



“It’s [gambling] obviously not regulated that well”: insights into Aboriginal peoples’ views on gambling regulation in the Northern Territory of Australia

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Abstract

Aim This study is the first in-depth qualitative study that has provided insights into Aboriginal (All participants in this study identified as Aboriginal and thus we have not included any reference to the Torres Strait Islander peoples in this paper.) people’s views on current gambling policy and legislation in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia.

Subject and methods In-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a targeted selection of participants. The sample comprised 29 participants, aged 18+ years, weekly and nonregular gamblers, and those negatively affected by others’ gambling. An open coding technique (a combination of inductive and deductive analyses) was used for data analysis. Appropriate ethics approval was also obtained.

Results Participants described gambling as a revenue-generating product for the government and the gambling industry. Hence, their role in influencing the regulation of gambling for public benefit was debated. Participants provided practical suggestions that the government and the gambling industry could adopt to inform gambling regulation to minimise harm from gambling among Aboriginal people and the wider community in the NT. The suggestions included establishing stricter regulations relating to the licensing and opening hours of venues, limiting bet size and restricting the availability of gambling machines at venues. Participants also encouraged the reinstatement of mandatory formal dress codes at venues and the creation of health promotion resources such as advertisements and awareness campaigns tailored to the needs of the local Aboriginal people.

Conclusion Both community-wide and targeted approaches are required to regulate and reduce gambling harm among Aboriginal people in the NT. Although both are important, having more explicit preventive approaches in place may eliminate the need for downstream interventions and strategies.

Keywords Gambling · Northern Territory · Legislation · Regulation · Aboriginal peoples

Abbreviations

EGM Electronic Gambling Machine
NT Northern Territory
PGSI Problem Gambling Severity Index

Background

Gambling in the Northern Territory

The annual gambling participation rate in the Northern Territory (NT) for most forms of gambling significantly declined from 2015 to 2018 (Stevens et al. 2020). Despite the overall decline in participation, electronic gambling machines (EGMs), commonly known as pokies, remained a significant concern in the NT. The prevalence of problem

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gambling risk increased from 2015 to 2018 in the NT, with a notable rise in the number of people classified as moderate risk or problem gamblers. Problem gambling increased from 1200 to 2500 people, with 3.55% (6400 people) of NT adults classified as moderate risk or problem gamblers between 2015 and 2018. Further, approximately 8% (14,500 people) of adults in the NT indicated that they had experienced at least one negative consequence from someone else's gambling in the same period (Stevens et al. 2020).

The above pattern shows that while the gambling harms have decreased overall, they have increased for those at most risk (problem gamblers). The 2018 NT Gambling Prevalence and Wellbeing Survey also found that compared to the non-Indigenous population, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations experienced a greater burden of harm from gambling (Stevens et al. 2020).

Gambling among Aboriginal peoples in the NT

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people represent 3.3% of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Cultural diversity and differences are important to acknowledge and understand, to effectively address social issues such as problem gambling and gambling-related harm. However, there is limited knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander gambling, especially in the context of the NT (Stevens and Young 2009; Fogarty et al. 2018).

Akin to the wider Australian population, gambling is a common activity in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (respectfully Aboriginal hereon) communities; however, the reasons that Aboriginal people gamble can differ from those for non-Aboriginal people. Factors that contribute to such differences include a history of gambling, higher unemployment resulting in less disposable income and more leisure time, and a desire to minimise challenging socio-political contexts and escape poverty (Acil Allen Consulting, Deakin University et al. 2017; Davidson et al. 2018).

Alike non-Aboriginal Australians, evidence suggests that Aboriginal people gamble on casino games, card games, horse races and sports. However, there is a significant variation in gambling activities among Aboriginal people across the NT. While card games are more popular in remote NT Aboriginal communities, EGMs are more popular in urban and regional towns (Stevens et al. 2020).

Card games have been popular among urban Aboriginal populations but have changed with increasing accessibility to more contemporary forms of gambling in these areas (such as EGMs). Aboriginal people from remote communities may change their gambling behaviours when they travel to urban regions and increase their accessibility to

other forms of gambling not available in remote regions such as the casinos that are based in Alice Springs and Darwin (Stevens and Bailie 2012; Fogarty et al. 2018; Gupta and Stevens 2021).

An estimated 64% of Australian adults take part in some form of gambling annually with the Aboriginal population of the NT having one of the highest reported levels of gambling in Australia (Stevens and Young 2009; Hing et al. 2014; Stevens et al. 2020). Aboriginal respondents in both urban and regional settings experienced significantly higher rates of problem gambling and harm from their own or someone else's gambling, compared with their non-Aboriginal counterparts, as reported in two recent population surveys conducted in the NT (Stevens et al. 2017a, b, 2020).

Approximately 4% of Aboriginal respondents were identified as experiencing either problem or moderate risk gambling as screened using the Problem Gambling Severity Index in the 2015 NT Gambling Prevalence and Wellbeing Survey. There were significant variations in problem gambling prevalence and harm from gambling across different regions of the NT. The numbers varied from 6 and 7% in Darwin/Palmerston and Alice Springs, respectively, to between 1 and 10% in Katherine, Tennant Creek/Nhulunbuy and the rest of NT. This is compared with the prevalence between 1 and 3% for the same regions for the non-Aboriginal population Stevens et al. 2017a, b.

In comparison, the problem/moderate risk gambling prevalence increased for Aboriginal respondents as reported in the 2018 NT Gambling Prevalence and Wellbeing Survey. The numbers ranged from 6–13% across regions, compared with 3–4% across regions for the non-Aboriginal population. These variations were related to a combination of access to different types of gambling products and the different social contexts in which Aboriginal people gamble (e.g. card games to pokies) (Young et al. 2008; Young et al. 2011; Stevens et al. 2020).

Further, a significant variation was also identified across regions for Aboriginal respondents in terms of whether they experienced harm from someone else's gambling (11–78% in 2015 vs. 5–26% in 2018). In comparison, the rates of harm from someone else's gambling among non-Aboriginal respondents were much less (6–12% in 2015 vs. 5–6% in 2018) (Stevens et al. 2017a, b, 2020).

The above statistics show that Aboriginal Territorians experience significantly higher rates of problem gambling risk and harm from someone else's gambling. These numbers also show that problem gambling risk and gambling-related harm vary significantly across regions in the NT. Given this variability, it is necessary to better understand the differences between gambling and related harm among Aboriginal people living in different regions across the NT.

Gambling regulation

Governments are responsible for regulating gambling which includes casinos, poker machines, sports and race betting, and lotteries. However, since the expansion of pokies across pubs and clubs in the NT in the mid-1990s, there has been little published research on regulated gambling among Aboriginal populations (Stevens and Young 2009).

The NT Government gambling policy targets gambling as a discrete harmful activity by providing education and counselling for people with gambling problems and those impacted by someone else's gambling, in an attempt to address the negative impacts of gambling (Stevens and Young 2009). The NT gambling policy was released in 2008. However, there has been significant continued growth of the gambling industry in the NT (particularly online sports and racetrack betting). Subsequently, the NT government's position as a regulator has also become challenging, with targeted approaches to gambling regulation now the *modus operandi* to minimise gambling-related harm (Stevens et al. 2020).

The findings from a previous qualitative study conducted in the NT provided insights into the potential for targeted policy and program interventions to minimise harm from gambling (Gupta and Stevens 2021). A qualitative study conducted with Tasmanians affected by someone else's gambling (affected others) also suggested that prevention and treatment interventions tailored to address the causes and impacts of harms experienced by affected others are helpful in addressing these harms (Acil Allen Consulting, Deakin University et al. 2017).

Overall, studies suggest that effective interventions should be tailored to the experiences and understandings of those at risk of gambling harm or experiencing it. Targeted policy and program interventions are crucial for minimising harm from gambling, especially in Aboriginal communities where the impact is more pronounced (Gainsbury et al. 2014; Lubman et al. 2015; Thorne et al. 2016; Davidson et al. 2018; Stevens et al. 2020; Gupta and Stevens 2021).

Current study

This article is based on a broader study (Gupta et al. 2021). However, in this article we present findings related to Aboriginal peoples' views on (1) strategies and interventions that government and other agencies could use to minimise harm from gambling in the NT and (2) the current gambling regulatory environment in the NT.

The focus of our study was on Aboriginal people living in the urban and regional NT (i.e. Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy). However, we expect that the findings would have implications for people from diverse Aboriginal backgrounds across the NT (Gupta et al. 2021).

Method

Sample selection

We used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants. Participants were selected from the 2015 and 2018 NT Gambling Prevalence and Wellbeing Surveys. These surveys contained a question asking respondents if they would be interested in participating in future gambling research and agree to be recontacted. Approximately 85% of respondents responded affirmatively. Further recruitment was carried out using a word-of-mouth snowball sampling strategy.

We contracted a market research company to recruit participants for our 2015 and 2018 NT Gambling Prevalence and Wellbeing Surveys. We wanted to recruit regular (weekly) and nonregular (monthly) pokies, sports and racetrack gamblers, and people negatively affected by someone else's gambling in our current study. The company held the contact details of the respondents and made initial contact with eligible people ($n=57$) and shared those details with the research team. The lead researcher (HG) contacted (via text messages/phone calls as appropriate) all 57 people to organise the interviews. Further contacts ($n=10$) were made using the word-of-mouth strategy. We also considered age, sex, Aboriginal status and region where participants had lived at the time of recruitment.

Twenty-nine ($n=29$) people agreed to participate in the study. The sample consisted of 15 EGM gamblers, four sports and racetrack bettors, and nine who had experienced harm from others' gambling. Of these 29 participants, 10 were male, 27 belonged to 35+ age group and 17 lived in the Darwin/Palmerston region (Table 1).

Data collection

We were aware that the NT Aboriginal population was unique and thus considered demographic, cultural and social factors in the study design. Hence, we used a strength-based approach in our study. To ensure that the research methods were respectful and to acknowledge the cultural distinctiveness of Aboriginal peoples, we adapted the study design and interview schedules to the NT context in consultation with local Aboriginal stakeholders, based on a similar study conducted in another Australian jurisdiction (Breen et al. 2010).

The local Aboriginal stakeholders included gamblers, people who were affected by others' gambling (both randomly selected from participants who participated in our previous gambling study), one Aboriginal member of the research team and two members of an Institutional Social and Emotional Wellbeing Aboriginal Advisory Committee. All stakeholders deemed the study design and the content and language of the guide appropriate for use with local

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of the final sample

Group	Age		Sex		Region			Total
	<35	35+	Male	Female	Darwin/ Palmerston	Alice Springs	Other	
Affected others	1	8	1	8	7	2	-	9
EGM (Pokies) players	1	15	8	8	7	2	5	16
Other bettors (sports and racetrack)	-	4	1	3	3	3	-	4
Total	2	27	10	19	17	7	5	29

Other = Katherine, Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy

Aboriginal people. We developed interview guides for each of the three categories of participants. There was a set of questions common across the guides and a further set of questions that was specific to the individual guide.

All interviews were conducted by an Aboriginal project team member (DA) who was trained in conducting qualitative research interviews. As the interviewer was based in Darwin, participants who were based in Darwin/Palmerston were offered a choice of face-to-face or telephone interviews. Most participants, however, preferred phone interviews because they wanted to remain anonymous and thus were more relaxed on the telephone and expressed their voices freely. This approach increased their comfort in disclosing intimate and sensitive information.

The above approach also allowed the research team to cover a wider geographic area and enabled access to geographically dispersed participants. Therefore, most of the interviews were conducted via telephone ($n=24$) and the rest were conducted face-to-face ($n=5$; all conducted at a university office). Nonetheless, qualitative data gathered via telephone are considered equally robust and valid as face-to-face interviews (Sweet 2002; Sturges and Hanrahan 2004), especially when the interview topic is sensitive (e.g. gambling) (McCoyd and Kerson 2006; Novick 2008).

At the beginning of each telephone interview, the participant information sheet (PIS) was read to the participants and verbal consent was obtained. For face-to-face interviews, a hard copy of the PIS was given to participants and written consent was obtained. Each interview lasted for an average of 30 min. All participants agreed for the interviews to be audio-recorded. The interviewer also made notes during the interviews. A professional transcription service transcribed all the interview recordings.

We provided all participants with a \$50 grocery voucher for their time and contribution to the study. The vouchers could not be used to purchase alcohol, tobacco or gambling products. The interviews included both semi-structured and structured questions. The semi-structured questions explored participants' views about:

- current regulatory environment on gambling in the NT; and
- strategies and interventions the government and other agencies could use to minimise harm from gambling in the NT.

At the end of the interviews, the gamblers were asked structured questions on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) to assess their problem gambling risk. It is a standardised nine-item scale for measuring the severity of gambling problems in the general population (Ferris and Wynne 2001; Currie et al. 2013). Participants had the opportunity to discuss anything related to the study that was not covered during the interviews.

Data analysis

We used an open coding technique to analyse the interview data (Ritchie and Lewis 2003; Gale et al. 2013; Parkinson et al. 2016). We considered this approach appropriate because it allowed us the inclusion of both pre-existing theoretical constructs (a deductive approach) and emergent data-driven themes (an inductive approach) to inform the development of the coding framework. This approach also suited the objectives of our study, in that we had identified areas from the literature we wished to explore (Hing et al. 2010, Gupta and Stevens 2021) but also wanted to discover the unexpected and identify themes in the data.

The interview data were coded by two researchers (NTK and DA), one of which was Aboriginal (DA). The initial coding framework was also discussed with two local Aboriginal stakeholders who provided input to refine the study design and the interview schedules. This was done to ensure that the reflections on the interview data captured the voices of the participants correctly and in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner. Both researchers resolved any differences that emerged during the coding process via discussions and worked collaboratively to develop the final coding framework.

We used QSR NVivo 12 software to organise and manage the interview data. We included participants' quotes verbatim throughout the results sections of this article. We also noted participants' sex (male and female), age group (18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64 and 65+ years), and region (Darwin/Palmerston (D/P), Alice Springs (AS) and others (Katherine, Tennant Creek, Nhulunbuy)), for each quote. Further, we made references to the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) scores for each quote for gamblers.

Ethics

We obtained ethics approval to conduct this study from the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee (CA-20–3747) and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research (2020–3728).

Results

Participants were asked about the changes made to the NT gambling legislation, and the potential intervention strategies that the Northern Territory Government (NTG) and other relevant agencies could develop and implement to minimise gambling harm among Aboriginal people.

Interestingly, the discussions primarily focused on preventive measures rather than post-harm interventions. While some participants described clear ideas aligned with each stakeholder group, some found it challenging to differentiate between the responsibilities of these stakeholder groups in relation to harm minimisation approaches and opted to share their thoughts in a more general way. Thus, we presented all ideas emerging from the interviews relating to harm minimisation without making assumptions about where implementation responsibility lies.

• Perspectives on recent changes in gambling legislation in the NT

We asked participants to express their views on the changes to the NT gambling legislation made in 2018 when online wagering providers were prohibited from offering any credit, voucher, reward or benefit as an incentive to open an account. The majority of participants were unaware of those changes. However, they described that such changes were required and could reduce gambling harm among Aboriginal people.

I didn't know about that... [changes to the legislation] but otherwise [unregulated gambling] that will just put people more and more into trouble.... (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 3, D/P, other bettor)

I wasn't aware that back in 2018 that the government changed the rules...I mean that's just a con-job that – that's playing on people's weaknesses. Well, this way [new regulations] they're not going to get themselves indebted, are they. That's basically it. They're not going to be imposed to go the damn sites. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other bettor)

We further asked participants about their opinions on the changes made to the NTG gambling legislation in 2013, where the note acceptors were installed into EGMs in clubs and pubs, allowing gamblers to load up to \$1000 in any denomination of the note. Most participants agreed that coin-only machines (the older system) would cause less harm to gamblers, as reflected in the quote below.

... I'd say the old dollar coins is what they should stick to, because they've got not only notes now, but when you go to take out your money now, you don't actually get the money. You get a piece of paper with a barcode with the stated amount leftover. So, it's very dangerous when you don't actually have money you're holding in your hand because, again, you're not conscious of that, from your wallet to your hand to the machine, right? At least if you've got coins, yeah, I've got \$10 coins, yeah, and you put it in. But when it's notes, it's that freely passed through, it's those little steps that either will make you conscious or disconnected from the actual thing that's happening. So, if you've got coins, you're actually hearing it and feeling the money, which makes it a bit more in the moment, but when you have notes, you're just slipping through like crazy. Yeah. I reckon coins definitely would be a way better option, if they want to keep gambling machines around. (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 11, AS, EGM player)

• Suggestions for reducing gambling harm

- Gambling policy- and regulation-related suggestions
 - Regulations around gambling conditions at venues

Participants offered suggestions on how the NTG and gambling industry (venues, betting companies, etc.) could help reduce gambling harm among Aboriginal people in the NT, more purposefully. The introduction of regulations around gambling conditions such as setting up limits on spending in one go or across a day was suggested by some participants.

I think that there should be limits set, but I also think that the limits set should be – there should be a difference between gambling that's actually financed and gambling that is funded so people can actually

go along and play a game without actually losing money...there should be a limit on how much they spend that way. (F, 45–54 years, AS, affected others)

Other suggestions included regulating the trading hours of gambling venues (venues), the number of venues and the number of pokie machines at venues.

Make places have less pokies, so there's not as much opportunity to play. Some of these clubs have got so many machines. Make clubs close earlier. (F, 45–54 years, D/P, affected others)

...regulating the venue, a bit more...make it harder for establishments to have pokie machines. I reckon definitely reducing hours, because it's ridiculous. These things are open until 4 in the morning. I think maybe if you've got your little nightclub and casino, obviously do that within the club hours, but things like pubs and that definitely should, because it's destroying families. (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 11, AS, EGM player)

If they [the government] could find other ways to get revenue, apart from that, maybe that would help but, my goodness, it's not an easy task... I don't know how you're going to do it, but I think they really should look at limiting poker machines; that's a huge impost. (F, 55–64 years, PGSI 3, D/P, EGM player)

Participants also expressed that gambling venues may independently play a part in regulating gambling, for example, by developing ways to monitor patrons' gambling activities.

Don't make it as easy to play. Maybe you have to register or something. Or you've got to be a member. And then maybe you can only go there for a certain – like the Banned Drinkers Register, where you can make people say, "You've been here for 10 hours, you can't come for another day"... Maybe make some rules to control how much time people spend, but that's only in the clubs. You go to one place, and then they say, "No, you can't come in", you go to another place. (F, 45–54 years, D/P, affected others)

I would like to see government legislate to have some cutoff points with the actual Pokies machines. With my son's PlayStation, it's programmed to turn off after an hour. I think if there was some way if they could tell if the same person has been sitting at the machine for a long period of time, then reset and don't let that person sit there for too long. Or if someone gets up to a couple of hundred dollars has gone through, there should be a message on the screen that says, 'have a spell. Sit this one out for half an hour' or something. Give people time to get out of the loop because I think it's quite hypnotising. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

Drawing on the circular associations between alcohol consumption, smoking and gambling, one participant expressed that establishing regulatory policies around having dedicated separate spaces for drinking, gambling and smoking at venues may help in regulating gambling to some extent.

I don't have the statistics, but I'm assuming there was a big impact when smoking was not allowed in Pokies areas. I think that's probably been helpful, and I wonder if disallowing drinking in that area might work as well. So, you've got to pick: you're either smoking or drinking or gambling; you can't be doing all of them at once. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

The suggestions also included providing other entertainment options within the venues and creating venue family-friendly spaces.

Get them [gambling activities] the fuck out of social environments...when it comes an RSL and then investing a crapload of money into the pokies right next door – I think that there's a real issue with it. I don't mind the idea of a casino. I don't mind the idea of purposefully going to gamble. But when you start to bring it into people's day to day function space – it's like having pokies at a supermarket or something. That sort of stuff's insane. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

There's no real family friendly places to – you know what I mean? You can't go and have a meal and take the kids, and like it used to be. Everywhere you go, like you go to the football club, St Mary's, and all that, it's just bingo – that's where they have bingo. That's pokie machines, it's just like, "Seriously?" They're the ones that shit me the most. (F, 35–44 years, DP, affected others)

They [gambling venues] could offer some facilities away from the – I am just thinking about when I was at Casuarina Club the other week. That was good in the fact that there was another area, and everyone was welcome to go and sit there, even if they weren't having meals or weren't drinking a whole lot or weren't gambling anymore. There was still somewhere they were welcome to sit, so they didn't have to be sitting gambling the whole time to be enjoying the comfort of the venue. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

The Basics Card for regulating gambling

The Basics Card (the Card) was a government initiative established for reducing gambling with less cash available. This initiative; however, only prevented people from buying gambling products and services and had no regulatory restrictions that may prevent Aboriginal people from gambling at venues and online gambling using the Card.

One participant expressed that the government may implement ways to monitor spending on the Card. For instance, if someone is using the Card to spend on gambling, they would not receive further benefits on their Cards and thus it could force them to control their gambling.

I like the idea of the Basics Card, monitoring of their money if they're using welfare and perhaps using – if the children don't go to school, the parents don't get their money so just spending money in establishments like that, you're not going to get your money. (F, 45–54 years, PGSI 1, D/P, other bettor).

Conversations around the intersections between gambling and food security also emerged during the interviews. Some participants reported that alcohol, drugs, smoking and gambling may take priority over purchasing food in some Aboriginal communities. In some cases, this practice put pressure on the family budget and was a major concern for the families. Subsequently, some participants felt that having the Card to buy food would help people who would otherwise struggle.

I know a lot of people don't agree with it, but to a certain extent I do because it means that the vulnerable, like the children – because women are big gamblers too – at least they can get something to eat, and whatever, because sometimes they really do struggle because a lot of the money just goes straight to gambling. (M, 65+ years, PGSI 0, D/P, EGM player)

I think, I really do believe that everybody that's unemployed, if we're talking about the unemployed people – they should all get a Basics Card with a very small amount of cash. That way they can get their little bottle of beer or something, and maybe a packet of smokes or whatever, and then the rest of it'll go on food.... Like I said that Basics Card is a damn good idea. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other bettor)

As mentioned above, the Card could not be used to purchase gambling products. Hence, some participants felt that it was a good initiative to control gambling to some extent.

For Aboriginal people – well, where I live, they subsidise their money. They get half in cash and half in a – what do they call it? A green card [Basics Card], and you can only buy food and drinks and stuff with that. You can't buy alcohol or cigarettes or tobacco or anything like that with it. It's only for food. That's one way they could combat it [gambling harm]. (M, 35–44 years, PGSI 0, AS, EGM player)

Links between a lack of money management skills, gambling and access to education among Aboriginal people were also described by some participants. It was expressed that gambling often took precedence over sending children

to school, especially, in remote Aboriginal communities. Hence, some participants suggested that learning improved money management skills may improve socioeconomic outcomes among Aboriginal people:

But the trouble is though, there's a lot of money there... There's a lot of cash, especially in our region here – there's money, and a lot of Aboriginal people don't understand how to manage money... [money is] just a bit of paper, and then they'll say "oh the men from government – the men from government give me money"... So, it's people putting bad ideas in their heads to start with. And the money management skills – even the young ones, even the kids, mate they're not going to school. It's a sad state of affairs. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other bettor)

Regulate online gambling

One participant expressed concern about the messaging they had received from overseas betting companies offering them betting opportunities from the comfort of their homes and asked for a stricter regulation around it.

That's interesting because a lot of emails that they send out offers credit and it's usually overseas sites and all that stuff so it's obviously not regulated that well, I still see them pop up in my email, emails and text messages so I think I answered a couple of questions on some online things and then all of a sudden they're even messaging me so – yeah... I think they should make it stricter. (F, 45–54 years, PGSI 2, D/P, other bettor)

Another participant highlighted how online gambling could further complicate the existing problem and needed stricter regulation to minimise related harm.

But the online side of things, I don't know mate, I honestly – if anything becomes a real problem for a certain individual, maybe they could probably do something like have their phones, something on it so they couldn't access or something, on their phones. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other bettor)

Adapt and tailor other gambling regulation models to the NT gambling environment

Some participants referred to the Western Australian system of regulating pokies and how NTG could use this system as a model to adapt legislation and reduce gambling harm in the NT.

To me, it should be like WA [Western Australia]. I lived in WA where they didn't have pokie machines in pubs. They only have it in the casino.... To me, that was amazing. I thought, because of the impact that

pokies can have in general, it was really nice to see a state where it wasn't in every damn pub, they're just in the casinos. So, unless you went to Perth, a casino, you couldn't get on the pokies. (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 11, AS, EGM player)

I don't know if they do it up here but down in Perth the casino you can ask to be blacklisted. If you had a gambling problem. I don't know if they do it in venues up here or not. (M, 45–54 years, PGSI 4, AS, EGM player)

Well, over in WA, pokie machines are not allowed in any sporting clubs or any clubs. They're only in the casino and a registered gambling place. So, to me, the fact that here in the Territory, they can go down to the local tavern, and you've got the pokies there. You go into the sporting clubs; you've got the pokies there. I think if they minimised it so that it's not so freely available at every club and pub in Darwin or in the Territory, and only available at the casino like in other states. Other states have exactly that. (F, 65+ years, D/P, affected others)

Evidence-based practices and specialised gambling support services

The following participant expressed the need for the government and other agencies to use evidence-based practices to reduce gambling and related harm among Aboriginal people, and more broadly, in the general population, the NT.

I think that governments need to take heed from the evidence base that's occurring around the reasons and rationale behind some of these addiction practices. And gambling fits into that. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

The participants also emphasised the need for government investment in the evaluation of the available support programs and services. It would help in assessing their effectiveness and areas for improvement. This is especially important in the NT given the demographic diversity.

...they [government] need a huge injection of funds and resources to be able to cope with something of the magnitude of gambling.... As we know, some people succeed in these programs [support programs and services], other people do not. Something works for some people, and something doesn't work for someone else. So, it's a matter of having, I think, lots of different programs and lots of different resources and having lots of different opportunities for the people to be able to access consistently. If it takes ten times that they're accepted in, and ten times they end up walking out, but the 11th time might be the time that they actually succeed in getting away from that gambling lifestyle. So,

we've got to keep having a revolving door and having lots of reviews to see what is working for our clients in that community. Because lots of different communities are all very different as well. (F, 65+ years, D/P, affected others)

Some participants emphasised the unmet need for specialised gambling support services exclusively catering to Aboriginal people:

It's education and as I said, providing opportunities – there is nothing in the community, and I'm an educated Indigenous woman, and there are no programs that even I'm aware of where these clients can go to. Well, it's not promoted. It's not educated out into the community if there is.... So, whether there is programs, we need to know about it, and if there's no programs well, we need to create the programs. (F, 65+ years, D/P, affected others)

Like, there's specialist areas that have been set up to deal with alcohol and drug problems, but there is nothing set up for gambling, and gambling has been a massive, massive issue that affects the Indigenous community whether you are remote or whether you are an urban Indigenous. It affects you, your families around you. It's amazing that the government hasn't put money into providing programs and resources to be able to support and educate. Education is the key to everything and maybe to just get some education out into our Indigenous community. (F, 65+ years, D/P, affected others)

Complexities around establishing legislation for regulating gambling

In addition to offering suggestions, participants referred to the potential complexities involved in implementing the above-mentioned ideas because of the industries and government's interest in generating revenue from gambling.

I don't think they [government and industry] can really do anything to tell you the truth because it's their business, that's the whole point in gambling, to make money like in any business. I don't think there's much they could do, or I don't think there's much they want to do. They advertise and say – when you watch the footy and gamble on the footy and then at the end, they say, "Gamble responsibly". That's just a figure of speech now. They keep repeating that and they don't even know what it means. To me, it's a no-win situation. (F, 45–54 years, PGSI 1, D/P, other bettor)

But let's face it mate, the government itself loves this gambling thing – because all the money that goes out, comes back in again, at taverns. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other bettor)

- **Other suggestions**
- Re-introduce dress code at venues

Some participants recommended that venues re-introduce the earlier formal dress regulations. Subsequently, patrons spend money on clothing, and thus, less money may be available for gambling.

There's nothing, really apart from... [cutting] down the number of licences, make sure that there's stricter things in there and that the clubs I suppose, well if they think that just by putting stickers up and all that stuff and it's not 'till the patron actually goes to the club and complains that they say, "Well this is what you can do, this is the advice we can give you." So, they think they're doing the best they can anyway. (F, 45–54 years, PGSI 2, D/P, other bettor)

I'm looking at from the Alice Springs area, district – the dress regulation. They [venues] used to have a certain dress regulation. Nowadays, a lot of these venues, they don't care if someone comes in there with a pair of thongs on. That was something, if they enforced dress regulation, and I mean having that neat clothes, not dirty–filthy clothes, and have proper footwear and things like that. So that would slow up a lot of it. And basically, people will then have to spend some of their money on buying decent clothes, which is less money for gambling. That's one way around – like I said that's one thing. But the venues don't anymore, they don't care. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other bettor)

Develop effective responsible gambling messaging

Participants were asked about their thoughts on responsible gambling messaging. Many participants felt that people often would not take notice of such messaging. Thus, it was unlikely that such messaging would affect people's gambling and related harm.

A lot of them have that anti – not anti, it's not antigambling, it's just that gambling responsibly campaign, so they still have that campaign, but again it's just leaflets and an A5 piece of paper within the pokie room or Keno room. But I don't think anyone really takes much notice of them. Yeah, that's highlighting to people that are in there, but at the same time, it's not always in a registered outlet. (M, 25–34 years, D/P, affected other Oh, mate honestly, look people don't read that. Mate, if it's going to get in the road – it's just like an alcoholic, let's face it. They could have heaps of advertising and anything saying that you shouldn't drink too much, you shouldn't do this, and you shouldn't do that. Like you shouldn't smoke, and all this sort of

thing. If you're going to smoke, like me I smoke – I take no notice of these things written on the pack, and see these horrible-looking tobacco ads, you have someone's eyeball there and the rest of the skin looks all dead around it. But I take no notice of that. It's the same thing with gamblers mate.... You see they run these ads of the problems that come with gambling, and that sort of thing. That I suppose does help, a bit I suppose. (M, 55–64 yrs, PGSI not available, AS)

Some participants thought that such messaging may work better if created in local Aboriginal languages and not just in English, especially for remote communities.

The poster that – up in the – sorry – board or somewhere – glass door or window – that's a good sign to tell people not to gamble. Sometimes you can see it in the door in the toilet... they should have both Creole and English.... (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 10, D/P, EGM player)

I certainly appreciate the posters on the toilet doors and things like that because when people are having a quiet moment, they can take that in. A couple of factors around that is you're in the NT, you need to make sure the language around that is correct or is translated, particularly at the casino where people are coming in from communities and may not be able to read the messaging. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

Participants also felt that television advertisements might work better for Aboriginal people than for posters and flyers at venues and other places, especially for Aboriginal people who live in remote NT.

Sometimes, I think some forms of advertising [could help in minimising gambling harm], because sometimes – I saw that Congress– just up – when I was in Alice Springs. So, they had, "Always wash your hands", and then, the message was over and over on TV...Because they're the things that reach a lot of remote communities, is just, people are sitting around and – So I always thought, advertising. And I've even learned some things like that, a couple of things off the – yeah with the spacing alcohol and I learned that through an ad on TV and started practising it based off an ad on TV. (M, 45–54 years, PGSI 8, D/P, EGM player)

Oh, mate, you see they [gambling industry] run these ads of the problems that come with gambling, and that sort of thing. That I suppose does help, a bit I suppose, because the rest of the family are there watching as well, I suppose it makes the gambler – I imagine it would, would make them feel sort of embarrassed, and the rest of the family's watching

the same thing. So, I suppose that can be helpful. (M, 55–64 years, PGSI not available, AS, other better)

Participants also discussed thoughts about the content of the advertisements which may have had a greater impact on people's gambling.

I think advertisement like better advertisement of the effects of gambling and actually break it down.... Put the gambling ads back up and highlight like "hey, gambling affects family, gambling affects your relationships, it affects the children, it affects your financial stability". There's your car gone, there's the family gone... (M, 25–34 years, D/P, affected others)

Self-gambling responsibility

Some participants described that the responsibility for controlling one's own gambling lied with gamblers and their families and depended on the choices they made. Thus, these factors should be considered when developing intervention strategies, which may otherwise have limited success.

Again, short of shutting all the venues – there's not a great deal. Do you put a limit on how much you spend on the machines? I don't – I just think it makes it – I think it's a choice – it really is a choice. And if you choose to do that, that's your choice. I know it makes it humbug for everybody else, but then it's the family's responsibility to say no. (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 3, D/P, other better)

Here's all your odds, here's all of this, but "Gamble responsibly" So, it's not, "You have to do this." "This is your choice but do it responsibly." I like that... You're responsible for it. (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 3, D/P, other better)

In addition to being as a choice, gambling seemed to be an acquired behaviour, as surfaced in our conversations. Some participants shared their reflections on the learned intergenerational gambling. That is, it is likely that children who grow up in a household where family members gamble, may gamble later in their lives. Nonetheless, the debate surrounding the responsibility for gambling regulation continued.

Funnily enough, it's [gambling] something we've all grown up with. You've seen it and a lot of people don't recognise that there's a problem. They don't have money, but they have family to support them for the rest of the fortnight or whatever. So, short of shutting every venue down, there's not a lot. I don't think the government has to be responsible for everything Aboriginal people do.... It's a choice thing. (F, 35–44 years, PGSI 3, D/P, other better)

Regulate incentives for gambling

Incentives are offered to gamblers by the gambling industry to promote gambling. For example, venues offer patrons free alcohol and transportation to and from venues in regional/remote NT and betting companies provide free credit to open a gambling account. Some participants described that such incentives promote excessive gambling and should be regulated.

My aunty was getting addicted [to gambling], because she was going every day [to the casino] and putting money in, and the next minute, she's into the Diamond Club... And we could go in the Diamond Lounge with her, and then she could get three free drinks. And then, I joined and got the cards myself, as well, and then you win prizes on top of that as well. (M, 45–54 years, PGSI 8, D/P, EGM player)

Create awareness and education about gambling harm

Participants expressed that creating awareness and educating people about gambling harm through health promotion programs may help in regulating gambling and subsequent harm.

It could be something like going to schools, some forms of education. And so, those kids are hitting that puberty into your adult life and then getting into the – think about getting a car and what not. And sometimes, they don't – You get taught a certain amount of things at school, but sometimes, you don't get taught about gambling and the impacts of gambling.... Yeah they don't talk about it – you might have sexual health education and nutrition and sports and stuff.... Or they might talk about drugs, sometimes, some schools. But then, they don't have any talk about gambling or anything, and it's such a major problem. (M, 45–54 years, PGSI 8, D/P, EGM player)

What type of interventions would assist? Culturally competent interventions that are compatible with the culture's origins, the language, dialect; their practices, beliefs, traditions in respect of customs and lore, and how that is interpreted. And what practices are credible and preserve life. Interventions that work from the bottom up would be hoped for. (F, 45–54 years, AS, affected others)

Drawing from and adapting successful approaches for the prevention of other addictions, such as smoking cessation, to the gambling context may help reduce the negative impacts of gambling. This is reflected in the participant quotes below.

...outreach to community – or sometimes smoking cessation programs they've had – but I haven't really seen the workers that go out and talk to people about gambling.... I've noticed that particularly government doesn't seem to have anything like that there. They might have a smoking cessation or health promotion sometimes but doesn't have a gambling focus. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

We've done really well in terms of smoking reduction... if I'm thinking bigger picture than just gambling here, as well as the other addictions, it's a space where you go; perhaps maybe we need to support addiction a little bit more in Australia. And some of the background effects of addiction. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

Train venue staff

Some participants felt that venue staff were usually not trained to approach someone with gambling issues, appropriately. To address this concern, participants suggested that venues should train their staff appropriately and may consider employing staff in specialised roles such as Aboriginal Liaison Officers and gambling counsellors.

I think that if there were sort of gambling counsellors that maybe even just did rotations through some of the hotspots in particularly Darwin and Katherine, and Alice Springs casino as well, and those people would be Aboriginal Liaison Officers. So, being recognisably Aboriginal themselves, as in being from that particular community or that town and be in a position to have that conversation... And then that person could do plug-in – like, a referral sort of thing after that conversation. I think something like that may work. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

I just don't think it [approaching gamblers] should be left up to people behind the bar [at venues]. Normally, you've got a lot of young people, who are not trained in how to approach people around something that is so sensitive, and you've certainly got a lot of people working in bars in the NT that are not culturally aware. So, I don't think that it should be up to the venue to have that conversation. It's a specialised role. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

Training the venue staff on using proactive but assertive communication strategies with patrons might assist gamblers in regulating their gambling, as suggested by the participant below.

I think people having that conversation there and there too like the mob behind the bars [at venues] with the RSA [responsible serving of alcohol] thing interacting with their clients more often and having those conver-

sations like “hey, how often do you do this?” but do it in a friendly manner like “how often do you come down here?”. Old Nanna says, “oh I come down here every second day and put 30 or 40 bucks in”. Then there's maybe “hey, Nanna, that doesn't sound very good. Your social aspect's, stepping out's really, really good”. But then again that might upset her like “what? You're saying I can't come down here”... (M, 25–34 years, D/P, affected others)

Another important topic that came up in the conversations was racism. Participants expressed that approaching Aboriginal gamblers at venues in the NT needed to involve a culturally sensitive approach to avoid perceptions of racism. Education on cultural awareness for venue staff has the potential to assist with this issue.

I've actually worked in a venue myself where we were told that anybody who had sat on a machine for a ridiculous amount of time or we became aware that they were losing a lot of money, we were encouraged to go and approach them and say, “would you like a break? How about we go and get a cup of tea?” Pull them away in some way. My concern around doing that with Aboriginal people is that there is already a subculture of racism in venues in the Territory, and I think that it could be seen in such a negative light and become quite a different issue. (F, 35–44 years, D/P, affected others)

Discussion and conclusion

To our knowledge, our study is the first in-depth qualitative study that has provided insights into Aboriginal people's opinions about the strategies and interventions the government and other agencies could use to minimise harm from gambling in the NT. Our study is also the first to explore Aboriginal people's (including regular gamblers and affected others) views on gambling regulation on gambling in the NT.

One quantitative (Stevens et al. 2017a, b) and one qualitative gambling research study in the NT explored peoples' opinions about gambling legislation in the NT. However, neither of these studies focused exclusively on Aboriginal people and regulatory gambling environments. The qualitative study found similar results as our study; however, it had more non-Aboriginal voices. A few previous qualitative gambling studies conducted in the NT have exclusively explored Aboriginal people's gambling activities and harms in a few remote Aboriginal communities (Christie et al. 2009; Fogarty 2013). In our study, we captured the experiences of a variety of voices which is one of the strengths of this study. For example, (1) we interviewed both gamblers

and those affected by someone else's gambling and (2) the sample included participants from both urban and remote areas of NT (more participants from urban areas).

According to the findings of this study, both community-wide and targeted approaches are required to regulate and reduce gambling harm among Aboriginal people in the NT. Although both preventive (tailored to address the causes) and interventional (tailored to address the impacts) approaches are important, having the former in the first place may eliminate the need for the latter in many cases (Hing et al. 2014; Lubman et al. 2015, Goodwin et al. 2016, Taylor-Rodgers et al. 2018, Gupta et al. 2021).

Participants reported a range of strategies and interventions the government and gambling industry may develop and implement to reduce gambling harm among Aboriginal people, and more broadly, the general population, in the NT. On the basis of the participants' perspectives, we offer the following recommendations:

- Targeted interventions that encourage health professionals and service providers to raise gambling with their clients and conduct brief interventions may have the potential to reach people experiencing difficulties.
- Public education campaigns aimed at reducing negative stereotypes associated with problem gambling and being harmed by someone else's gambling may promote the uptake of services.
- A stronger regulation around measures such as limiting accessibility to gambling services; setting mandatory lower load-up limits on online gambling and EGMs; re-introducing the coin system for EGMs; setting limits on the daily number of hours of EGM playing and maximum allowable bet size; and reducing access to EGMs through reduced hours in venues may assist gamblers in controlling their gambling and subsequent harm. These measures should be made mandatory and not opt-in.
- Initiatives that portray positive outcomes from gambling interventions may encourage gamblers to seek help. For example, creating advertisements featuring gamblers who had previously benefitted from gambling interventions. Additionally, involving people with lived experience of gambling (or addictions and mental health challenges) in support services can encourage gamblers to seek help for their issues.
- Strategies aimed at improving awareness of gambling behaviour such as keeping track of losses and venues issuing regular statements on gambling expenditures to their patrons may facilitate the self-identification of gambling issues.
- Akin to the Western Australia Model, removing or limiting the number of EGMs in pubs/clubs and making them available only in casinos may help to reduce the harms of gambling in the NT.
- Participants, especially, those in the affected others group, mentioned that people experiencing gambling problems were likely to be identified by venue staff and other gamblers at gambling venues. Therefore, employing measures to provide information to venue staff and other gamblers such as gambling support workers at venues to check on people and offer support may be useful in addressing and minimising the impacts of problem gambling.
- As mentioned above, the Basics Cards initiative prevented Aboriginal people from buying gambling products and services. However, the Card has no associated legislation that prevented people from using the Card at casinos and online gambling. Hence, introducing regulations that prevent Aboriginal people from using the Card to gamble at casinos and other venues may help in regulating Aboriginal people's gambling.
- Gambling support services should be established in regional and remote NT to reflect the distribution of the Aboriginal population in the NT. Furthermore, developing support services tailored to local Aboriginal populations, including those offered in local languages, may be an effective strategy to encourage Aboriginal people to seek help for gambling.
- Many participants discussed the associations between gambling, substance use and mental health. Hence, developing and implementing a multilayered approach to behaviour change that includes gambling education and support incorporated with education about substance use and mental health services, rather than those delivered in sectoral silos, may be beneficial.
- Drawing on participants' views, interventions that may help Aboriginal people learn life skills such as money management, coping with stress and anxiety, and providing better education may help with gambling regulation.
- Food security and access to education are fundamental social determinants of health. These determinants seemed to be associated with gambling, as emerged in our conversations. Therefore, careful consideration of these factors is essential when developing regulatory frameworks for gambling.

Limitations and future research

Recognising Aboriginal people in the NT as a homogenous population is problematic as there is a vast range of cultural and linguistic differences in urban, regional and remote Aboriginal populations across the NT. The location of Aboriginal people living in the NT also adds to this diversity. For example, Aboriginal people in urban locations have higher levels of education and greater access to employment (Fogarty 2013). However, this cultural and linguistic diversity is not often reflected or acknowledged in many

health promotion and harm reduction gambling programs and support services (Fogarty et al. 2018). Subsequently, it also poses many challenges in delivering programs and support services for reducing gambling harm to these populations, which also surfaced in some of the interviews.

Most of the participants in this study were from urban NT (Darwin and Alice Springs). Although some of the participants were originally residents of regional NT, they lived either in urban localities or at least moved between urban and regional localities at the time of this study and generally had higher levels of education and better access to employment opportunities. This may have affected the study's ability to detect differences by region, which is a limitation of this study.

To gain further insights into Aboriginal gambling behaviours, more research is needed, especially in remote and very remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. This will help to design culturally and linguistically appropriate gambling support services and minimise harm from gambling among Aboriginal peoples in the NT.

Our study was confined to exploring the views of the Aboriginal residents of the NT. Hence, caution must be exercised when generalising these findings to other locations and the wider community. Nevertheless, as occurs with qualitative research, our aim was not to generalise the study's findings to the wider community but to provide an overview of the studied phenomena.

Conclusion

Both community-wide and targeted approaches are required to regulate and reduce gambling harm among Aboriginal people in the NT. Although both are important, having more explicit preventive approaches may eliminate the need for downstream interventions and strategies.

Most of the participants in our study were from urban NT. We anticipate higher rates of gambling among Aboriginal people living in remote NT because of fewer recreational and employment opportunities and thus greater chances of boredom. In comparison, Aboriginal people in urban NT are likely to have better recreation and employment opportunities and thus lower chances of boredom. Therefore, further research with Aboriginal people living in remote and very remote NT is warranted for a better understanding of Aboriginal people's needs in the gambling context.

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Authors' contributions HG conceived the study. DA conducted the interviews, NTK performed the data analysis and HG drafted the manuscript. DA, NTK and JS critically revised and reviewed the

manuscript. All authors commented on the full draft and approved the final manuscript.

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Data availability The datasets supporting the conclusions of this article are included within the article.

Code availability QSR NVivo 12 software was used to manage the interview data.

Declarations

Ethics approval Ethics approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Central Australian Human Research Ethics Committee (CA-20-3747) and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research (2020-3728).

Consent to participate All participants provided consent to participate in the study – verbal for telephone interviews and written for face-to-face interviews. I agree to participate in this study and understand the purposes and procedures of the study (including audio-recording of the interview) and any risks relating to my participation in the study.

Consent for publication Not applicable.

Data transparency We have prepared this article based on our research study, "A qualitative investigation of Aboriginal gambling behaviour, consequences, risk factors, and help-seeking in the Northern Territory". However, the analysis presented in this article is sufficiently different and provides new and unique insights into Aboriginal peoples' views on gambling regulation in the Northern Territory of Australia. Hence, this article provides new knowledge to the gambling literature. We have also cited the previous report in the article, where appropriate, to avoid any perception of self-plagiarism.

Competing interests The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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