

“Bet responsibly” – what a joke

The government should stop promoting gambling

Kathy Spencer

When I see a government organisation enthusiastically offering “bonus cash”, and telling us how fast and easy it is to bet on multiple events, I feel like I’m living in a parallel universe.

Anyone who followed the FIFA World Cup will be aware of the aggressive promotion of gambling by the TAB on TVNZ – both government bodies.

The TAB offered “bonus cash” if you: opened an account, backed a player to score the first goal, or “smashed out a multi” with 4 or more components. In the fine print, the TAB’s website notes that bonus cash is not actually cash.

The first of the TAB’s two objectives is to “facilitate and promote betting” and its website boasts: *“Getting a bet on your favourite sports on the TAB app is now faster and easier than ever before.”*

The promotion of gambling by the TAB has moved to another level since partnering with international gambling company, Entain, in 2023. The TAB is evidently proud to be getting young people into gambling, with its annual report stating:

“In its first year, betcha expanded the customer base and attracted demographic segments previously under-represented in traditional regulated New Zealand betting channels.”

“The brand celebrates the social and competitive value of sport, focusing on disciplines that resonate with younger audiences, including football, basketball, and UFC.”

In New Zealand, 52% of adults gamble without doing any harm and another 36% don’t gamble at all, according to the NZ Gambling Survey. However, an estimated 360,000 are at risk of harm, with a little over 100,000 of these people being at moderate-high risk. Young people, aged 15-24, make up a quarter of the moderate-high risk group.

The forms of gambling most likely to cause problems are continuous ones, in which winnings are immediately re-gambled, such as gaming machines, casino table games, scratchies, and betting on sports and racing. Gambling online is also more harmful than gambling in person.

Ads that urge young people to download the betcha app are very concerning because it is clear that this advertising works: the NZ Gambling Survey found that a little over one million adults made unplanned bets or purchased lottery tickets in response to an advertisement in the past year. This included an estimated 78,000 young people, aged 15-24.

While one part of government is ramping-up gambling, the Ministry of Health is responsible for a strategy to prevent and minimise gambling harm. This is funded by the problem gambling levy which raises about \$25m a year.

In 2024/25, a total of \$2,708 million was lost through NZ-based forms of gambling: \$1,015m through gaming machines in pubs, clubs and TABs; \$754m through lotteries; \$545m in casinos; and \$393m through racing and sports bets with the TAB.

Exactly where this money goes is difficult to nail down due to the patchwork of rules and taxes applying to the various forms of gambling. However, taking the example of the \$1,015m lost through gaming machines: 40% had to be distributed to community groups, 20% went into government coffers as gaming duty, and 38% went to operating costs. Of the \$754m lost through lotteries: 52% was returned to community groups through grants, 12% went into government coffers as gaming duty, and 35% was spent making it all happen.

Sitting at the most harmful end of the spectrum, gaming machines are called “one-arm bandits” for a reason. These machines accounted for 37% of all gambling losses despite being played by only 14% of the adult population. The more deprived parts of the country contributed the lion’s share of gaming machine losses, while the better-off parts of the country received the lion’s share of the money returned in community grants.

The Australians seem to be ahead of us in this area, having made it illegal to offer incentives to open a betting account or bet on a sports match while it is in progress. Instead of our lame “Bet responsibly”, the Aussies are using warnings like “Chances are you’re about to lose” and “Win some. Lose more”.

Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, says Australia needs to do more to protect children from gambling advertising because “kids shouldn’t grow up thinking gambling and sport are the same thing”. Independent senator and former Wallabies captain, David Pocock, wants to go further than Albanese and is calling for a full ban on gambling advertising in Australia.

There is no intention to stop people from gambling, either here or in Australia, but there’s certainly a lot of scope for improvement in New Zealand.

In my view, the most harmful forms of gambling should be actively reduced and the promotion of gambling, including offering inducements like “bonus cash”, should be prohibited. The unhealthy reliance of sporting bodies and community groups on gambling should also be phased-out. Instead, support should be provided through Sport NZ and the Department of Internal Affairs.

Sometimes we need government agencies to encourage us to do things that are good for us: eat 5+ fruit and vegetables a day, drive safely, save for retirement, or get a breast or bowel cancer screening test. But let’s face it, no-one needs to be encouraged to gamble.

Kathy Spencer worked in public policy for over 30 years, including as a Deputy Director-General in the Ministry of Health, a General Manager in ACC, and a Manager in the Treasury.