

# **The impact of the COVID-19 shutdown on gambling in Australia**

## **Preliminary results from Wave 1 cross-sectional survey**

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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**

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# Executive summary

**Background:** The COVID-19 shutdown substantially reduced gambling availability in Australia. Land-based gambling venues were closed (no EGMs, casino games, keno, retail wagering), and sporting events were cancelled (limiting sports betting options). 'Stay at home' orders reduced access to lottery retailers.

**Aims:** This study aimed to investigate the impact of the shutdown on the gambling behaviour of a sample of Australian gamblers, particularly in relation to psychological distress, financial stress, and existing gambling problems.

**Methodology:** An online survey of 764 Australian adults (85% male, aged 18-82 years) who had gambled in the past 12 months was conducted in May 2020.

**Preliminary results:** Nearly three in four participants reported gambling less frequently during the shutdown, and most did not increase their online gambling frequency. Individuals at moderate-risk of gambling harms were more likely to report increases in gambling frequency, and higher problem gambling severity was associated with increases in gambling expenditure. However, the majority of participants reporting past-year gambling problems indicated that their gambling problems had decreased during the shutdown. Higher psychological distress and COVID-related financial difficulties appear to be linked with increases in gambling expenditure, but not increases in gambling frequency. Most participants reported expecting to resume their normal gambling patterns post-shutdown.

# **Background**

## **Aims**

## **Methodology**

# The COVID-19 shutdown of venues and sports substantially reduced the availability of gambling

- **Land-based gambling venues were closed by the Government, effective from 26<sup>th</sup> March 2020**
  - No access to retail-based electronic gaming machines, casino games, keno, and wagering
- **Most domestic and international sporting events were cancelled**
  - Limited opportunities for sports betting
- **Regulated gambling options were constrained**
  - Lottery products were still available via retail and online outlets
  - Some online wagering, primarily on a reduced number of horse races
- **‘Stay at home’ orders were in place for all Australians**
  - Mainly between late March and mid May 2020
- **Gambling venues began re-opening in June 2020 in some states**

# Aims

- **To investigate the impact of the COVID-19 shutdown on the gambling behaviour of a sample of Australian gamblers**
- **To understand the impact of psychological distress, financial stress, and existing gambling problems on changes in gambling patterns**

# Australian adults with gambling experience completed an online survey

- **Online survey of 764 Australian adults who had gambled in the past 12 months**
- **Preregistered protocol on Open Science Framework** [osf.io/tskdq](https://osf.io/tskdq)
- **Recruitment notices posted on social media, websites, and email communications**
  - 26 organisations, including gambling operators and support services, promoted recruitment notices for the survey
- **Key self-report survey questions**
  - Monthly gambling frequency and expenditure before and since shutdown
  - Level of gambling problems in past 12 months (PGSI; Ferris & Wynne, 2001)
  - Level of psychological distress in past 30 days (K6; Kessler et al., 2002)
- **Data collected between 1–22 May 2020**
- **Ethics approval obtained from the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee** (protocol number 2019/213)

# Participant characteristics

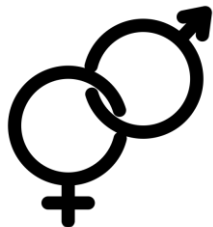


# Participant characteristics



Created by Adrien Coquet  
from Noun Project

**764 past-year  
gamblers aged  
18–82 years**



Created by Kieu Thi Kim Cuong  
from Noun Project

**85% male**



Created by Nociconist  
from Noun Project

**97% spoke  
English at home**



Created by joe pictos  
from Noun Project

**43% tertiary  
educated**



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**66% employed  
full- or part-time**



Created by Anagaja Design  
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**Median gross  
personal income  
\$65,000–\$77,999 pa**



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**85% gambled at least  
weekly pre-COVID**



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**78% gambled  
online at least  
weekly pre-COVID**



Created by Gan Khoon Lay  
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**48% gambled in  
venues at least  
weekly pre-COVID**



Created by Luis Prado  
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**22% reported experiencing  
gambling problems in the  
past 12 months, and 31%  
were at moderate risk**

# Increased distress and financial difficulties since the shutdown were common but were not reported by the majority



Created by priyanka  
from Noun Project

**8% of participants reported experiencing severe psychological distress in the past 30 days, and 29% moderate distress**

**32% of participants reported that their level of distress had increased either a little or a lot since the shutdown**



Created by Adrien Coquet  
from Noun Project

**25% of participants reported that COVID-19 had made it either somewhat more or much more difficult to make ends meet financially**

# COVID-19 affected participants across a variety of domains that can influence people's choices about gambling



Created by Adrien Coquet  
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**10% of participants had their job suspended due to COVID-19**



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**23% of participants had their employment status changed due to COVID-19**



Created by richad  
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**14% of participants had full-time home-schooling or caring responsibilities due to COVID-19**



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**37% of workers/students reported working completely from home during the shutdown**



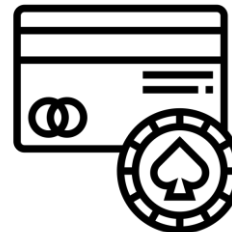
Created by ArmOkay  
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**63% of participants reported having increased free time**



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**21% of participants reported accessing loans and/or financial support services due to impacts of COVID-19**

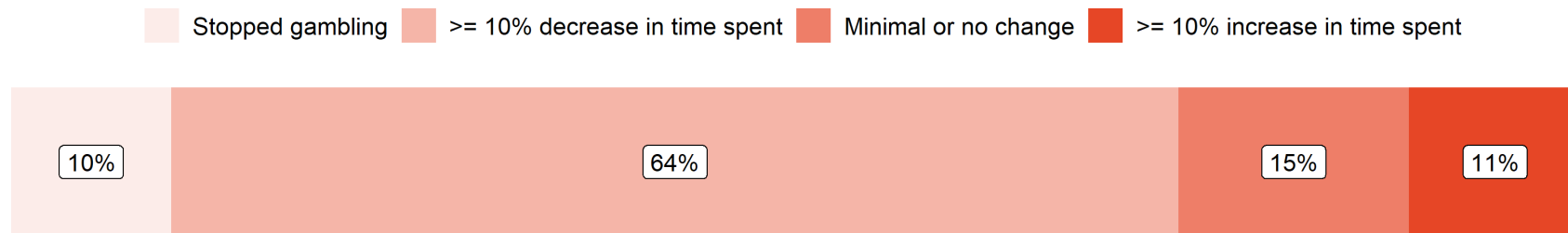


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**11% of participants reported using credit cards, loans, and/or financial support to finance their gambling during the shutdown**

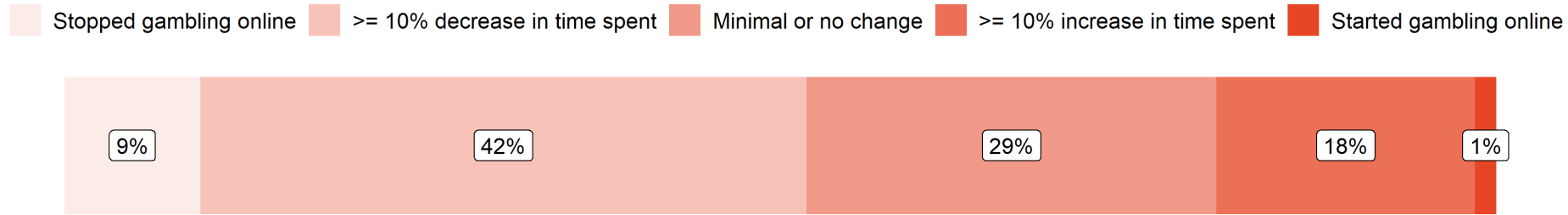
# **Impacts of the shutdown on gambling patterns**

# Nearly three in four participants reported spending less time gambling during the shutdown



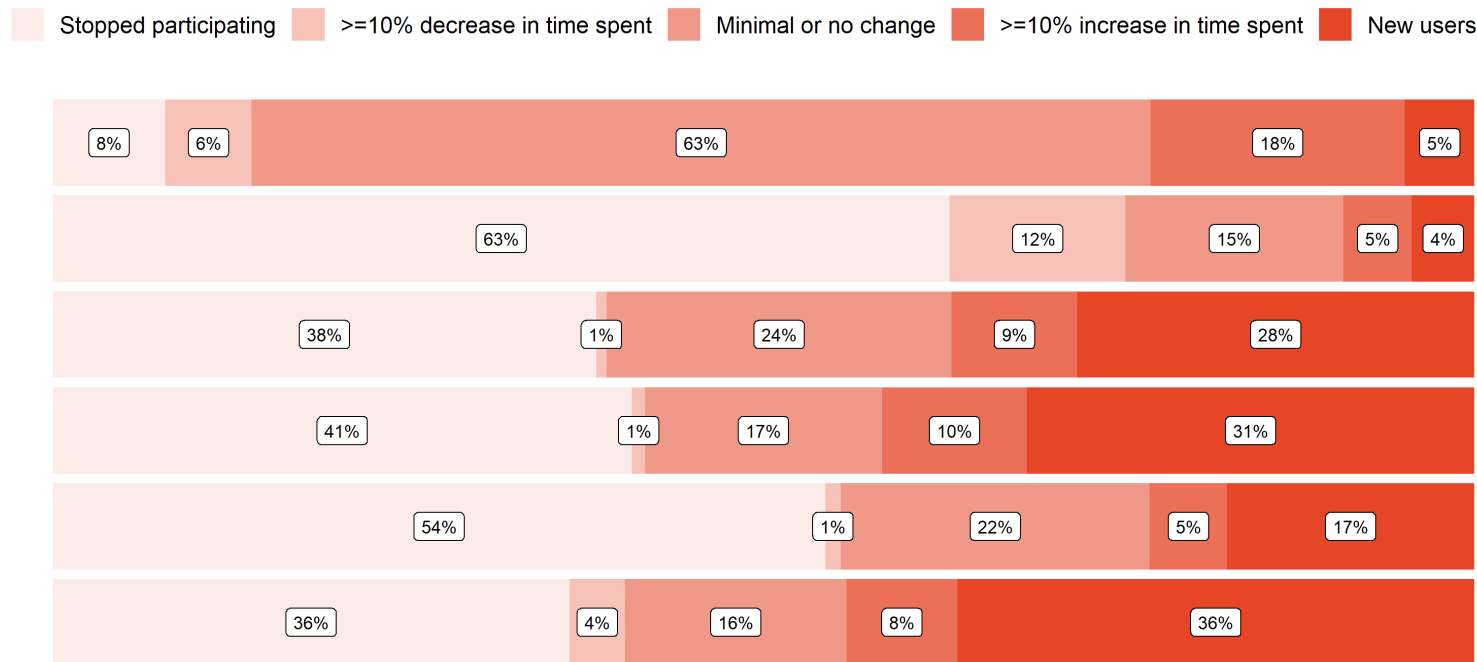
- Median reported monthly gambling spend decreased from AUD \$450 (pre-shutdown) to \$200 (shutdown)
- Of those who reported substantial increases ( $\geq 10\%$ ) in overall gambling frequency ( $n = 84$ ):
  - Problem gambling: 17% were classified as having gambling problems and 38% as engaging in moderate risk gambling
  - Psychological distress: 10% reported severe distress and 35% moderate distress
  - COVID-related financial difficulties: 25% reported having difficulty making ends meet

# Most participants spent less or about the same amount of time gambling online compared to before the shutdown



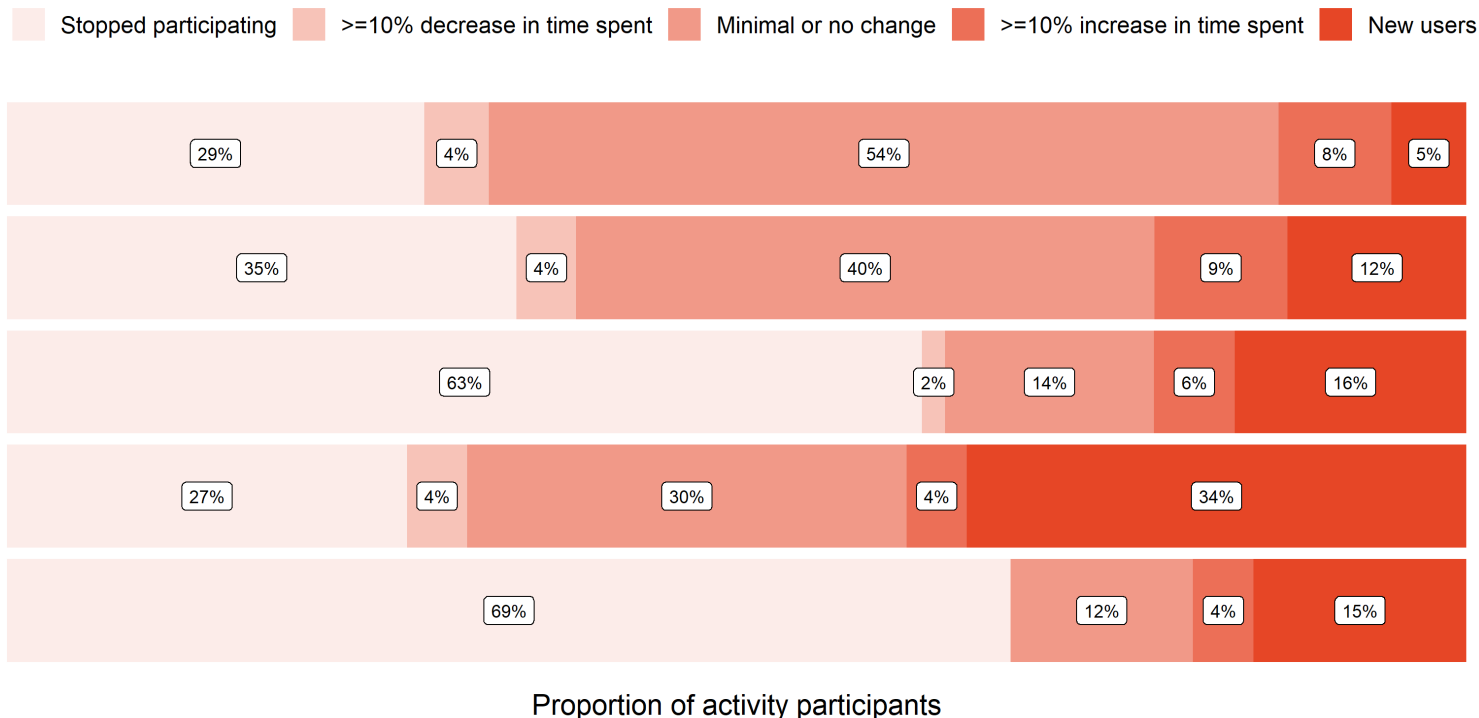
- Only 1% of respondents gambled online for the first time during shutdown
- Of those who reported substantial increases ( $\geq 10\%$ ) in time spent gambling online ( $n = 133$ ):
  - Problem gambling: 24% were classified as having gambling problems and 35% as engaging in moderate risk gambling
  - Psychological distress: 11% reported severe distress and 35% moderate distress
  - COVID-related financial difficulties: 30% reported having difficulty making ends meet

# Most participants maintained their usual online race betting patterns, many reduced their online sports betting, and some started betting on esports and non-sporting events online



Proportion of activity participants

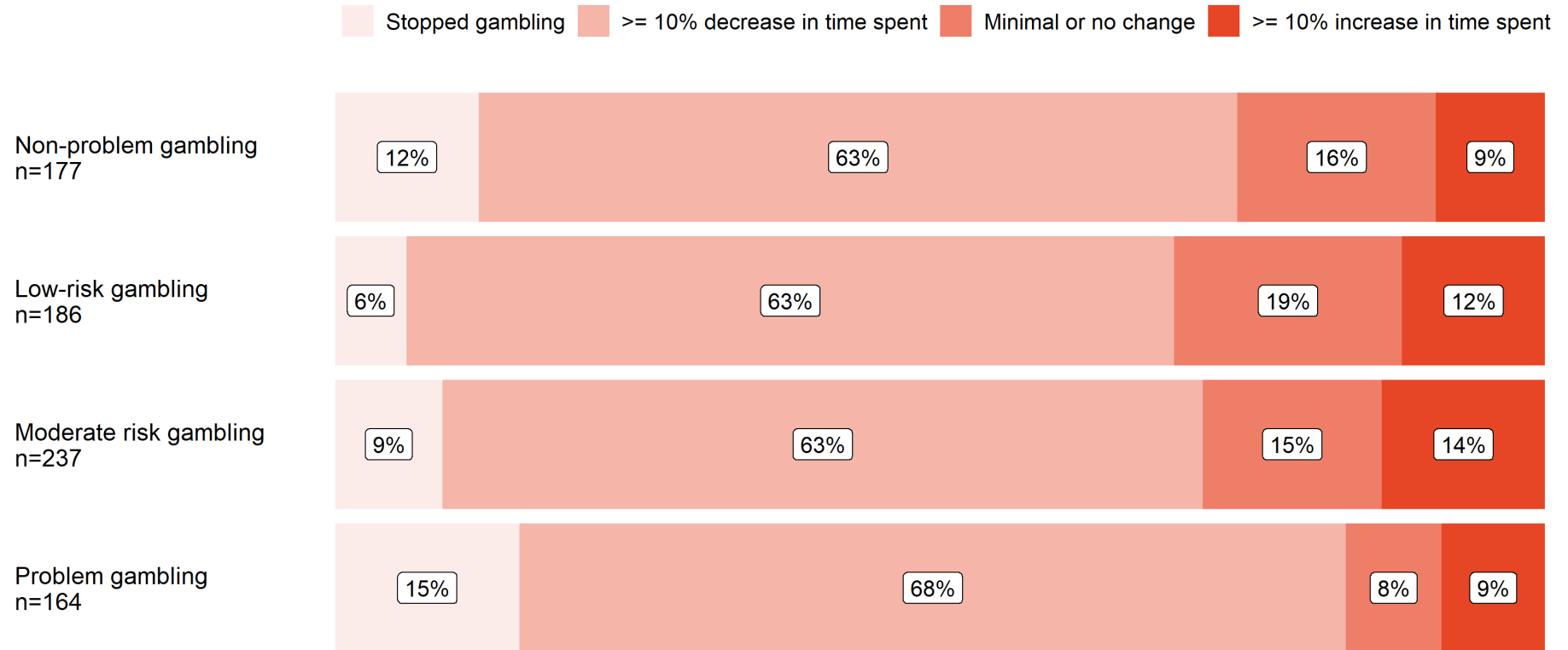
# Most participants reported either reducing or maintaining their usual frequency of participation in non-wagering activities that were available during the shutdown



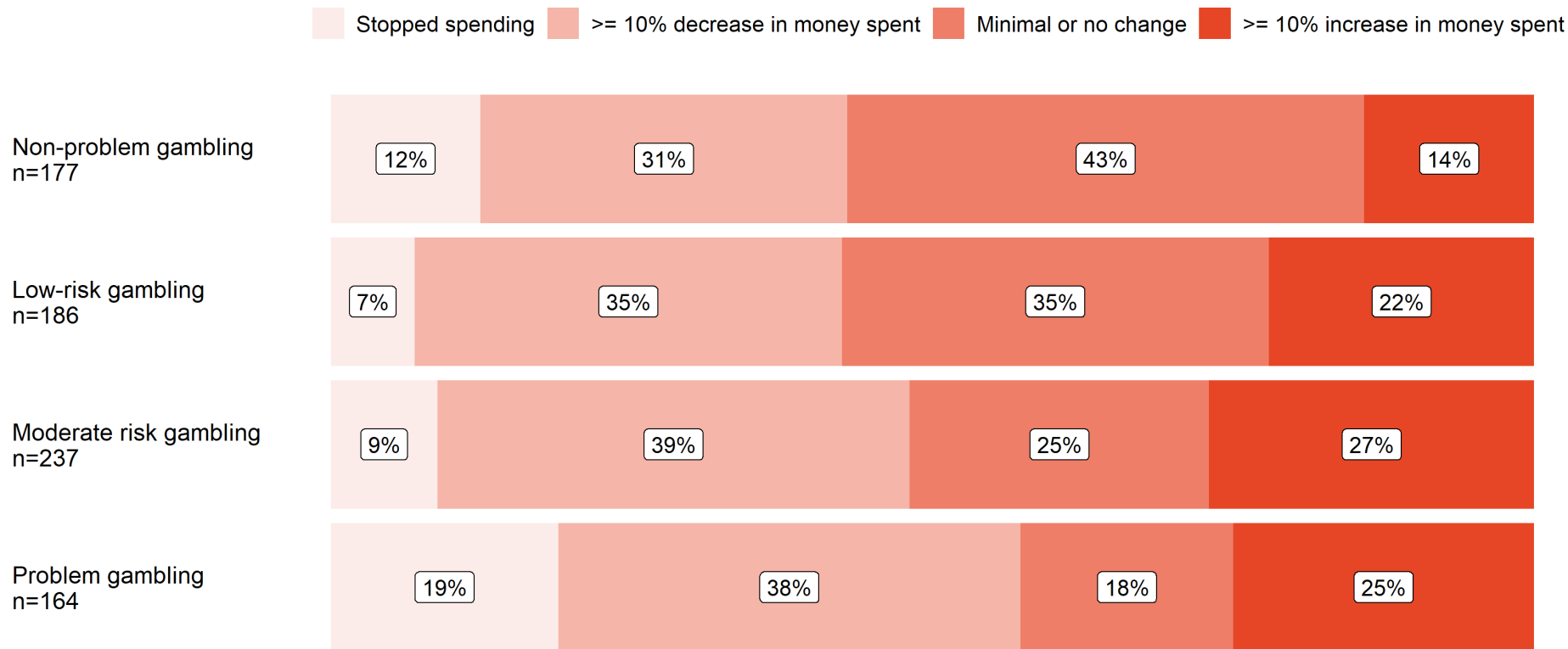


# **Associations between changes in gambling and existing gambling problems**

# Increased gambling frequency was most common among those at moderate risk of experiencing gambling problems



# Participants with higher problem gambling severity were more likely to increase their gambling spend

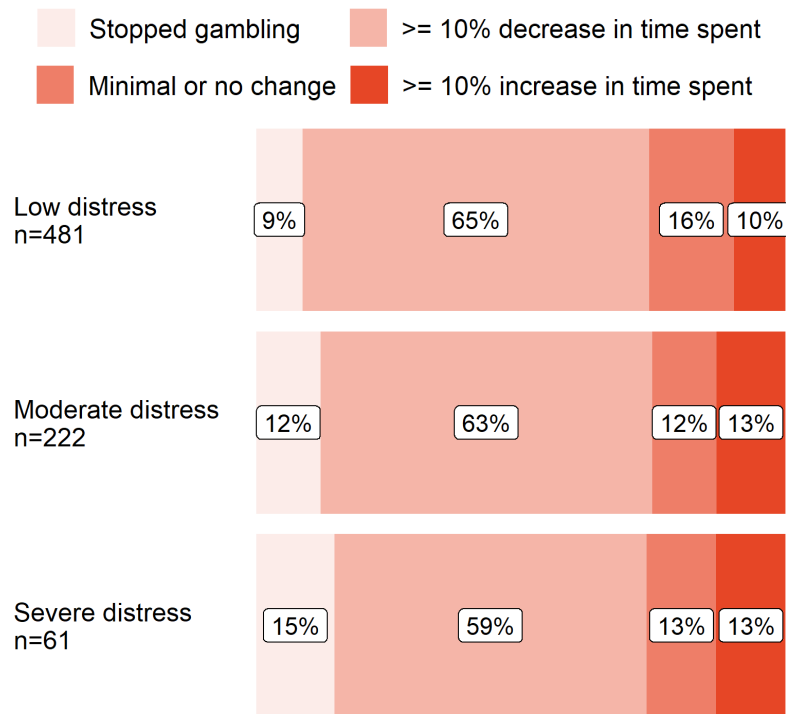


## The majority of participants reporting past-year gambling problems indicated that their gambling problems had decreased during the shutdown

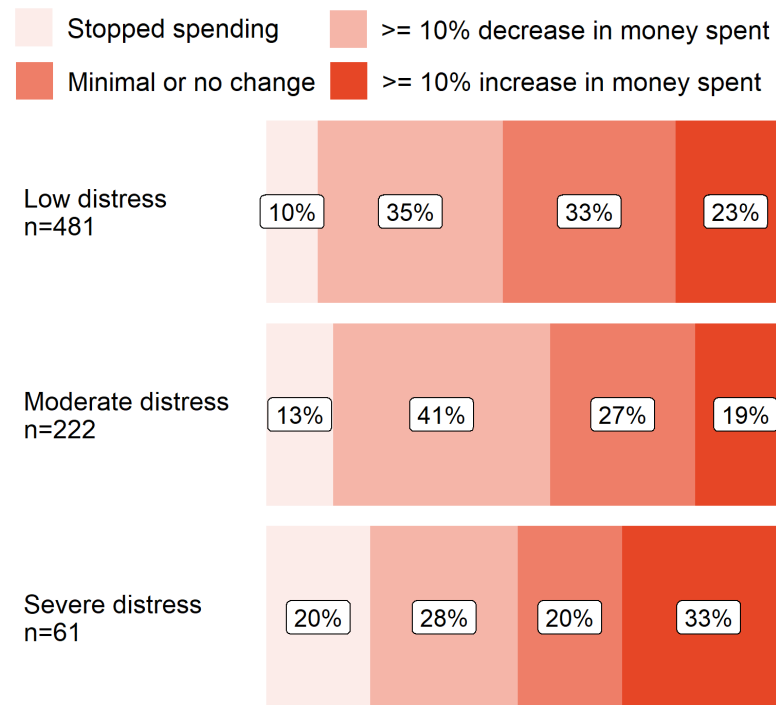
- **23% of participants reported having experienced gambling problems in the past 12 months**
- **6% of participants reported seeking professional help for a gambling problem in the past 12 months, and 4% since the shutdown**
- **Among those reporting past-year gambling problems ( $n = 172$ ):**
  - 27% had sought professional help for a gambling problem in the past 12 months
  - 17% had sought professional help for a gambling problem since the shutdown
  - Most reported that their experience of gambling problems had either decreased (60%) or stayed much the same (21%) since the shutdown
  - 76% reported that they were unlikely to attend a professional gambling treatment service in the next 3 months

# **Associations between changes in gambling and psychological distress**

# Participants reporting higher distress were more likely to spend more money on gambling, but not more time gambling



Changes in gambling frequency

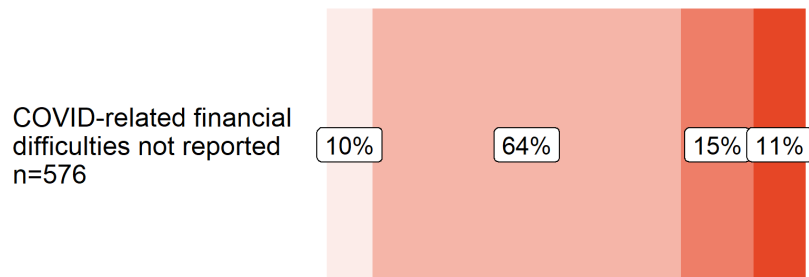
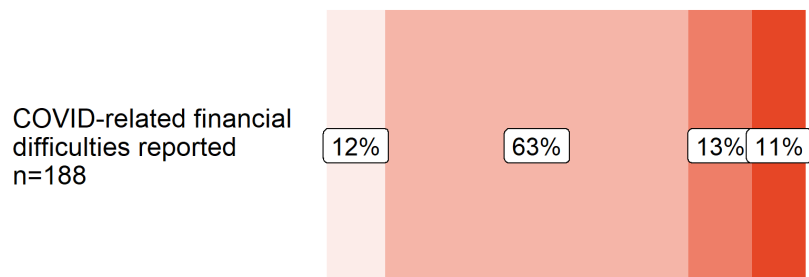


Changes in gambling expenditure

# **Associations between changes in gambling and financial difficulties**

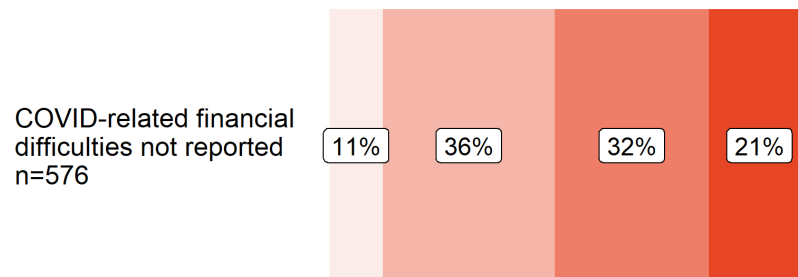
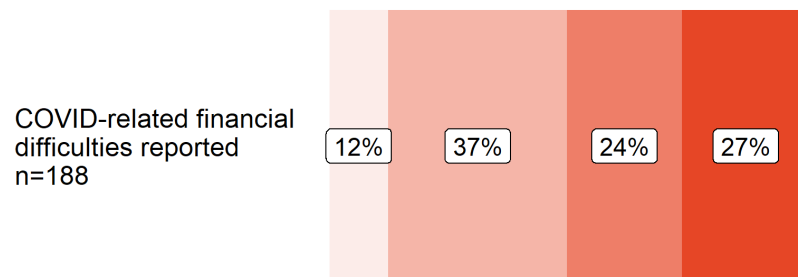
# Participants reporting COVID-related financial difficulties were more likely to spend more money on gambling, but not more time gambling

Stopped gambling     $\geq 10\%$  decrease in time spent  
Minimal or no change     $\geq 10\%$  increase in time spent



Changes in gambling frequency

Stopped spending     $\geq 10\%$  decrease in money spent  
Minimal or no change     $\geq 10\%$  increase in money spent



Changes in gambling expenditure

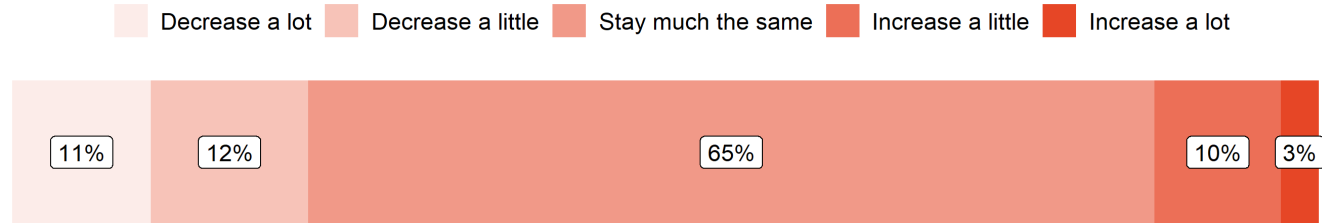


# Post-shutdown gambling intentions

# Most participants reported expecting to resume their prior online and land-based gambling patterns post-shutdown, and a greater proportion expected to decrease than increase their gambling

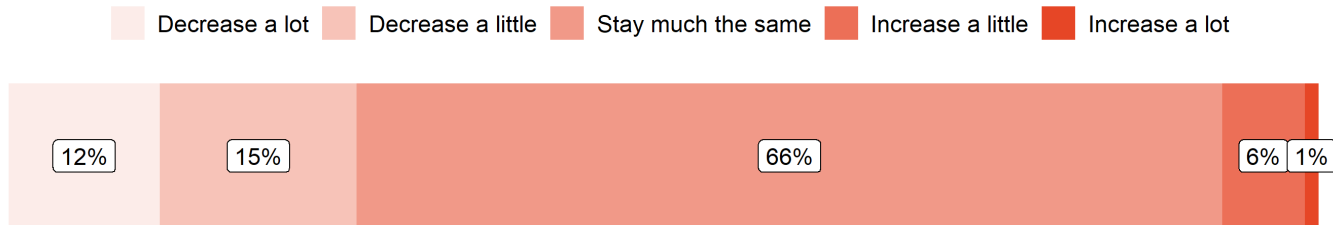
**Question:** Compared to how often you gambled prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, how do you think your gambling **ONLINE** will change once the shutdown is lifted?

N = 764



**Question:** Compared to how often you gambled prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, how do you think your gambling in **LAND-BASED** venues will change once the shutdown is lifted?

N = 764



# **Participant comments about the impact of the shutdown**

# Changes in access to venues and amount of free time were reported to impact gambling patterns

Some participants said that the lack of opportunity meant they were gambling less:

- *“No pokies = extra money”*
- *“Only reason I’m not gambling right now is because sports are shut down.”*
- *“Having no sport to gamble on has seen a significant decrease in my desire to gamble but I’m also terribly bored”*
- *“Since the shutdown I have had more money in my bank account because I don’t play the poker machines.”*

Several participants reported that they were gambling more due to boredom:

- *“Boredom contributed to the amount of time and cash spent gambling. Due to the lack of things to do. Caused by not being able to go out socially.”*
- *“increase time at home so need disrupted routine significantly. Increased boredom has led to more desire to gamble.”*
- *“my gambling has increased during lockdown predominantly out of boredom”*

# Impacts on disposable income and discretionary spending varied across participants

Several participants reported that COVID-19 had impacted their usual spending patterns in general, not only on gambling:

- *“My gambling amount has increased a little but I balance that against not going out drinking or dining.”*
- *“More money available due to not being able to spend it on dining , shopping etc”*
- *“Our overall spending is down and some significant regular expenses (e.g. restaurants, childcare, transport) have disappeared altogether.”*

Some participants indicated that uncertainty regarding their income and employment situation had impacted their gambling patterns:

- *“Most of my anxious energy now is spent making plans for a future where I will likely not have a job ... I think this is why I’m spending slightly more on lotto, it’s always been a nice bit of “imagine if” and spending \$5 doesn’t seem like alot to make yet another contingency plan”*
- *“I would say I am trying to gamble less and save any dollar I have with my current lack of job security.”*
- *“The loss of income also meant I have less money to gamble, which is part of the reason I have spent less.”*

# For some participants, the shutdown was an opportunity to reflect on or change their gambling

- *“I don’t really think about gambling when the choice is not there.”*
- *“Apart from the financial stress, this shutdown has been a blessing as it has made me realise how much money I was wasting on gambling.”*
- *“Have gambled on pokies for a long time and under control now - but been so nice not to have the option and maybe show me I don’t need to go every week just because its what I do”*
- *“over the last 2 months I have been busy with work I have money in my pocket and a family that can rely on me financially ... I am going to try with all my might to stay away from pokie machines”*
- *“Since COVID-19 I have ceased gambling. My life has improved immensely. I have more money. I have more time with family.”*
- *“I always used credit cards to gamble and I’m still paying them off. While restrictions are in place I intend on paying down and closing credit cards as much as possible, I’m not sure how successful I’ll be.”*
- *“Have managed to pay off 3000 dollars off my credit Card funds I’ve used to gamble on the pokies with”*
- *“Been wonderful to get CLEAR AIR away from pokies. ... Working with my counselor in readiness for when they re-open. I’m desperate not to return.”*

## Several participants reported feeling anxious about gambling venues re-opening

- *“My fear is that I will return to gambling at the same rate as before the shutdown - thus wasting the opportunity of the forced hiatus to reign in my poker machine habit”*
- *“Not having the choice has taken a lot of the mental effort out of trying not to gamble on the pokies. I hope I don’t fall back into the bad habits once the clubs open up again.”*
- *“Thank God pokie venues are closed I am feeling at peace now and am dreading them reopening.”*

# Future research



# Future research

- The second survey wave will be conducted in August 2020, followed by a third wave in November 2020
- Findings will be published in academic journals

For more information, please contact

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# Research team

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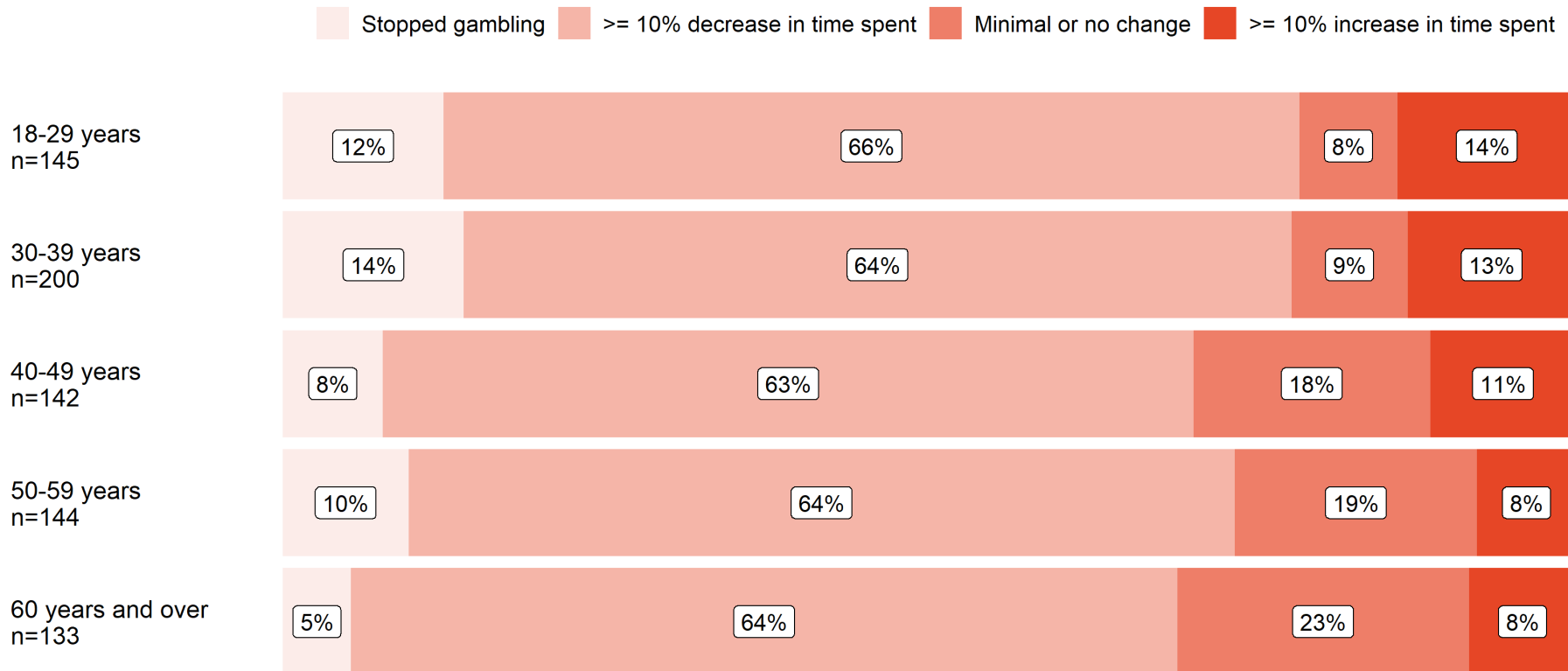
[sydney.edu.au/brain-mind/our-research/technology-addiction.html](https://sydney.edu.au/brain-mind/our-research/technology-addiction.html)



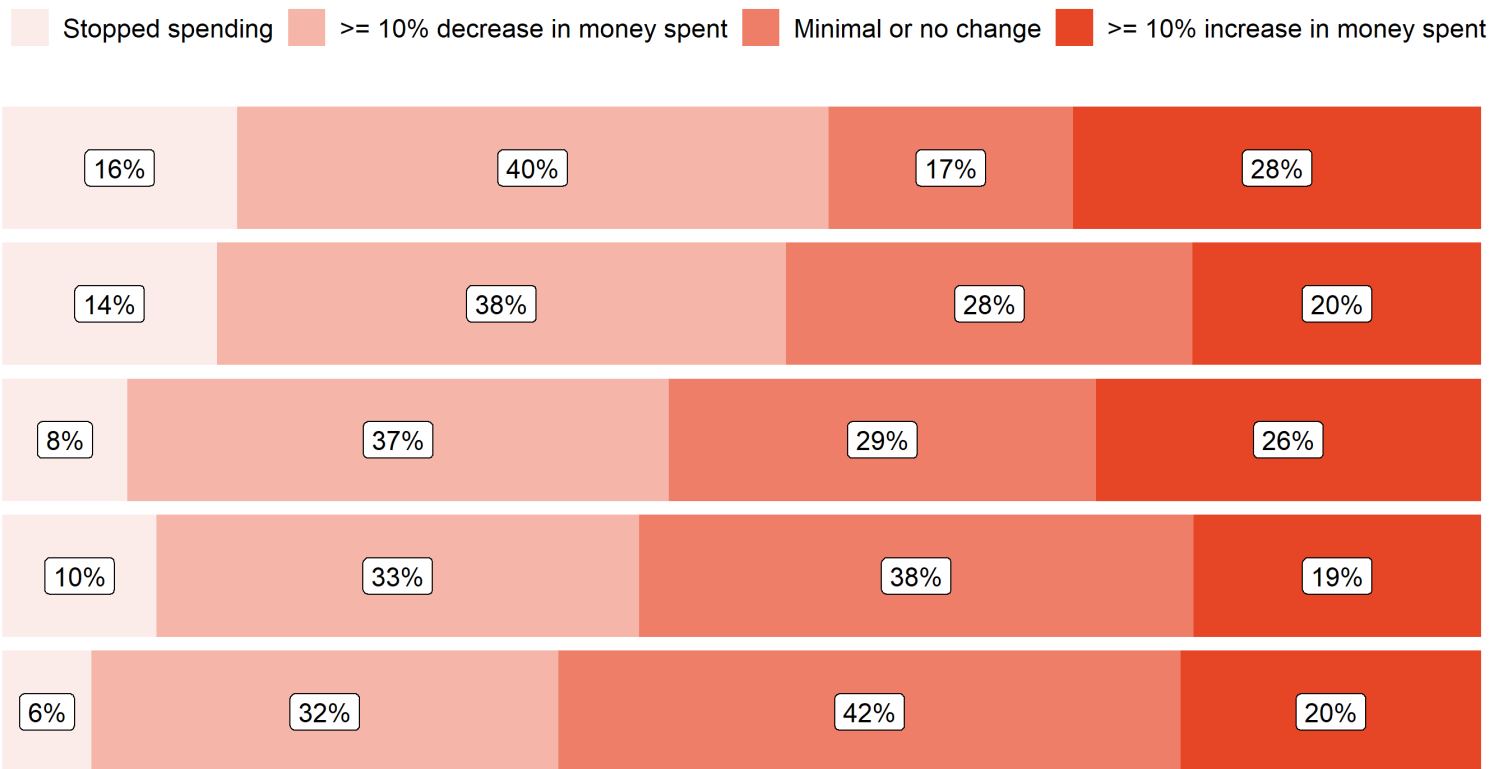
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# **Appendix 1: Additional graphs**

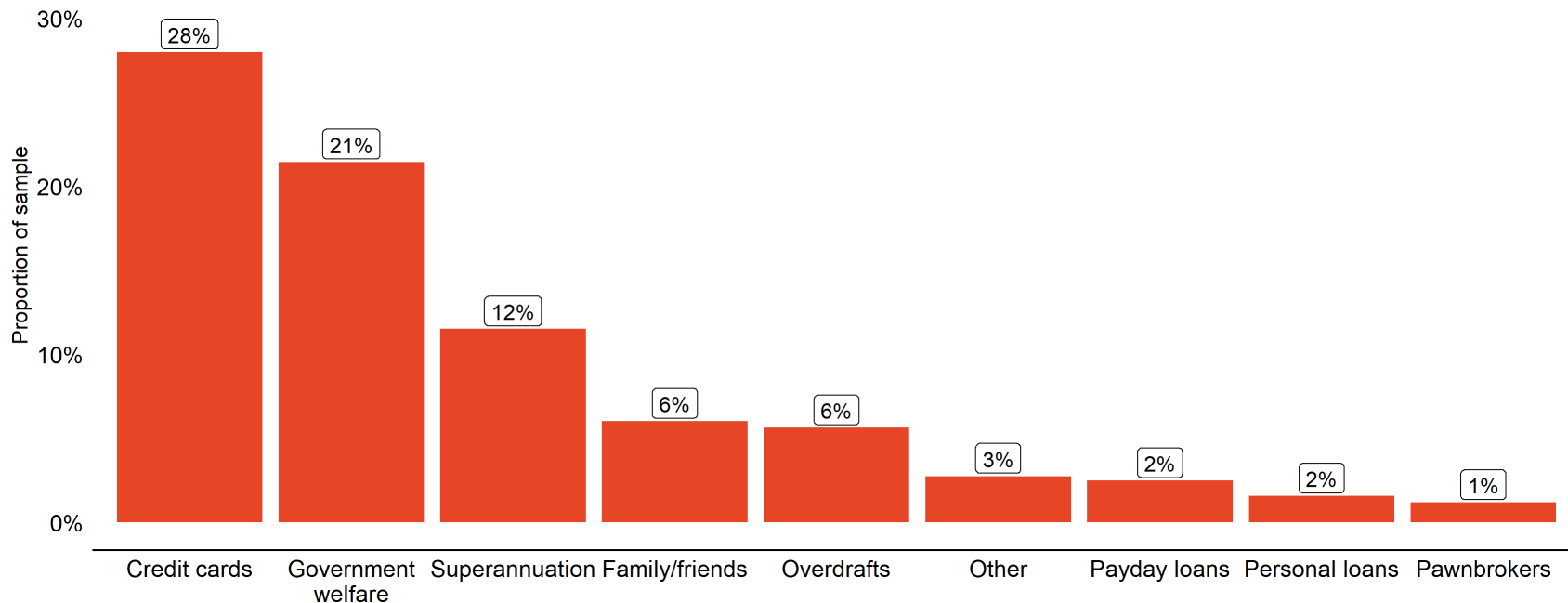
# Across age groups, most participants reported spending less or about the same amount of time gambling



# Younger participants were more likely to report increasing their gambling spend



# Access to loans and government stimulus packages



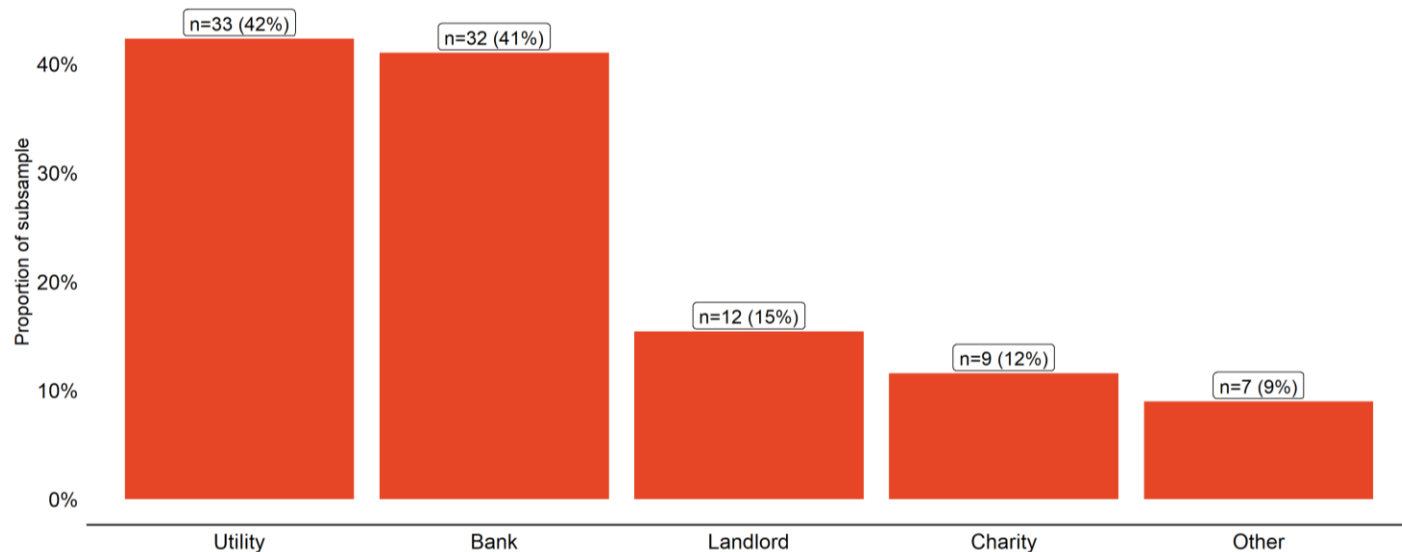
**$N = 764$**

**Question: Which of the following have you used to access money for any purpose in the past 30 days? (Select all that apply)**

**See slide 42 for definitions.**

# Access to financial assistance programs

- Most participants (90%) reported not having accessed financial assistance programs during the shutdown
- 78 participants reported accessing financial assistance programs



## **Appendix 2: Definitions**



# Definitions

**Online race betting:** Betting on horse or dog races online

**Online sports betting:** Betting on sports (excluding esports) online

**Online lotteries:** Lottery tickets, like Powerball or Oz Lotto, (not including instant scratch tickets) online

**Land-based lotteries:** Instant scratch tickets (“scratchies”), or lotto or lottery games, like Powerball or Oz Lotto, from a land-based retailer (e.g., newsagent)

**Online non-sports betting:** Betting on non-sporting events (e.g., politics, weather events) online

**Online casino games:** Casino table games (e.g., blackjack, roulette), poker machines/slots, instant scratch tickets, or bingo online

**Online esports betting:** Betting on esports online

**Land-based private betting:** Private betting for real money (e.g., playing cards or mah-jong with friends and family) in a land-based setting (e.g., at home)

**Online private betting:** Private betting for real money (e.g., playing cards or mah-jong with friends and family) online

**Online poker:** Poker online

**Online keno:** Keno online (i.e., not including in a land-based gambling venue)

# Definitions

**Credit cards:** Credit cards (not including pre-paid or debit cards which only allow expenditure of savings)

**Personal loans:** Personal loans from a bank or credit union (typically used for specific purchases, such as a holiday or car, and usually requiring repayment within 1-5 years)

**Overdrafts:** Overdrawing a bank account (taking out more money than you have in your account, so you end up with a negative balance)

**Pawnbrokers:** Pawnbrokers or pawn shops (leaving valuable items, such as jewellery, with a pawnbroker in order to borrow money)

**Payday loans:** Quick cash loans, e.g., from Cash Converters, Money3, Nimble

**Government welfare:** e.g., Centrelink payments, including JobKeeper, JobSeeker

**Family/friends:** Financial support from family and/or friends

**Superannuation:** Funds from superannuation

**Bank:** Financial assistance from a bank

**Utility:** Financial assistance from a utility provider (e.g., water, gas, electricity, phone, Internet providers)

**Landlord:** Financial assistance from a rental property landlord

**Charity:** Financial assistance from a charity or community organisation

# **Appendix 3: References**

# References

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