



Mitigating the Impact of Gambling in Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Communities: A Social Work Perspective





Which of these individuals has a gambling problem?

Introduction

- Gambling harm is not merely an individual problem; it is deeply embedded in the **social, economic, and cultural contexts** within which people live.
- In socially and economically disadvantaged communities where unemployment, poverty, and limited access to resources already create vulnerability the consequences of gambling are magnified.
- From a **social work perspective**, addressing gambling requires us to look beyond the act of gambling itself and toward the **broader structural and systemic factors** that sustain harm.

Definition of socially and economically disadvantaged communities:

- Socially and economically disadvantaged communities are **groups of people and geographic areas** that experience **systemic barriers** to resources, opportunities, and social mobility.
- They face persistent **inequalities in income, education, employment, housing, healthcare, and political representation**, which collectively place them at greater risk of social and health-related harms, including gambling-related harm.
- In social work terms, disadvantage is not just about individual poverty; it reflects **structural oppression, historical marginalization, and limited access to power and participation**.

Who Are Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Communities?

Dimension

Indicators of Disadvantage

Examples

Economic

Low income (Grant recipients), high unemployment, informal economy

Townships, rural/informal settlements (Soweto, Alexandra, Umlazi etc)

Social

Marginalization, low social capital

Women-headed households, migrant groups

Educational

Poor school quality, limited tertiary access

Youth in low-income areas (18-35 years)

Health

Limited mental health and addiction services

Rural and under-resourced communities (no libraries, parks)

Spatial

High outlet density, poor infrastructure

Inner-city or peri-urban areas



Understanding Gambling in Context

- A critical yet often overlooked reality is that **gambling outlets and online platforms are disproportionately concentrated in low-income communities**. In these areas, where there are few recreational facilities, limited employment opportunities, and scarce mental health services, gambling often becomes one of the only accessible forms of entertainment or social interaction.
- For many individuals, gambling is not merely about winning money, it is about coping with poverty, stress, loneliness, and the pressures of survival. Women, in particular, have reported using gambling to “stretch” household income or to find temporary relief from emotional fatigue and social isolation.
- Thus, gambling in disadvantaged communities is not just a leisure activity; it becomes a mechanism of social survival, reflecting the broader structural inequities that restrict opportunity and perpetuate marginalization.



The consequences of gambling related harm:

- The consequences of gambling are multifaceted and deeply interconnected.
- From a social work lens, we recognize that **the impact extends beyond financial loss**, it touches every aspect of family and community life.
- Families face **conflict, neglect, and breakdown** as financial pressures and emotional distress escalate.
- In some cases, **social grants, including children's SASSA funds**, are diverted toward gambling, undermining the purpose of social protection and jeopardizing children's nutrition, education, and emotional security.
- Communities experience the **erosion of trust, increased social isolation**, and the outflow of wealth from already struggling local economies.

Theoretical Frameworks Guiding Social Work Response:





The Biopsychosocial model:

Component

Examples

Social Work Implications

Biological Factors

Genetic predisposition, brain chemistry, impulsivity

Recognize addiction as partly physiological; integrate referrals for medical/psychiatric assessment.

Psychological Factors

Depression, anxiety, trauma, coping mechanisms

Provide counseling, trauma-informed therapy, and emotional regulation interventions.

Social Factors

Poverty, unemployment, isolation, cultural norms, access to gambling

Address structural inequality, promote community development, and advocate for equitable social policy.

Empowerment Theory:

- The Empowerment Theory reminds us that people are not passive victims.
- They must be active participants in defining problems and shaping solutions.
- Social workers can facilitate safe, participatory spaces where individuals share experiences, challenge stigma, and co-create prevention strategies.
- Peer-led support groups and lived-experience advocacy networks are powerful examples of empowerment in action.

Strengths Perspective

- Through the **Strengths Perspective**, social workers shift from pathologizing to recognizing capacity.
- We view people not as “addicts,” but as individuals with resilience, creativity, and untapped potential.
- Interventions grounded in this perspective foster **self-determination, confidence, and recovery**, essential for breaking cycles of dependency

Systems Theory

- Finally, Systems Theory highlights that gambling harm does not exist in isolation.
- It is intertwined with unemployment, housing insecurity, family stress, and substance misuse.
- Therefore, effective intervention must be integrated and multidisciplinary, addressing interconnected issues rather than isolated symptoms.



Social work intervention in practice:

- **Early Intervention and Casework:**
- Social workers are often the **first point of contact** for individuals and families affected by gambling harm.
- Frequently, gambling problems surface indirectly through crises such as **household debt, child neglect, eviction, domestic conflict, or mental health challenges**. Because gambling is often hidden due to shame or stigma, early detection requires keen assessment skills and trauma-informed sensitivity.

Key Components of Early Intervention:



1. Routine Screening and Assessment:

e.g. Mobile assessment using PGSI in those communities

MOBILE COUNSELING & TESTING UNIT





2. Counselling and Motivational Interviewing:

- **Counselling and Motivational Interviewing (MI):**
- MI is a client-centered, non-confrontational counseling technique that helps individuals explore ambivalence and build intrinsic motivation for change.
- In gambling cases, MI can guide clients to recognize the negative impact of gambling while reinforcing their autonomy and capacity to choose recovery.

3 Family Therapy and Relationship Work:

Gambling harms rarely affect one person alone. Families often experience emotional, financial, and relational distress. Family therapy can rebuild trust, open communication, and strengthen coping mechanisms within the household. This aligns with the systems theory approach, recognizing that recovery must involve the family unit, not just the individual.

4 Referrals to Specialized Support:

Social workers should maintain a network of referral pathways to addiction treatment centers, financial counseling services, and mental health professionals. Collaboration ensures that clients receive comprehensive care addressing both immediate needs (e.g., debt management) and underlying psychological issues.



6 Crisis Intervention and Safety Planning:

- In severe cases such as those involving child neglect, domestic violence, or suicidal ideation, social workers must implement crisis intervention strategies.
- This may include safety **planning, temporary shelter arrangements, or coordination** with law enforcement and **child protection** services.

Mitigation under the 3 levels of intervention:

Level	Focus	Social Work Role	Outcome
Micro (Early Intervention & Casework)	Individual and family support	Counselor, case manager, advocate	Recovery, stability, improved well-being
Mezzo (Advocacy & Community Work)	Groups, organizations, policy influence	Advocate, educator, coalition builder	Structural change, ethical policy, reduced harm
Macro (Community Empowerment)	Systems and social reform	Community organizer, policy strategist	Empowerment, resilience, and social justice

Conclusion:

- In conclusion, mitigating the impact of gambling in socially and economically disadvantaged communities is both a **professional responsibility** and a **moral imperative** for social workers.
- We must recognize gambling harm not as an isolated addiction, but as a **symptom of broader social and economic inequality**.
- By applying our theoretical frameworks from the **Biopsychosocial Model** to **Empowerment Theory** and by centering **community resilience and systemic change**, social workers can lead transformative efforts that protect the most vulnerable.
- Ultimately, to reduce gambling harm, we must address its root causes: **poverty, exclusion, and lack of opportunity**.
Through advocacy, empowerment, and social justice-driven practice, we can help build communities where survival no longer depends on chance but on collective strength and equitable opportunity.



Thank you!

- *“Social work exists not only to mend the broken, but to challenge the structures that keep breaking them.”*
— Anonymous