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GAMBLING WITH TEEN HEALTH



Betting site Ladbrokes has donated a huge £180,000 to gambling support for teens as the problem among the UK's youth continues to spiral out of control



Teenage gambling is on the rise with nearly half a million 11-15 year olds gambling weekly

Report: Seb Jenkins
Photo: Danny Molyneux

Elliott had been an online gambler since the age of ten, and even started playing poker two years before that. His dad taught him from a young age, eventually letting him loose on the world of online gambling. Ever since that first day online, Elliott had been hooked, but tonight was different. He was full of confidence and excitement. He had finally found a way to beat the casino and claim a huge jackpot, or so he thought.

Elliott had done extensive research into an old martingale betting tactic, originating from 18th century France. Gamblers had used it for hundreds of years, with some reaping the rewards with minimal effort. The strategy was designed for simple games in which there are only two outcomes, such as the flip of a coin. After adapting it for roulette, Elliott was confident in his fool proof plan.

A gambler with infinite wealth will almost certainly eventually land on red. By this logic, if you keep betting on red, and increase your bets exponentially after every loss, you will eventually win big money. This is for gamblers with infinite money, but no gamblers have infinite money.

Elliott logged into the online roulette table, edging forwards on his chair in anticipation of the long night ahead of him. It started off well, with small bets of one pound to begin. The third spin fell agonisingly onto black, but the loss was small. Elliott stuck with his martingale method and doubled his bet, placing two pounds on red for the next spin.

The plan was going well. Elliott's confidence had spiralled out of control. He was winning money, but the sums were too small. He was dying for that big win. His eyes scanned the room before finally falling on his dad's wallet on the table next to him. His hand reached across the desk tentatively, before taking a deep breath and retrieving a credit card. He transferred £100 over and started playing with real money.

It started off well and £100 quickly turned to £200, then £400, then on one spin it was all gone. Elliott had put all of his profit on red and clicked spin. The ball bounced unbearably from red to black before finally settling on the latter. His fool proof scheme had left him penniless and his dad's account £100 worse off.

The rate of high school gambling has surpassed adults two to one, as teenage gambling problems are surging across Britain. The birth of internet gambling in the 90's has created a whole generation of inexperienced teens for the addiction fuelled industry. Gambling has evolved from a rare form of entertainment to a common and easily accessible pass time for the nations young adults.

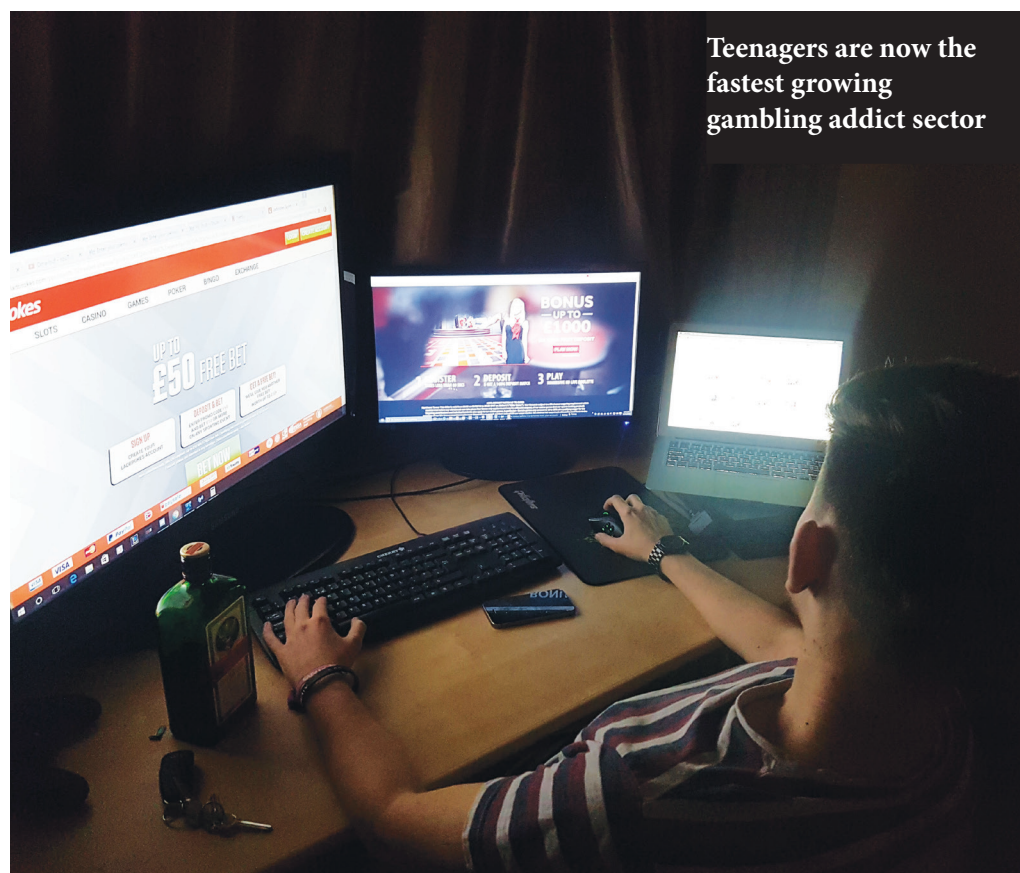
In 2013, over 2,000 children aged between

11 and 15 were surveyed from over 100 schools. Even at this young age, 15% of them admitted to engaging in some form of gambling in the past week alone. This widespread issue is spiralling out of control, so much so that even some betting companies are showing their support for those teenagers severely affected by gambling addictions.

Ladbrokes have decided to take initiative and contribute to beating this growing problem by donating £180,000 to GamCare, the leading provider of gambling support. The money has gone straight into their YouthHub programme, specifically set up to help teenagers combat their individual gambling problems.

The money donated has allowed GamCare to create three new regional youth hubs in Bristol, Birmingham, and the North West, as well as the expansion of youth education services in London.

These hubs will provide free of charge workshops which will aim to spread awareness about teen gambling addiction. The hubs will also train young professionals to support teenagers in their own local



Teenagers are now the fastest growing gambling addict sector

areas. Screening tools will be delivered to assist local youth services and teachers in identifying young people at risk so referrals for treatment can be made for the vulnerable teens that need it.

Graham Weir, Head of Responsible Gambling at Ladbrokes described the high risk of addiction among teenagers, especially boys.

“We know that some people get into difficulty gambling when they spend more time or money than they should. We think it is important that when someone starts gambling they understand that it’s not a route to getting rich quickly.

“Gambling is not a subject that is on the school curriculum, so young adults may not understand that they should only look at gambling as something they should do in moderation. We want young gamblers to understand that something like chasing losses is not something they should do.”

On the surface, this seems like a caring gesture to help towards the battle against teenage gambling addiction, however when you break down the numbers it becomes more and more questionable.

Ladbrokes turned over a profit of just over £25m in the first half of this year. This means that they have made around 140 times more profit than the sum they decided to donate. Furthermore, how much of the donation itself was actually funded by illegal teenage gambling?

Around 40% of under 16’s who gamble do so in betting shops, so the issue of underage gambling is by no means limited to online.

However, perhaps the biggest crisis within teenage gambling is the lack of self-control.

Young people do tend to chase losses and bet larger amounts than they can possibly afford because many of them have very little experience with finances. Many don’t understand the reality of placing bet after bet in search of that big win, because they aren’t used to handling the responsibility that comes with money.

Elliot Macey learned to play poker before his ninth birthday. His dad taught him Texas Hold’em in 2004 and once he thought Elliot was good enough, he let him play online two years later.

“He thought I was good enough to play by myself but he would still watch over me. A couple of years later I would log into his account while he was at work and play £2 tournaments with the money in his account

The development of online casino games has drawn in the young generation

Photo: Ralf Roletschek



‘I WAS SO SURE I COULD BEAT THE ROULETTE SYSTEM’

which was about £20. He was never that bothered, unless I lost it all.”

Elliot started off small but before long, the sums grew larger and the hours grew longer. Eventually he would play for whole nights at a time, building up the account to a few hundred pounds before inevitably losing the entire lot.

Is that the difference with young teenagers? Perhaps they don’t grasp when to stop, or appreciate the true value of the money when all that represents it is a series of numbers on a screen.

The nature of gambling is so glamorised to an impressionistic generation, with advertisements on TV making it seem like a

guaranteed get rich quick scheme.

“A couple of years later, I read about this new method online and I was so sure I could beat the roulette system. I didn’t have any money so I used my dad’s card to fund the night. It worked to start with and I racked up £400 before I lost it all, including £100 of my dad’s money.

“I think the adverts on TV have a big impact, especially the football ones. I don’t think I would gamble anywhere near as much if there weren’t adverts on TV. When you turn 18, gambling is one of those things you’re allowed to do, and they make it look so fun and cool without really showcasing the dangers.”

There’s no arguing against this really. Apart from the token ‘gamble responsibly’ thrown in at the end of an advert, there is no real appreciation of the chaos gambling can cause. Cigarette packets legally have to carry the ‘smoking kills’ brand on them to ensure that people know the risks, should the same not be said for another addiction which can

equally destroy lives?

Even on a small scale, gambling addictions can take hold of your life from a young age, as Elliot told me about his own battle with his addiction.

"I think I have an addicted personality and when I've got nothing else to do, I can always gamble. When I could finally have my own account, I deposited part of my wage every few weeks that I made from working. Again, I would build it up and then lose it all.

"At university, I would spend the last of my money on betting, so I couldn't always buy food. It was at this point that I knew things had become stupid and I put a six-month ban on all my accounts."

The worrying but overwhelming truth is that gambling has become so normalised in our modern society, so much so that our teenagers can't differentiate the risk from the entertainment.

There is a huge difference between gambling small amounts for fun and betting more money that you can afford to get rich quick.

Dr Jeffrey Derevensky is a Professor of Applied Child Psychology and the recipient of the 2013 NCRG Scientific Achievement Award for invaluable contributions to the field of research on youth and adolescent gambling. I talked to him in depth about the

psychology behind teenage gambling, to really get inside the mind of a teen gambler.

"Gambling has become normalised in our society and it is viewed as a socially acceptable pastime now. I think teens believe they are smarter than most adults and can easily win. Once they start to lose, they want to catch up. There is this false illusion of control."

Dr Derevensky passionately described how the birth of mobile gambling has been the real downfall when it comes to teenage problems. The pure accessibility and availability of mobile gambling provides such an easy platform for teens to bet, even if they are underage.

"Registered sites require some form of ID check but there are hundreds of sites that just ask how old you are. These games build upon video game technology, implying that the more you play, the better you get but this is not true."

The comparison to video games is an interesting concept. For years, parents have complained about how addictive and unhealthy modern video games are, as they are replacing all other forms of entertainment. It seems like the betting companies are finally tapping into this market, letting teens carry on playing the games they love so much whilst spending a bit of money as they go.

GamCare seemed to agree with this concept, explaining that: "Young people may have trouble differentiating between the concepts of: luck, fate, chance and probability... Young people are motivated to gamble for a number of different reasons including: for entertainment, to win money, the sensation of winning, the thrill of the game, or to escape stress/problems."

They also stated that parents introducing their children to gambling at an early age often leads to a gambling problem developing. Just like in Elliot's case, being around betting at such an impressionable age just normalises it and makes it seem like a risk-free activity.

'I WOULD SPEND THE LAST OF MY MONEY ON BETTING, SO I COULDN'T ALWAYS BUY FOOD'

Whatever the reasons behind teenage gambling, it is clear that it has become a severe problem in the UK.

Dirk Hansen, CEO at GamCare, says: "Our work aims to ensure that young people can access honest, accurate and relevant information about gambling" which is something that is desperately needed now.

Now in his twenties, Elliot only plays online every now and then, putting his addiction far behind him. As someone who went through a gambling problem in his teens, he knows the importance of funding and available help.

"If I gamble now it's only a fiver every now and then on the football. I lost so much money when I used to play online; it just wasn't worth it anymore.

"My dad screaming at me after I lost his money and demanding that I stopped playing online was a huge wake up call. I'd never seen him anywhere near that angry before.

"Anyone who thinks they might be in trouble should get help as soon as possible, before things get out of control. There are always people you can talk to."

The problem of teenage gambling is a broad one, underage gambling is far too easy, some parents are too relaxed about their kids gambling and help is now funded enough. Whatever the route of the problem, teenagers, especially those underage, need to have the proper information and counselling to ensure that they understand all the risks. GamCare need real funding, not PR stunts.



Teenagers are increasingly exposed to gambling in day to day life

Photo: Nicu Buculei