



**ACT GAMBLING**  

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**SUPPORT SERVICE**

# External Annual Report 2023-2024



*Relationships Australia*<sup>®</sup>  
CANBERRA & REGION

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## Gambling harm means much more than losing money.

It is also:

- Losing sleep because of gambling
- Fighting with your family and friends because of gambling
- Hiding your situation because you are ashamed
- Feeling anxious that someone will find out about your situation
- Being distracted from work or school by thoughts of gambling
- AND so much more.

## If you or someone you know is impacted by gambling, help is at hand

All services are **100% free of charge** and are available **24 hours a day, 7 days a week**.

Every year, the ACT Gambling Support Service (AGSS) assists hundreds of people, and we can help you too if:

- You are worried about your gambling.
- You are affected by the gambling of a family member or friend.
- You are a community support worker or health worker working with people affected by gambling.
- You are working in the gambling industry and want to better support your patrons.
- You are a community member interested in learning more about gambling harm in the ACT community.

# The AGSS team tailors support to meet individual needs

By providing:

- **Gambling counselling** – flexible, therapeutic support from highly qualified, experienced gambling clinicians for anyone affected by gambling harm including people impacted by the gambling of a family member or friend.
- **Financial counselling** - financial loss, instability or crisis is often experienced by individuals and their families in relation to gambling. AGSS financial counselling services provide practical advice and support to people experiencing financial difficulties as a result of gambling.
- **24/7 telephone support** – calls to the gambling helpline originating in the in ACT are answered by trained AGSS staff all day, every day.
- **Peer support** – talk to an AGSS team member who has lived experience of gambling harm, or meet other people with experiences of gambling harm through a peer support group.

*The ACT Gambling Support Service is funded through the Gambling Harm Prevention and Mitigation Fund. Relationships Australia Canberra & Region leads and coordinates delivery of the service in collaboration with Care Financial and Relationships Australia Queensland.*



**ACT GAMBLING**  
**SUPPORT SERVICE**

**1800 858 858**

# OUR CLIENTS

2023 - 24



The average number of counselling sessions attended was

**2.4** sessions per person

**56%** aged 25 to 44 years

largest age group of people who sought help




More men than women sought support


**♂ 53%**  
men (256)


**♀ 46%**  
women (224)

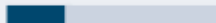
**\* 1%**  
non-binary (5)

## WHAT OUR NEW CLIENTS TOLD US

**72%**   
said that gambling had been problematic for them for over two years before they sought help

**79%**   
of new clients report they gamble at least once a week

**42%**   
of new clients self-referred to the service

**33%**   
of new clients said they mainly gamble online

**42%**   
of new clients sought help due to relationship issues and 39% due to financial concerns

**41%**   
of new clients reported that they usually gamble in clubs

**61%**   
reported poker machines as their main or only form of gambling

**64%**   
said they spend more than \$1,000 per month on gambling

## AGSS CASE STUDIES FROM THE 2023-2024 YEAR

### Case Study 1: Gambling Counselling

**Kerry\* is a 30-year-old woman with a long history of mental health concerns and concurrent gambling behaviours impacting on her ability to live independently.**

Kerry presents as frustrated by her current situation and seeking support to bring about change in her life. Gambling behaviour is an activity fully supported and actively encouraged by her family. Kerry initially viewed gambling as an enjoyable activity and a way to make money. Gambling losses were buffered by family members sharing winnings and financially supporting each other to maintain ongoing gambling engagement. Gambling is also a social activity for Kerry and an escape from boredom.

Kerry presents with a mild intellectual disability, suicidal ideation, and a range of physical and mental health concerns. She describes a history of childhood trauma. In an attempt to 'fix her problems', Kerry connects with a variety of services and support professionals often starting out with strong engagement however inevitably ending when Kerry decides the support no longer suits her needs. Kerry currently displays a strong motivation to make changes with her gambling behaviour.

At times Kerry found it challenging to engage in counselling. Her parents do not support her seeing a counsellor or facilitate access to face-to-face sessions. Kerry and the counsellor utilise public spaces outside the family home where she can talk freely, without being overheard by family or others. Progress was initially slow due to the challenges of managing a mild intellectual disability, ongoing mental health concerns, and family pressure to gamble.

Through counselling, Kerry now understands she has high social needs which conflict with her parents' cultural expectations and values. The counsellor supported Kerry to achieve her social needs through volunteer work, attending group programs, engaging with disability support workers, and looking for social opportunities outside her family. Kerry became more comfortable with using public transport if a parent was unavailable to transport her to activities. She now finds social interactions have a positive effect on her general mood and significantly reduce her urge to gamble.

Strong rapport with her AGSS counsellor aided Kerry to maintain her motivation and achieve personal milestones she had previously not thought possible such as self-advocacy, completing study programs, and developing computer skills.

Education on gambling odds helped Kerry understand that she cannot make money from gambling and now makes realistic and achievable goals for spending that is not beyond her income or reliant on family.

Counselling also assisted Kerry to be more flexible in her interactions with her family and with other service providers. She is now able to work with others to support her in her mental health journey. Looking back over the past year has enabled Kerry to see changes in herself that she did not think

possible. As Kerry grew her social connections, she reduced her gambling activity and eventually stopped completely.

Kerry is proud of her achievements and better able to navigate challenges that previously would have seen her retreat into the safety of her room.

### **Case Study 2: Gambling Counselling**

**Mary\* is a 34-year-old, culturally and linguistically diverse woman who presented at the ACT Gambling Support Service last year after she lost her job due to her gambling.**

Mary presents as overwhelmed, anxious and with symptoms of depression during her first counselling session with her AGSS counsellor. During her session she described layers of trauma from her childhood. Her mother abandoned her and her younger brother as small children, and she described emotional and physical abuse perpetrated by her father and stepmother. Since Mary had moved to Australia 10 years ago, they regularly contacted her asking for money.

Mary reported significant workplace stressors as a receptionist including inconsistent workhours and lack of leave. She experienced significant anxiety and her mental health deteriorated considerably. She started to experience flashbacks from her childhood and thoughts of dying by suicide. Playing the pokies became a maladaptive form of self-soothing. Her husband, family and friends were unaware of the extent of Mary's gambling or her mental health issues.

Mary could not afford to fund the frequency of her gambling and started to take money from her workplace to play, thinking that she would give the money back after winning. When her workplace discovered this, her employment was terminated. This was the catalyst for Mary accessing AGSS support.

Her AGSS counsellor worked intensively with Mary at first using trauma informed cognitive behavioural therapy, aspects of acceptance and commitment therapy and schema therapy to address gambling triggers, childhood trauma and anxious and depressive symptoms. She stopped gambling shortly after her first appointment, however experienced an increase in anxiety and depression. Mary was also referred to our financial counselling, the Women's Legal Centre for assistance with her court case, and a general practitioner for support with her mental health.

She attended fortnightly appointments for more than a year. She reported not gambling for the duration of the treatment. The service helped Mary to stop gambling and regain her confidence in the workplace. She eventually re-entered the world of work as an administrator in a small office where she felt very supported by her colleagues. As a result of the support she received, she reported reduction of anxiety related heart palpitations and suicidal thoughts, better self-esteem and improved relationships with her husband and children.

### **Case Study 3: Financial Counselling**

**Steve\*, a 44-year-old man, contacted the AGSS for assistance in applying for rent relief. Financial issues were causing a strain on his relationship, and he was also worried that his partner might leave.**

Steve is married with teenage children. He works full-time for a private firm however has had a significant period of leave in the past 12 months following a bike accident. Steve ordinarily does a reasonable amount of exercise including running and bike riding but has not been able to do this since the accident. Steve and his family frequently attend the local club for meals. Since his accident, Steve has been spending more time at the club and on the poker machines. He has also increased his time on online sports betting apps.

During the conversation with his AGSS financial counsellor, Steve mentioned that he also had a credit card that had reached the limit and several Buy Now Pay Later arrangements. He was also behind on his car loan payments with the credit provider threatening repossession.

Steve noted that the financial and relationship pressure was contributing to his gambling, and gambling was an escape from reality. He had reached the point where he was struggling not to gamble every day. At the same time, he recognised that the increased gambling had led to significant financial losses and his inability to meet his financial commitments.

Steve was referred to gambling counselling to discuss his increased gambling activity and his counsellor worked with him to apply for a rent relief grant for almost \$2,000 which provided his family with some relief with their private rental situation. He was also provided with a \$100 credit on his electricity account.

A Statement of Financial Position was undertaken showing that Steve had some capacity to make repayments on his credit card and car loan but not the full amount. Negotiations were undertaken with the bank to waive interest on the credit card given Steve had reduced income during his leave. This was successful. A payment arrangement was set up to pay down the outstanding amount and the credit card was cancelled.

Negotiations were undertaken with the car finance company. The company were not initially willing to assist but after several contacts they agreed to provide Steve with a 3 month no payment period until he was back at work full time. That time has just expired.

Steve has returned to full-time work and recommenced payments with a small additional sum to catch up on arrears. Whilst Steve continues to gamble, he has reduced this significantly and continues to work with a gambling counsellor. His financial situation is stable which Steve indicated had reduced his stress levels.

*\*Names changed to protect client confidentiality*



## OUR WORK AND RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ACT 2023-2024

### OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEOPLE WHO USE OUR SERVICES

#### *Overview*

Relationships Australia Canberra & Region (RACR) has been working collaboratively to provide gambling support to the Canberra community for more than 10 years. We have a strong reputation as demonstrated by steadily increasing engagement and strongly positive evaluation results.

To enhance engagement with our service users the team continue to build strong referral pathways and relationships through connection with community service organisations. This is an important means to engage with people who may be seeking support for co-occurring issues such as alcohol and other drugs and/or mental health issues.

The AGSS service is designed to provide **multiple entry points** and **immediate engagement with clients** through the 24/7 gambling helpline, accessible face to face and online counselling, group sessions and peer support.

#### *Gambling Helpline*

Callers to the gambling helpline can talk to fully qualified clinicians and receive over the phone information, intake, assessment and counselling, no matter the time, day or night. Callers can confidently discuss the impact gambling is having on them or someone they know. Clinicians provide information on support options and make face to face, phone or online appointments with a qualified counsellor.

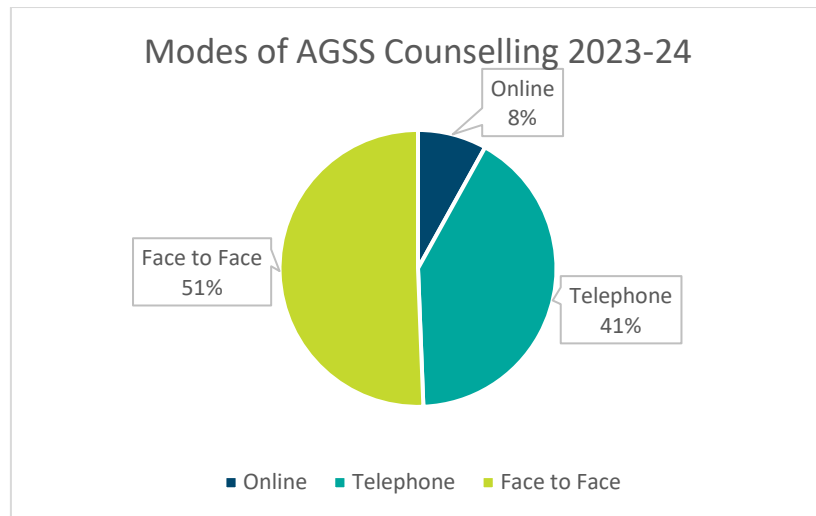
During 2023-24 the helpline received significantly more valid enquiries, with a 37% increase on calls from people in the ACT when compared to the previous year.

There has also been a significant increase in invalid calls to the helpline. It is thought that the introduction of mandatory taglines and calls to action, which include the helpline number, on betting advertisements may have impacted this. This was introduced in March 2023. Also, the new national Gambling Help Online website, which was launched in August 2023, could have led to an increase in the number of people calling the helpline, potentially to test what happens when they call.

#### *Gambling Counselling and Family and Friend Counselling*

Our experience supporting people impacted by the gambling of a family member or friend confirms the reasons people gamble and continue to gamble to the point of experiencing harm, are complex. Our clinicians take time to systematically look at the whole of a person's life, not just their gambling. This helps get to the core of gambling urges and addresses the factors underpinning the person's gambling

To maximise access, gambling counselling is offered by counsellors based in the ACT face to face at RACR offices in Deakin and Gungahlin, over the telephone and online. The mode preferred by clients is face to face counselling, closely followed by telephone counselling:



The team continue to maintain a strong reputation as a trusted and highly effective service provider as evidenced by RACR evaluation data which shows that 100% of our survey sample were satisfied with the service that they received and felt that the service listened to them and understood their issues. One client commented that:

*“The counsellor that I saw was very understanding, helpful and they talked to me at my level and not at me.”*

### **Financial Counselling**

The AGSS financial counselling is a valuable source of support for individuals, couples and families who are in financial distress as a result of gambling. Financial counsellors provide information, advocacy and negotiation with creditors about repayment arrangements.

Financial problems are a leading trigger for people to contact AGSS with 39% of new clients of the AGSS citing money troubles as the main reason for seeking help. Feeling overwhelmed by financial issues is often reported by clients. Having a plan and the support of a professional to see it through is often a great relief.

The AGSS Financial Counselling team have delivered 25% more financial counselling sessions in the 2023-24 financial year when compared to 2022-23. The number of clients supported has also increased by 10%.

Despite increased demand, Care Financials’ evaluation data is strongly positive. The report shows that over 86% of respondents indicated they were listened to and understood, were satisfied with the service, and felt better able to deal with their situation after receiving financial counselling. One client who accessed financial counselling commented that:

*“The team I have dealt with...have been amazing in listening, understanding and assisting in every avenue they can with my financial crisis.”*

### ***Peer Support and Community Education***

Peer support at the AGSS provides encouragement, assistance, and information from individuals who share similar experiences of gambling harm. It is delivered through peer support groups and education sessions as well as 1:1 sessions with the AGSS Lived Experience Coordinator.

Sharing lived experience is vital to reducing the stigma and shame associated with high-risk gambling behaviours and feedback from education and support groups sessions indicates that this is particularly valued by participants:

*“I liked hearing others’ stories, having a safe place and being heard.”*

*“The presenter’s own experience was helpful because his story was what I resonated with.”*

*“I liked hearing stories of harm and recovery and being able to share my own.”*

*“The life experience of the speaker...I could really related to him and it was truly inspirational to me and gave me a new perspective on my own recovery journey.”*

The AGSS collects feedback from group participants which has been consistently positive. Across the 2023-24 year:

- **90%** of group participants surveyed said that they felt understood and respected by the group facilitators.
- **87%** of participants rated the group as 4 or 5 (where 1 indicates ‘bad’ and 5 indicates ‘great’).
- **90%** liked the way the information was presented.

## OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY

### Community Organisations

The AGSS team work closely with community organisations in our region to increase awareness of the signs of gambling harm and how individuals can access AGSS support. RACR also regularly connects with other community organisations to maintain up to date knowledge of complimentary supports to ensure we are able to refer clients who have needs outside of the scope of the AGSS. These relationships are vital to ensuring that the service is visible and accessible.

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*“Thanks so much for your support and service for both the organisation and the participants, particularly in Solaris. We really value what you bring to our space and look forward to continuing our relationship”*

*Justice Services Manager, Karralika, December 2023*

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In 2023-24, the AGSS team have taken steps to increase engagement with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. A discrete, wallet sized card with AGSS contact details has been printed in simplified Chinese and has been distributed to 45 club venues. This resource will help increase access from a community we know is impacted.

The AGSS team commenced weekly engagement with the Yeddung Mura Aboriginal Corporation this year, with a counsellor and lived experience worker spending time on site raising awareness of gambling harm and working to prevent gambling harm in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The AGSS Lived Experience Coordinator shares stories of lived experience at the yarning circle and is developing trust in the community.



**The team providing information on AGSS services and raising awareness of gambling harm at the Bruce Campus during CIT 'O' Week**

The team connected with new students at CIT Orientation Week, manning pop-up stalls at both Reid and Bruce campuses, talking with them about gambling, gaming and what to do if they or someone they know is experiencing gambling harm. The team also manned pop-up stalls at University of Canberra and ANU Orientation Weeks.

Throughout 2023-24, new relationships have been fostered with associations under the Coalition of Major Community Sports ACT. The teams' work with the Canberra Raiders NRL team continues, with the team providing information on signs and impacts of gambling harm and providing information on AGSS services to the Raiders Wellbeing Team.

The AGSS continues to advocate for gambling harm education for high school students and is a contributor to the GRC’s project developing keystone teacher training and classroom resources in partnership with the ACT Education Directorate.

## OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ACT GAMBLING INDUSTRY

During 2023-24 the AGSS was invited to speak at a number of industry events including the Gambling Harm Minimisation Micro Conference held by Clubs ACT where the AGSS Lived Experience Coordinator shared his lived experience.

In answer to the question, ‘What were the most useful aspects of the session?’, asked post event, responses included the below comments:

RESPONSES
Getting a clear understanding of what we need to do to help situations where gambling may be a negative issue in a member’s life
Lived experience and identification of indicators.
I am aware of my roles and responsibilities as a board member. I gained further insights into gambling assistance more broadly
Lived experience. Understanding of responsibility as Board member. General understanding of the issue.
Understanding gambling issues better
The sideshow made it simple to follow.

In addition, the AGSS:

- continues to use a regular slot in the Clubs ACT newsletter
- continues to contribute to the delivery of Gambling Contact Officer training
- continues to provide resources and materials that promote the AGSS to gambling venues.

### **Gambling Harm Awareness Week 2023**

This year’s Gambling Harm Awareness Week (GHAW) focussed on the theme of ‘Prevent, Empower, Support’. The AGSS promoted the event through RACR and AGSS networks and assisted in the development of materials for the event.



**AGSS Lived Experience Coordinator, Markus Fischer, and Steve Roach at the Clubs ACT Micro Conference, May 2024**

The team leveraged their relationship with the NRL’s Alan Tongue to create a video promoting GHAW 2023 which received more than 2,000 views on Facebook.

At the main event on 19 October 2023, AGSS Lived Experience Coordinator, Markus Fischer, took the floor after the Minister's address to present on breaking down the barriers to help seeking, which included reflections on his own journey of recovery and the paths of people he has supported.

Across the week the team got out and about in the community promoting the service and raising awareness of gambling harm. The AGSS delivered pop-up events at various locations including Gungahlin, Civic and Tuggeranong.

## **FEEDBACK AND COMPLAINTS**

RACR aims to provide a safe environment for all clients, staff, and visitors at RACR venues and outreach locations. RACR's complaints handling system provides clients with a way to raise and have their concerns addressed. It also provides a valuable source of information to improve our services.

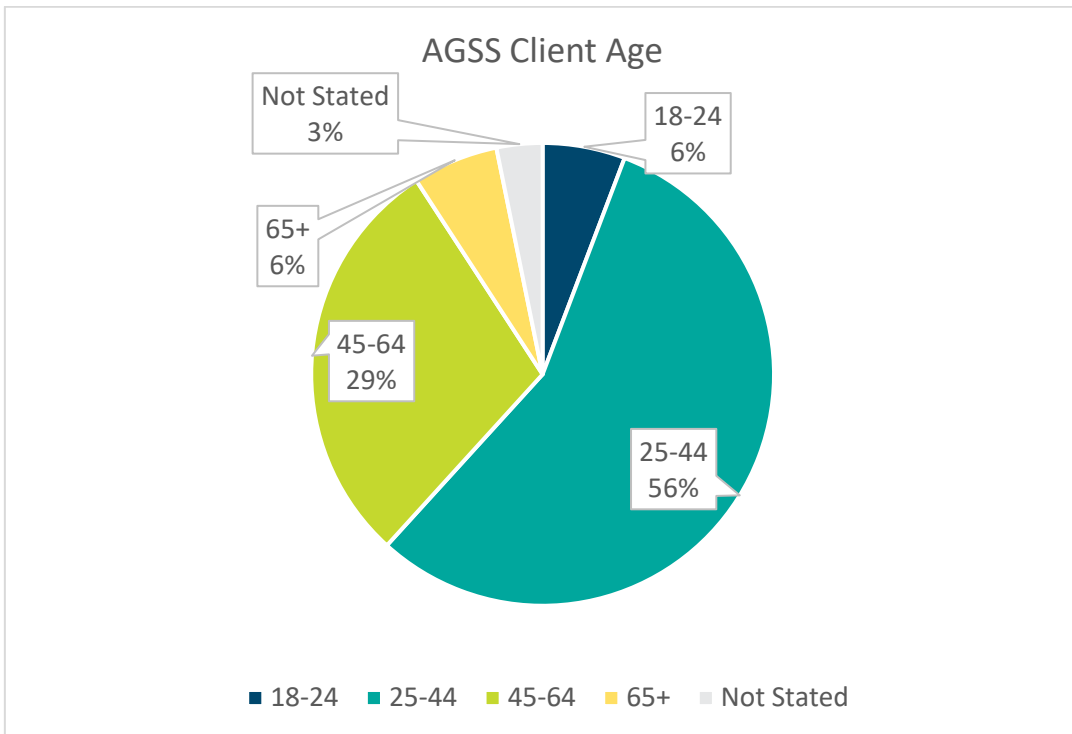
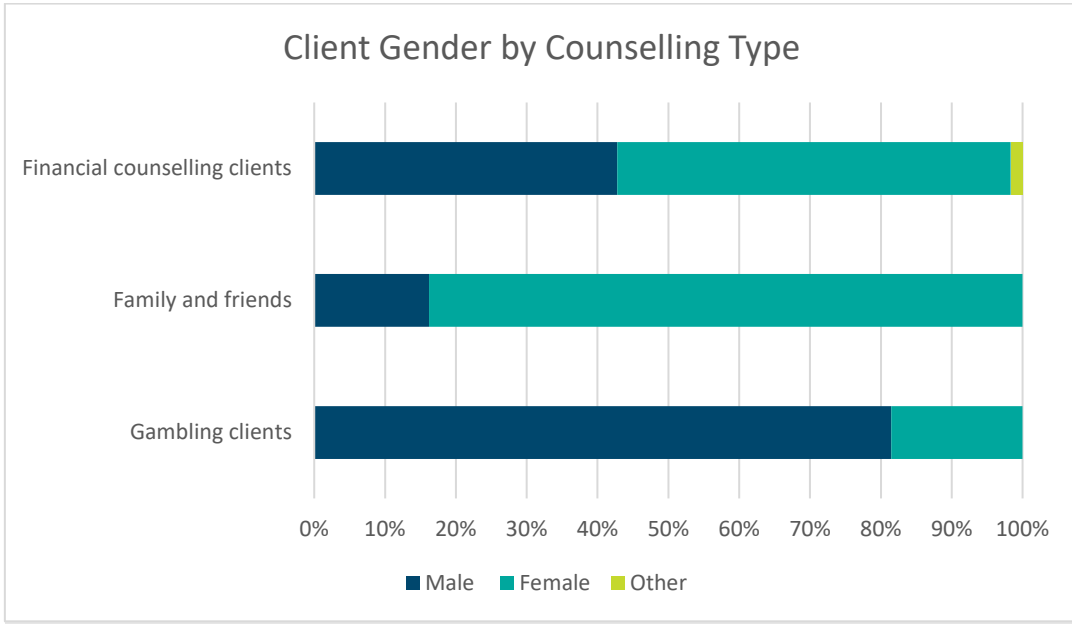
Feedback is always welcomed by RACR, and we actively seek feedback through our formal evaluation process. The AGSS team also gathers feedback from group participants at the end of each group and event to ensure that session content and delivery remains aligned with the needs of the community.

No complaints were received from service users during the 2023-24 period.

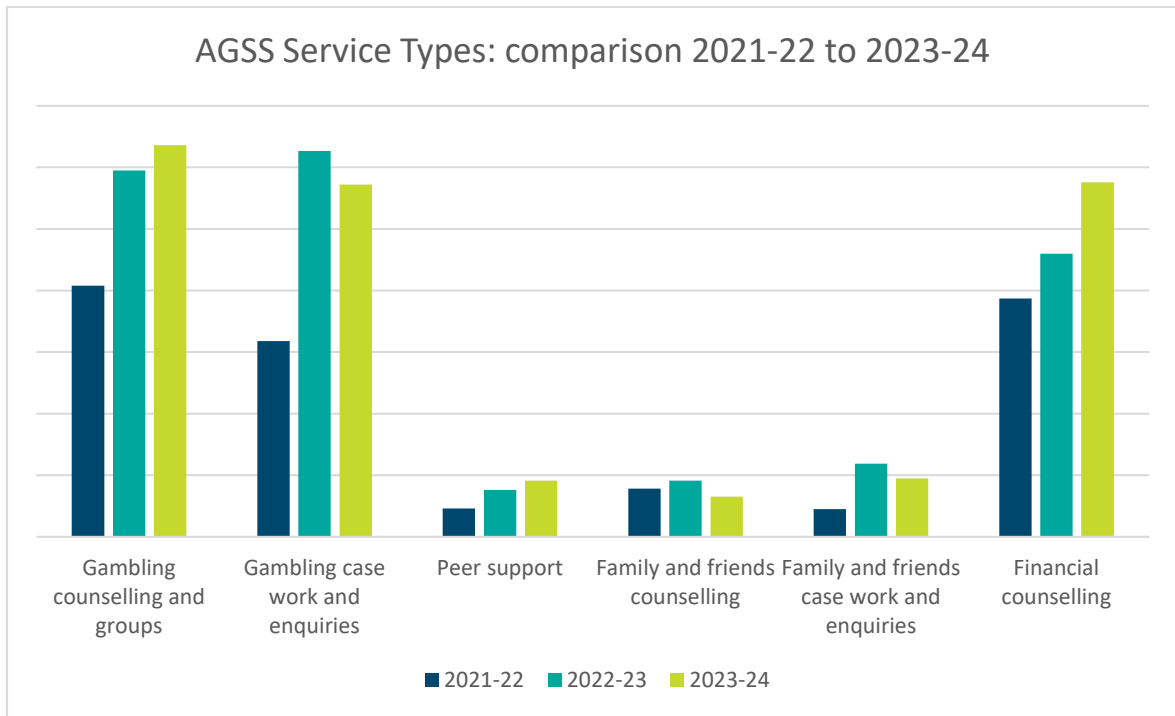
# AGSS 2023 – 2024 CLIENT STATISTICS: ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

## AGSS CLIENTS AND SESSIONS

### AGSS Clients

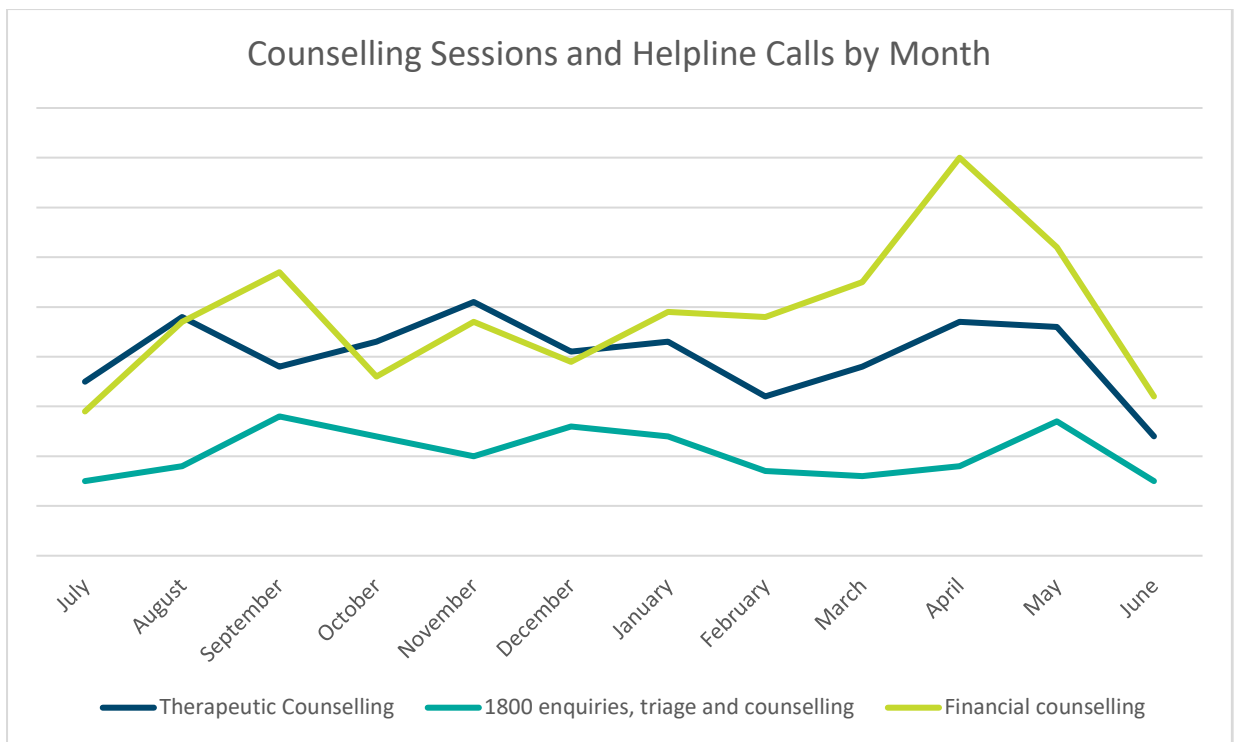


**AGSS Sessions**



The data above shows a steady cumulative increase in service delivery across peer support, gambling counselling and groups and financial counselling.

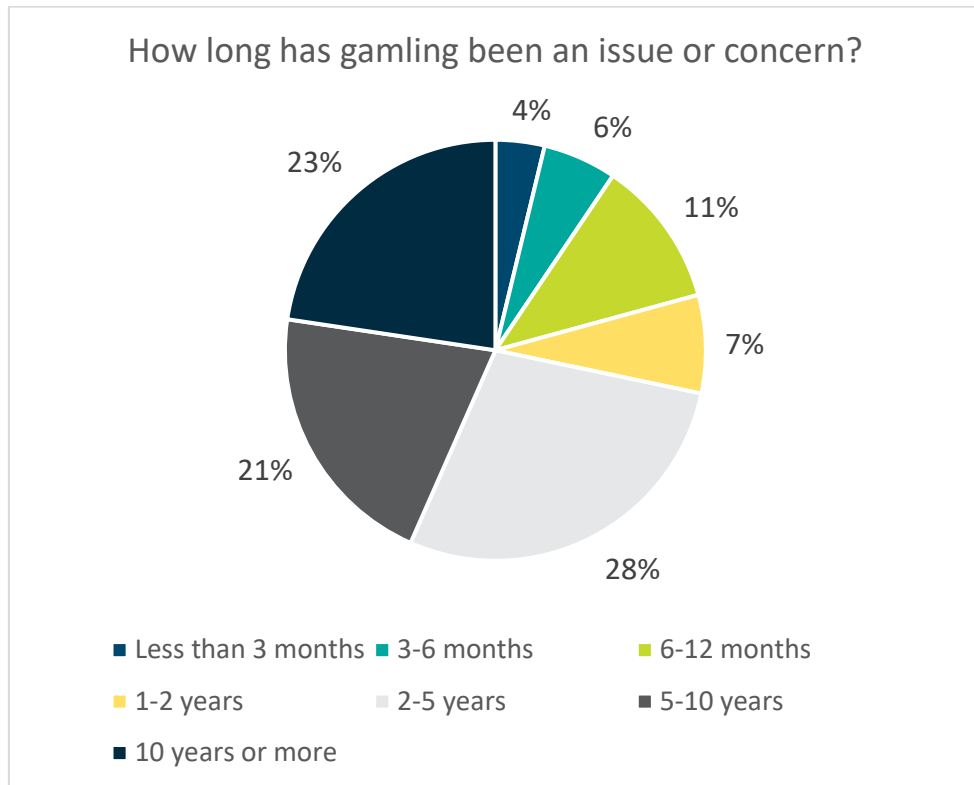
The 2023-24 counselling sessions and helpline calls by month data is shown below.



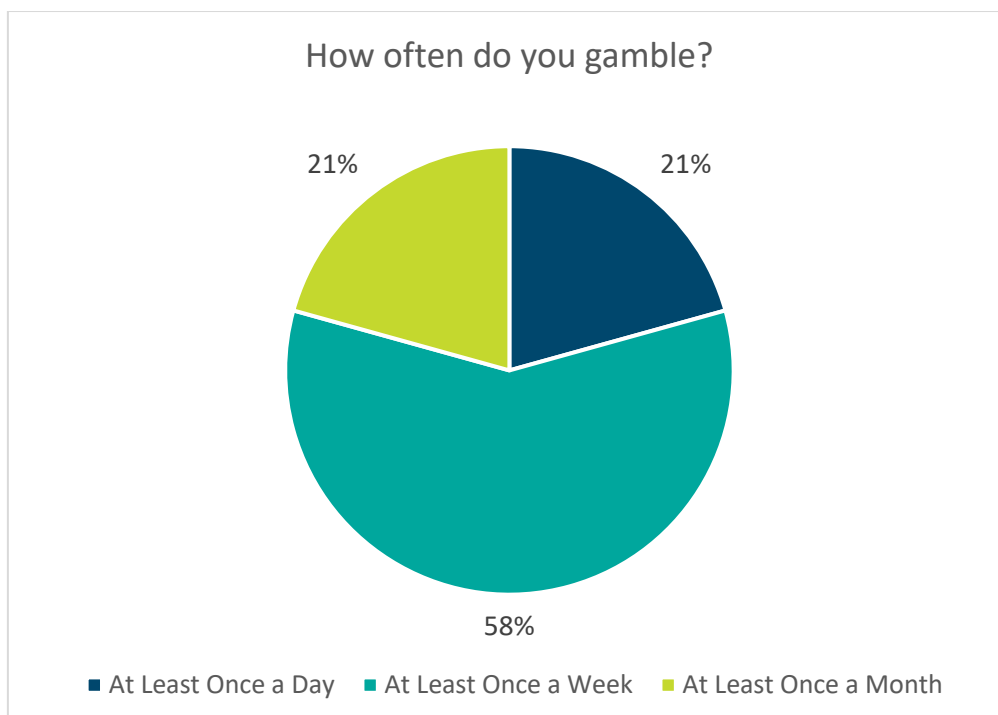


## GAMBLING HABITS – NEW CLIENTS

### *Duration of gambling harm – new gambling counselling clients*



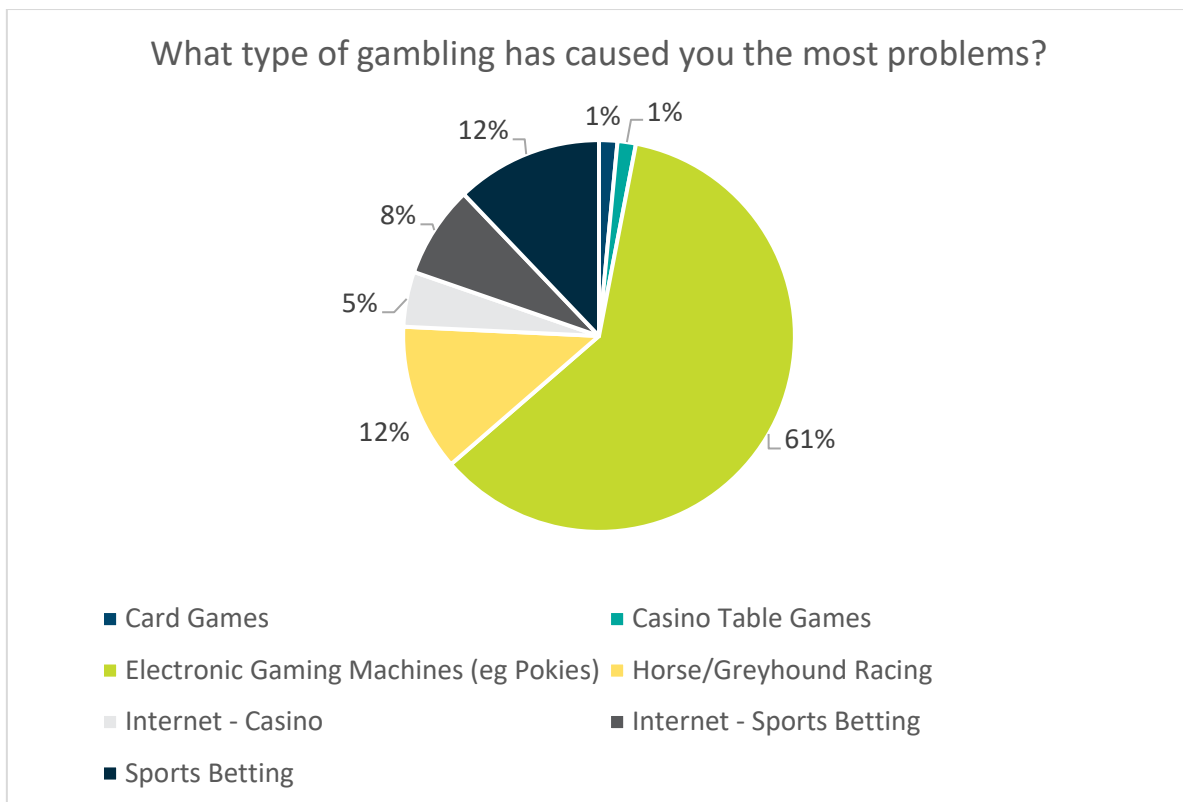
### *How often do you gamble? – new gambling counselling clients*



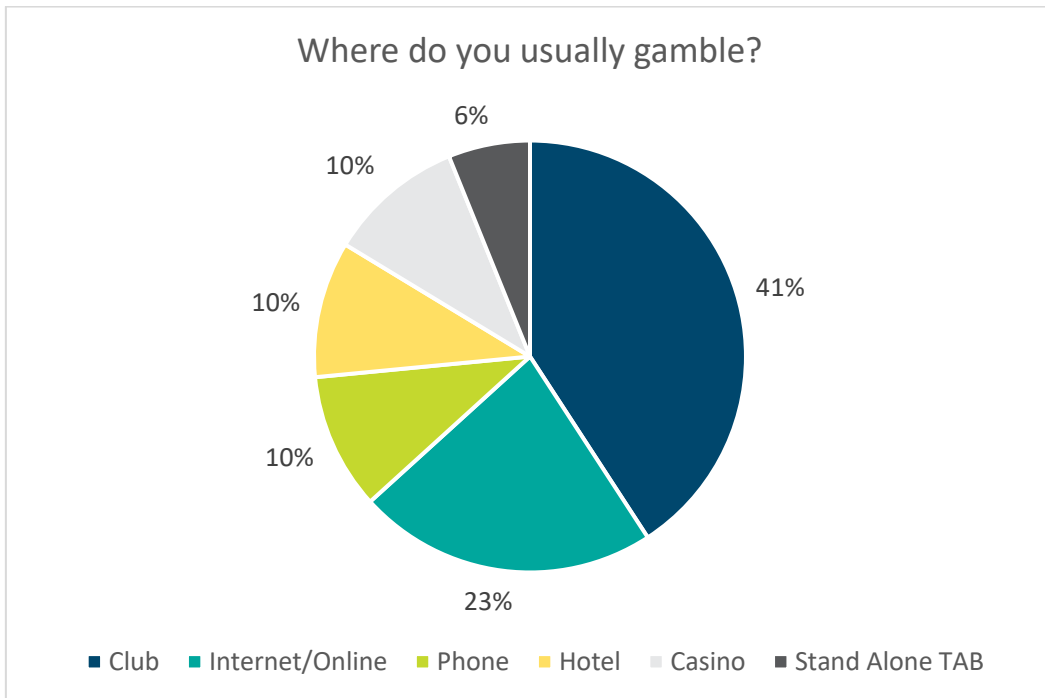
**How much do you spend on gambling per month? – new gambling counselling clients**



**Most problematic type of gambling - new clients**

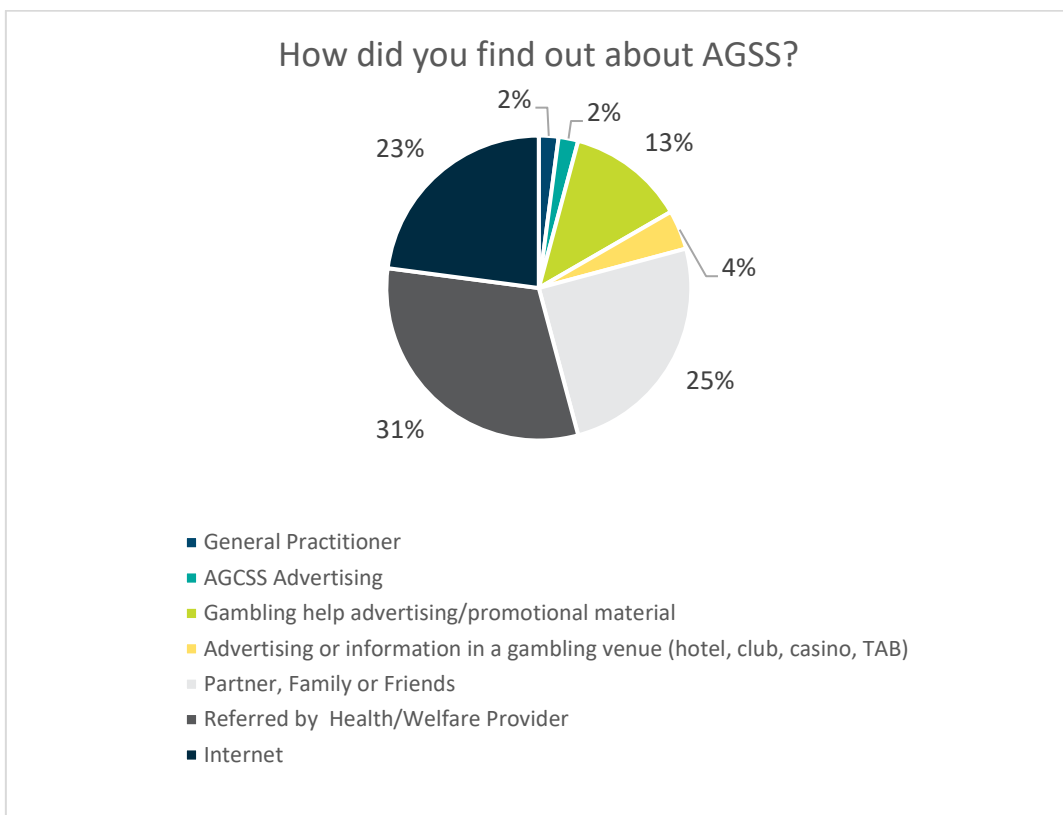


**Location of gambling – new therapeutic clients**



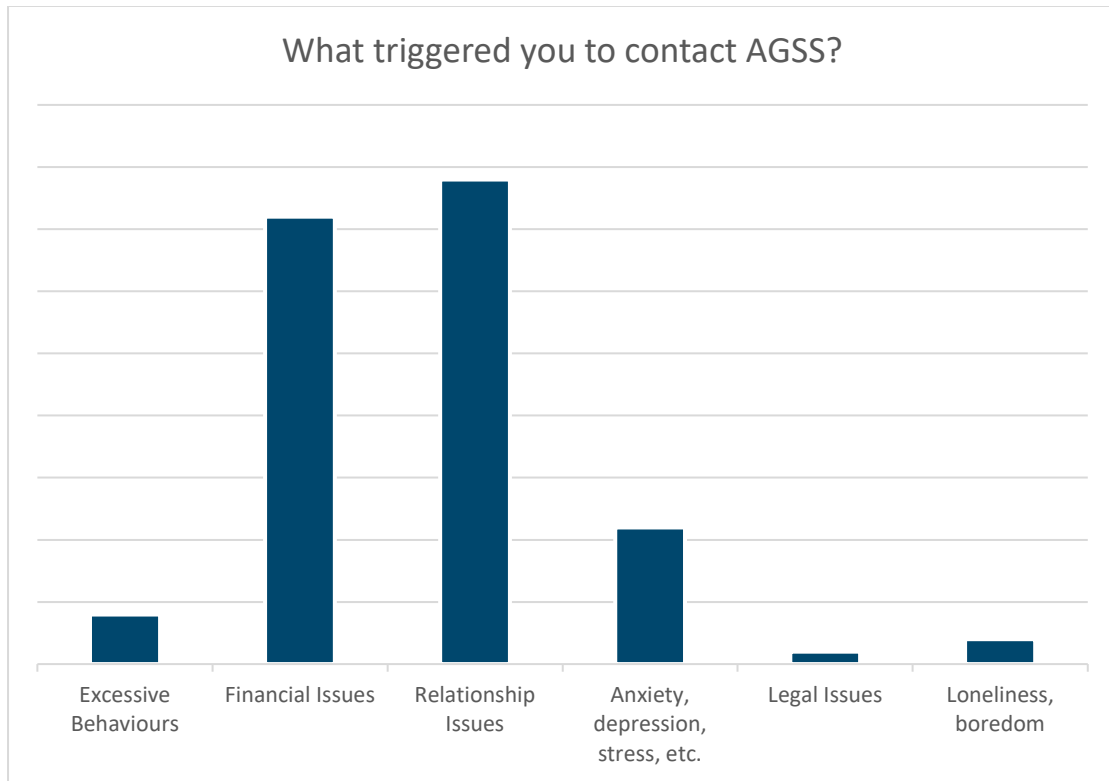
**How clients found out about the Service - all new clients**

The main source of referrals this year has been Health/Welfare Providers, which demonstrates the excellent work of the team in building inbound referral pathways.



### ***Triggers for seeking help***

Relationship issues became the primary cause for seeking help this year, however, financial issues remain a key cause for seeking help.



## AGSS CONTACT DETAILS

### Support for everyone

Call 1800 858 858 – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Email the team [AGSS@racr.org.au](mailto:AGSS@racr.org.au)

Visit the website <https://actgamblingsupport.org.au/>

### Financial counselling

Call 02 6257 1788 or 1800 007 007 (free call)

### Contact for industry and community partners

AGSS, 15 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600

Call 02 6122 7170 or email [AGSS@racr.org.au](mailto:AGSS@racr.org.au)

*Free Helpline*

**1800 858 858**

Open 24 hours, 7 days a week



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