a new opportunity to engage with existing players but also to reach new customers” and that “existing players have embraced opportunities for more spontaneous gambling, especially in the evenings” and “particularly for in-play betting.”

In looking to rise to these challenges, all the leading betting shop companies are also continuing to develop as multichannel retailers. Playtech (2020), an international software designer and developer, for example, are behind a “multi-channel solution,” which it claimed “is leading a revolution in the betting shop arena.” This multi-channel system operates across the whole of Coral's betting shop estate under the banner “Connect,” and unifies the company's traditional retail and online offer and which enables customers to use a single personal account across all platforms. Thus, customers can open a multi-channel account in a betting shop and use that account to place their bets online or on a mobile phone and in a betting shop. Customers can use Connect to place bets over the counter, play on the (FOBTs) and deposit or withdraw funds.

At the same time, such developments offer betting shop companies the chance to promote other betting opportunities and to increase gameplay and strengthen brand loyalty. Deloitte (2014), for example, argued that betting shops will continue to be important in that “they increase brand awareness and play a key role in the development of the multichannel model.” However, if customers increasingly look to online, and particularly to mobile betting opportunities, this will do little to consolidate the role of betting shops in the gambling mix. As such, the promotion of new digital experiences and services in betting shops may, ironically, be contributing to their own decline. That said, ImageHOLDERS (2020) claimed that there is “the social aspect to betting,” and that “from the bookies to customers, the community feeling of the bookmakers creates an atmosphere that cannot be experienced through a mobile phone screen or at home.”

### 3 | CONCERNS AND CRITICISMS

Gambling in betting shops has attracted increasing social and political concerns and criticisms and a number of issues can be identified, though many of them are contested. Firstly, there have been concerns about the proliferation of betting shops in high street locations. Philips (2018), for example, suggested that with the proliferation of betting shops onto high Streets and neighbourhood retail developments “they became a marker for social decline of an area, with the perception that they swooped in after other more respectable retailers had moved out or gone out of business.” More pejoratively, in exploring the notion of “betting shops as a noxious business,” Hubbard (2017) detailed the scale of community, business and local political opposition to a betting shop application in the London Borough of Croydon, before dismissing the notion “as class-based prejudice against what is ultimately an affordable and popular form of sociality and leisure.”

The impact of betting shops on the vitality and viability of town centres has certainly been a cause for concern. The London Borough

of Tower Hamlets Local Plan (2018), for example, suggested that “the proliferation of betting shops” can harm “the attractiveness, vitality and character of town centres.” A “Citizens Panel Survey” conducted by West Dunbartonshire Council (2016) as part of its “Town Centre Planning Pilots Programme,” reported a Clydebank respondent’s view that “the real problem is the proximity of bookies in one place” and that “having them concentrated near each other, and near pawn shops or payday lenders, is going to create an environment that is very off-putting for most people coming into the centre.” More generally West Dunbartonshire Council (2016) reported that “82% of survey respondents agreed that more payday lenders and betting offices would be detrimental to the town centre’s vitality and vibrancy.”

Secondly, concerns have been expressed about the clustering of betting shops in districts of towns and cities that exhibit deprivation. Almost a decade ago, Harriet Harman (2011), then Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, claimed that “high streets in low-income areas across the UK are blighted by the prevalence of bookmakers” and “betting shops are appearing not only in well-off areas but in those with high levels of poverty and unemployment.” Indeed, Harman (2011) argued that the continuing opening of betting shops in such areas is “pushing many families further into poverty and creating a dangerous synergy between welfare dependence and gambling that threatens the fabric of our communities.” In a similar vein, Meera (2012), writing for the London Journalist, claimed that “the proliferation of betting shops on the North End Road (in Fulham) clearly shows the predatory nature of betting shops profiting on the back of a vulnerable community.”

There have also been persistent suggestions that increases in anti-social behaviour and crime have been associated with the proliferation of betting shops. Martin (2019), for example, reported that “councillors and a community organisation have said the number of betting shops in Normanton (an inner city suburb of Derby) is contributing to poverty and anti-social behaviour.” Newham Council (2016), claimed that “the dramatic increase in the number of betting outlets correlates to increasingly high rates of crime and anti-social behaviour.” However, Newham Council (2016) also reported “areas of Newham with a high concentration of betting shops, persistently remain within areas with the highest levels of crime in the borough” and this seems to indicate an ecological, rather than a causal, correlation.

The Gambling Commission (undated) reported on “money laundering in betting shops,” where FOBTs receipts had been used to verify the legitimacy of cash in a drug-dealing case in West Yorkshire and on a case where thousands of pounds from cash in a transit robbery at a retail park in Merseyside “had been laundered through Greater Manchester betting shops following the robbery.” In reporting on the banning of five people from betting shops in Birmingham city centre, the Gambling Commission (2017) drew attention to its work with the local council, the police and bookmakers, “designed to tackle localised anti-social and criminal behaviour in and around betting shops” as well as to “suspected drug dealing and anti-social behaviour linked to one bookmaker.” More generally, Griffiths (2011), who has worked as a consultant for a number of leading UK bookmakers, argued that “in order to be a cause of crime, betting shops must be both a necessary and

sufficient condition for the crimes in question to occur” and his work “found evidence of neither.”

Thirdly, there have been concerns about the inability of local planning authorities to control the number of betting shops on the high street, but, in truth, opportunities for local authorities to exercise such powers have been extremely limited. Prior to 2015, premises with a range of uses, including restaurants, cafes, public houses and hot food takeaways, could be converted to betting shops, without the need to apply for planning permission, under permitted development rights, and thus local planning authorities did not have a statutory role in approving, or not approving, a change of use. That said, the “Town Centres Supplementary Planning Guidance for the ‘London Plan 2011” (Mayor of London, 2014) suggested that “across London, there is an urgent need to enable local planning authorities to control the proliferation of betting shops” and that “there are genuine planning issues affecting amenity, community safety and the continued success of town centres which justify allowing planning authorities to consider the merits of proposals for betting shops.”

Finally, and by and away most significantly, FOBTs has been the source of widespread and deep-seated concern. Here, critics argued that the £100 stake per play meant that it was possible for customers to lose large amounts of money very quickly and that the FOBTs were addictive and played a causal role in problem gambling. Woodhouse (2019) has traced the origins of these concerns back to evidence presented to the Joint Committee examining the Draft Gambling Bill 2003–2004. More specifically, and more evocatively, to a statement by a member of Gordon House, now the Gordon Moody Association, a charity which supports problem gamblers, that “FOBTs are the crack cocaine of gambling” (House of Lords/House of Commons, Joint Committee on the Draft Gambling Bill, 2004).

Douglas, Noyes, and Blond (2017), writing under the banner of ResPublica, an independent, non-partisan think tank, claimed that for the circa 1.5 million players “the liberalisation of high stakes FOBTs has increased their exposure to a highly addictive and compulsive form of gambling” and that “this has had a harmful impact on the lives of thousands of people, their relationships and their children.” Douglas et al., (2017) also claimed that “for FOBT users, problem gambling is particularly acute – 43% of those using these machines are either problem or ‘at risk’ gamblers.” Further Douglas, Noyes and Blond suggested that the corrosive effect of problem gambling has been concentrated in many of Britain’s working class and ethnic communities and argued that “the clustering of gambling machines in these communities has damaged the health, well-being and prosperity of some of Britain’s most vulnerable people and their families.”

The Association of British Bookmakers (2013), suggested that the strict regulation of FOBTs could put “90% of betting shops and 4,000 jobs at risk,” “create more empty premises on the high street” and “lead to an increase of activity on the illegal gambling markets.” The major betting shop companies disputed the causal links between FOBTs and problem gambling and consistently opposed regulatory controls, claiming that they would lead to large numbers of shop closures and significant job losses. More specifically, the Bookmakers Review (2019), claimed that some 2,100 betting shops could close

within the UK, causing the loss of up to 12,000 jobs, though some commentators suggested that such estimates of the numbers of betting shop closures and job losses were exaggerated. More generally, Woodhouse (2019) reported that “robust evidence” about the relationship between FOBTs and “gambling-related harm” in the British context “was scarce.”

## 4 | CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The nature and impact of the public policy responses to the concerns about betting shops have varied considerably. Firstly, despite increasingly strident calls for stricter controls on FOBTs in betting shops, successive governments initially just kept their regulation and the wider issue of gambling and social responsibility, under review. However, in May 2018 the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced that the maximum stake for FOBTs was to be lowered from £100 to £2 on a single bet, though the maximum prize remained at £500. The necessary legislation was passed in December 2018 and came into force in April 2019. In the wake of the 2018 legislation on FOBTs, the majority of the leading betting shop companies announced and embarked on closure programmes. William Hill, for example, closed some 700 of its shops; by late 2019, Ladbrokes/Corals had closed 200 shops (with a further 700 shops scheduled for closure up to 2021) and the corresponding figures for Betfred, Megabet, Jennings and Scotbet, were 70, 45, 13 and 10, respectively. Of the leading betting shop companies, only Paddy Power, which claimed to have concentrated more on developing its sports betting offers rather than promoting FOBTs, did not report any closure plans.

Secondly, and in response to concerns that local planning authorities lacked the powers to control the number of betting shops in high streets, the rules on permitted development, as they related to betting shops, were revised in April 2015. The Explanatory Memorandum (legislation.gov.uk, 2015) accompanying the new permitted development order, reported “there was overwhelming support for the proposal to always require a planning application for change of use to a betting office.” However, in a business environment where even before the 2018 FOBT legislation came into force, the number of betting shops declined from 9,111 to 8,320 between 2014–2018 (Gambling Commission, 2019), the development pressure for new betting shops has been very limited. In truth, local planning authorities have rarely been able to exercise their new powers to control the concentration of betting shops in high street locations. That said, Woodhouse and Grimwood (2018) claimed that “concerns remain that clusters of betting shops, particularly in deprived areas, affect high street vitality.”

In summary, during the past decade, betting shops have been in the public eye as they have attracted wide-ranging concern and criticism. The impact of public policy measures designed to address these concerns has varied. On the one hand, the change to planning legislation seemingly designed to control the concentration and proliferation of betting shops on high streets, has, to date, been largely ineffective

and seems unlikely to assuage a number of critics' concerns about social deprivation, anti-social behaviour and the viability and vitality of high streets. On the other hand, the Government legislation designed to limit the scale of gambling on FOBTs within betting shops has seen the closure of many of these shops. However, given the range of online gambling opportunities, it remains to be seen whether this legislation will reduce the scale of what is perceived to be compulsive and problem gambling. At the time of writing, all betting shops in the UK are all closed because of the Corona Virus crisis. The betting shop companies and their customers may be hoping that normal service will be resumed when the lockdown on trading and the movement of people is lifted. However, the blanket closure of all betting shops may mean that the eventual reopening of many of these shops may be short lived, in that customers who switched to online gambling during the crisis, may be reluctant to return to their former gambling behaviour patterns.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Peter Jones** is Emeritus Professor of Management in the School of Business at The University of Gloucestershire. His research interests are in sustainability and retail change.

**Daphne Comfort** is a Research Associate in the School of business at the University of Gloucestershire and her research interests are in sustainability and woodland management.

**Tim Hall** is Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Winchester and his research interests revolve around urban crime and the presentation of place.

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