

## **GAMBLING AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN BASILICATA. ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS ON A REGIONAL CASE STUDY IN SOUTHERN ITALY**

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**Abstract:** This essay analyzes the phenomenon of gambling in the Basilicata Region, reconsidering the results of a recent sociological survey conducted between 2022 and 2024 (EnFor, 2024). The approach adopted integrates the bio-psycho-social paradigm with theories of gambling as a social practice (Gordon & Reith 2019) and as a lifestyle connected to social capital (Bond et al. 2024). The survey highlights the widespread nature of gambling with growing youth participation and cultural normalization that also involves minors. Gambling emerges as a means of economic, identity, and relational compensation, fueled by social networks, environmental vulnerabilities, and symbolic representations. The conclusions emphasize the need for integrated public policies that are attentive to gender differences and the criminogenic implications of the phenomenon.

**Key words:** Gambling, Basilicata, sociology of addiction, social capital, Italy

### **1. Background and Introduction**

In this paper, we will focus on the social practice of legal gambling, with particular reference to the case of The Basilicata region in southern Italy<sup>2</sup>. Far from being a simple recreational activity, gambling today represents a complex social phenomenon, deeply rooted in the cultural and relational fabric of communities. It is a historical, complex, and multifactorial phenomenon that transforms a wide variety of games into activities in different spaces, roles, and cultures, changing over time even within the same culture. The meanings and practice of gambling therefore depend on the historical and cultural context. As highlighted by McGowan et al. (2000), the interpretation of this phenomenon depends on the historical and social context, emerging norms, and the power structures that regulate it. In Italy, the exponential growth of the sector has transformed gambling into a cultural industry, with significant economic and health implications (Pedroni & Scavarda, 2023, p.155).

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<sup>2</sup> In ancient times, the *Lucanians* inhabited Basilicata, still known today as Lucania. Hereinafter, we will use the terms as synonyms, referring to the inhabitants of Basilicata as Lucanians and defining anything related to Basilicata as *Lucanian*.

Our main aim is to analyze, from a socio-culturalist perspective of gambling (Russell et al. 2018; Gordon & Reith, 2019; Jhonson et al. 2023), the results of a new mixed-method case study on legal gambling carried out in Basilicata (En.For 2024; Clemente, Di Santo, Benvenga 2024). This sociological lens emphasizes relational networks, cultural norms, and biographical trajectories. Gambling is not merely deviant behavior, but a socially embedded practice shaped by gender, class, and symbolic economies (Bond et al., 2023, p. 18). From this perspective, gambling is no longer a marginal recreational activity, but a complex social phenomenon embedded in cultural, relational, and economic structures (Marionneau, 2015; Landuzzi, 2017; FeDerSerD, 2018; Monti et al., 2018; Gordon & Reith, 2019; Wardle, 2021; Pedroni & Scavarda, 2023). Gambling also falls within the forms of addiction that are socially influenced by gender (Aasved, 2003; Venne, Mazar & Volberg, 2020; Guzzo, 2018, 2024). Attention is given to the role of informal networks, symbolic representations, and the gendered dimensions of gambling behaviors.

The bio-psycho-social paradigm (Griffiths & Delfabbro, 2001; Sharpe, 2002; Johnson et al., 2023; Coriale et al., 2015; Chang et al. 2023), which is also dominant today in Italy (Pickernell et al. 2004; FeDerSerD & Ce.R.Co. 2018; Lombi & Pedroni, 2019), offers an integrated interpretation of the phenomenon, considering individual, environmental, and relational vulnerabilities (Jhonson et al. 2023). In this context, gambling is seen as a practice that reflects social tensions, desires for economic mobility, and needs for social membership. Basilicata offers an emblematic glimpse of this transformation, where gambling is intertwined with dynamics of educational poverty, territorial marginalization, and new addictions.

Our research question is: what are the results emerging from a socio-cultural interpretation of the En.For (2024) research conducted on gambling in Basilicata?

We will answer by arguing that examining the Basilicata study from this perspective not only reveals new findings, including those related to gender, but also seems to provide important implications and recommendations for policies to combat and treat gambling.

## 2. Legal gambling in Italy (2021-2024)

Since 2021, Nomisma Observatory has recorded a significant increase in gambling in Italy. This trend is also confirmed by the latest official data in the recent 2022 Blue Book of the Customs and Monopolies Authority, published in February 2024: the total revenue amounted to € 136 billion, with an increase of 292% from 2002 to 2006. If we analyze these figures relating to gambling in physical locations (known as “on-site gambling”, i.e., carried out in betting shops, tobacconists, newsagents, bars, and motorway service station) in relation to the Italian population, the per capita expenditure for online gambling is €1,069.

The participation of young people (aged 15-19) in gambling is documented by sample surveys conducted in both Europe and Italy. For example, the IPSAD study reports that in Italy, almost 30 million people (aged 18 to 84) have tried gambling at least once (62%), while over 20 million participated in 2022 (43%); 10 million said they had gambled in the last 30 days (21%). Forty-two percent of people prefer “onsite” gambling, while only 7% opt for “online” gambling (using the Internet). Young people tend to be more active in online gambling, especially for sports betting. According to the ESPAD report, almost 1.5 million

young people (57% of students aged 15-19) declared in 2022 that they had participated in gambling at least once in their lives. The ESPAD 2023 report indicates a further increase in the trends previously observed.

### **3. Situation in Basilicata (2021-2024)**

The highest per capita gambling value is recorded in the southern regions, but Basilicata, deviating from this trend, boasts a value just below the national average, in line with the regions of central Italy. In terms of the ratio between per capita GDP and per capita gambling, Basilicata is then halfway between the most virtuous regions (Trentino, Valle d'Aosta, Veneto) and those with the highest number of bets (Campania, Calabria, Sicily). In a small region (approximately 533,000 residents) with an average per capita income of approximately €24,000, the average per capita gambling expenditure is €1,200 per year.

This confirms the widespread and pervasive nature of gambling in the social context of Basilicata. Legal betting amounts to around €643 millions. The analysis of the distribution of expenditure by geographical area shows specific differences. The highest share of gambling in Basilicata is recorded in Matera city and its neighboring municipalities, with equally significant values in other areas. This is the case in Potenza city and its hinterland as the regional capital, in the Metapontino area (where medium-sized municipalities such as Policoro and Pisticci prevail), and in the Vulture-Melfese area (with its municipalities of Venosa, Melfi, Rionero in Vulture, and Lavello).

The southern municipalities of the region (lower Agri valley, Lagonegrese, and the inland area of Pollino) are the areas with the lowest volume of gambling. Among the municipalities in Basilicata that spend the most on gambling we find the two provincial capitals (Potenza and Matera, both with annual expenditures of just under €100 million), Policoro (first among municipalities that are not capitals, with approximately 18,000 residents and an expenditure of €30 million), Melfi, Pisticci, and Marsicovetere (expenditure close to €15 million). The highest volume of gambling is concentrated in Potenza (regional capital), in areas with a strong industrial vocation (Tito, Melfi, and Villa d'Agri di Marsicovetere), and in areas with a strong tourist vocation (Matera, Policoro, Pisticci, and Bernalda).

Even in small municipalities in Basilicata with a high concentration of people over the age of 75, an average of €300-600 is spent on gambling each year. Therefore, it is not the number of residents that determines the total volume of gambling, but rather the total number of consumers temporarily present in each area or municipality. Most often, they are occasional consumers (holidaymakers, workers and students in transit, users of public services, etc.) who are temporarily present in each area of attraction (industrial, tourist, cultural, etc.) and who consume various types of gambling products in the designated places within the same municipality.

This does not disprove the theory that small municipalities that welcome many workers have higher per capita costs than medium-to-large municipalities in Basilicata (e.g., municipalities in Val d'Agri, location of oil extraction operations that employ a thousand workers from different regions, staying there during the middle of the week). Consequently, it is in small municipalities with 5,000 inhabitants (Marsicovetere, Viggiano,

Missanello, Paterno, Grumento, Guardia Perticara) that the highest level of per capita gambling expenditure is recorded.

The games preferred by the elderly (bingo in dedicated halls, scratch cards, and instant lotteries) are played in physical locations crowded with people over the age of 70 who identify themselves through their gambling practices. Scratch cards and instant lotteries, on the other hand, show a strong gender preference expressed by Lucanian housewives.

The analysis conducted in the ENFOR Report allows us to sketch the typical profile of the Lucanian gambler: predominantly male, with an average age of 47, an annual income of around €13,000, and an average annual expenditure of €626 on gambling.

#### **4. Pragmatic-culturalist and Gender Approach to Gambling**

Compared to other areas of study, the sociology of gambling (Asved, 2003; Clemente e Guzzo, 2024) using a pragmatic-culturalist approach (Russell et al. 2018; Gordon and Reith, 2019; Johnson R. et al. 2023) and a gender approach (Volberg, 1994; Guzzo, Fiorita, Amendola, 2018; Venne et al., 2020; Kairouz et al. 2023; Guzzo, 2024) does not focus on the nature (pathological and problematic) of gamblers but rather on the effect of different historical and cultural contexts in which men and women enact different gender representations of gambling, resulting in very different bio-psycho-social outcomes<sup>1</sup>.

These studies document, in Italy also, the existence of significant differences between men and women in terms of participation, motivation, and consequences in losses in the different gambling practices chosen. For example, women develop the intention to gamble later than men (this is also due to the reduced availability of money) but progress faster than them in losses (so-called telescopic effect) (Grant, et al. 2012).

The sociology of gambling (Clemente e Guzzo, 2024) and the social perception of this phenomenon in Italy (Malizia, 2016; Monti et al. 2018), has gone through several stages: from the medicalization of the pathological gambler (Zola, 1964) to the conceptualization of gambling as an existential metaphor (Goffman, 1967). Today, the most fruitful approach is the one that considers gambling as a social practice, influenced by relational networks, cultural norms, and biographical trajectories (Gordon & Reith, 2019, p. 2). This sociological approach to gambling does not seek to identify the type of problem of the 'pathological or compulsive' gambler, but highlights the effects of context and social factors (protective and harmful) that impact gambling behaviors that are risky for individual health and for that of the community. This starts from an analysis of the player's personal experience, which guides their gambling career, also from the perspective of addiction as a gender phenomenon (Guzzo, Fiorita, Amendola, 2018; Guzzo, 2024).

Bond, Widdop, and Myers (2023) propose the concept of "gambling lifestyle," where gambling is an integral part of a lifestyle connected to social capital. From this perspective, gambling is not just deviance or pathology, but a form of consummation that reflects capitalist values, strategies of resistance, and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion.

In Italy, the regulation of gambling is marked by institutional ambiguity: the state is both promoter and regulator, with a role that oscillates between "bookmaker" and "educator" (Pedroni, 2014, p. 75). Regional policies, which are often fragmented, fail to contain the

social and health effects of the phenomenon, which is entangled with criminal and mafia dynamics (Sciarrone et al., 2023).

### **5. A Case Study: the Results of the En.For Report on Basilicata**

This Lucanian case study (ENFOR, 2024) was conducted using a mixed method, combining qualitative (focus groups, interviews) and quantitative (online survey) approaches. Between October and December 2023, an online survey was conducted via the portal [www.gapbasilicat.it](http://www.gapbasilicat.it), involving minors and adults residing in Basilicata in completing a specific questionnaire.

For the survey among adults, cluster sampling was used, involving school figures such as pupils, teachers, managers, and parents, who then extended participation to other adults. The anonymous and confidential questionnaire collected 179 responses from adult people. The number of interviews was influenced by the presence in schools of training and awareness-raising activities provided for the project, as well as by the ability to engage participants. The schools involved belonged to the areas covered by the six Addiction Recovery Services (Ser.D), four of which (Lagonegro, Mariscicovetere, Melfi, Potenza) were in Local Health Authority Number 1 in Potenza, and two (Matera and Policoro) in Local Health Authority Number 2 in Matera.

#### **5.1. Gambling among adults in Basilicata**

During the planning phase, based on the available data, it was assumed that gambling would be more widespread among adults and seniors, who are supposed to be more vulnerable. For this reason, the research analyzed the relationship between age and spending in the municipalities of Basilicata. However, the data collected and their correlation analysis disproved the initial hypothesis: spending decreases with increasing age and old-age index, while it increases with income. Basically, it is not age, but economic availability that influences the propensity to gamble. The gambling market is cross-cutting, adapting to the individual preferences of all ages.

The gambling sector caters to people of all ages, adapting to different individual preferences thanks to the wide and diverse range of available games. Consequently, it is not age that determines involvement, but the type of game chosen, which changes according to the characteristics and interests of the individual.

The survey corroborates a common perception of gambling as being more closely associated with men than women, and therefore a predominantly male practice among adults with employment difficulties. This male-dominated view of gambling is confirmed by the scientific literature, although older studies indicate that gambling expenditure increases with income.

As for the reasons for gambling, 46% of respondents see it as a shortcut to getting rich, while 27% see it as a means of satisfaction, reflecting a strongly consumerist view. A smaller proportion consider it a personal need related to pleasure or entertainment. Only 5% see it as an opportunity for socializing, and just 4% link it to financial difficulties, such as an attempt to pay off debts, indicating problematic and potentially illegal situations.

The ENFOR research links gambling to situations of economic and social hardship. Some gamblers find themselves in critical conditions, marked by heavy debt and potentially illegal behavior. The data collected confirm the high incidence of gambling among people of low-to-middle income, poor and unemployed groups, consistently with previous studies. It also confirms the relationship, already documented by the CGIL and Federconsumatori study, between an increase in the propensity to gamble and the economic crisis, whether real or perceived.

According to the Lucanian survey, the most involved profile is that of adults between 30 and 60 years of age. Among these, the unemployed are considered the most inclined to gamble, driven by the hope of a win that could solve their situation. Those with a steady income gamble too, but with the aim of improving their status. Gambling is perceived as a predominantly male phenomenon linked to employment difficulties, a view that is reflected in some of the scientific literature. On the contrary, several previous studies, both Italian and international, agree that as income increases, there is a proportional increase in spending on gambling.

In addition, 24% of respondents believe that young people are the most involved, especially due to their frequent use of technology and online games. Added to this is a small percentage of very young people, the so-called digital natives (6%).

Throughout the regional seminars (40 held in 38 municipalities), the data on annual expenditure per municipality was striking: 60% of respondents believe that in their area gambling does not exceed €1 million, while only 29% estimate a figure between €1 million and €5 million. This suggests a distorted perception of the phenomenon, probably due to lack of information. Only 68% are aware of the services offered by Ser.D, while the rest rely on private psychologists (12%), family doctors (4%), social services (7%), Caritas (25%), or even law enforcement (2%).

A test developed by the Italian National Institute of Health was used to assess the risk of addiction. These are the results: of the 179 adults interviewed, 81% presented a low risk, 12% a moderate risk (habitual gamblers without worrying signs), and 7% a high risk, with significant exposure to debt. Projecting these data into the regional population, we can estimate that approximately 14,000 people in Basilicata are at risk of addiction.

The most significant part of the research concerned minors: 185 students, with an average age of 13.5, participated in the questionnaire. Most are preteens. The responses show that almost a third of them express an interest in gambling. The young people would spend up to €60 on technological products, video games, accessories, and even cigarettes, while only a small proportion attend church. Over 50% prefer to spend their free time in arcades, which they see as places to socialize. An alarming finding is that 5% say they gamble in bars and tobacco shops, despite the ban on minors.

Online gambling is widespread: 34% play at least one hour a day, 20% two hours, and 25% more than two hours a day, taking time away from studying and socializing. Although 40% of families say they have rules about the use of devices, there is a certain lack of attention to the time and money their children spend on gambling. Seventy-eight percent of minors gamble overtly, while 22% do so secretly.

The impact of gambling in Basilicata was assessed through a test conducted by the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (National Institute of Health), self-administered to 179 adults,

81% of whom were at low risk of developing addiction, although no one scored zero. Twelve percent fall into a moderate risk category, habitual gamblers who do not show any warning signs. This suggests that gambling is now a widespread and normalized practice among families in Basilicata.

The reasons for gambling are varied: from psychological needs such as the search for excitement or escape, to economic reasons related to money management, to social pressures and fears related to the judgment of others. A significant finding concerns the 7% of respondents who present a high level of risk, with intense gambling frequency and a marked vulnerability to debt. Extending this percentage to the entire regional population between the ages of 18 and 80, it can be estimated that approximately 14,000 Lucanians are potentially at risk of gambling addiction.

## **5.2. Gambling among pre-teens and teens in Basilicata**

The study focused on gambling among children and adolescents, involving 185 students (84 girls and 101 boys) from schools participating in the project. The sample (mainly pre-adolescents with an average age of 13.5), answered a questionnaire of 21 questions. The answers reveal a worrying picture: almost 30% show an interest in gambling, this evidence of its significant prevalence among very young people.

Hypothetical spending preferences show that many minors would spend part of their money on betting, video games, and non-essential products, with some spending over €120 per month. The money comes mainly from pocket money and family gifts, but also from small jobs or personal sales. Gambling is often practiced overtly (78%), with only 22% hiding it from their parents.

Spare time is spent mainly in game halls which are considered places for socializing, while the parish is almost completely absent as a social space. Online games and smartphone use take up most of the day: 34% play for at least one hour a day, 20% for two hours, and over 25% for more than two hours a day, taking time away from studying and socializing.

Although families claim to have rules on the use of devices, they often seem unaware of the time and money their children spend on gaming. In many cases, parents themselves gamble (32%), particularly fathers and grandparents, contributing to the transmission of bad habits.

The reasons that drive minors to gamble are diverse: fun, relaxation, a desire to belong, but also the illusion of getting rich quickly. Gender differences are evident: girls are more influenced by media and seek emotional well-being, while boys gamble to socialize and participate in sports activities. Most worryingly, almost 5% of respondents (almost all males) declare they cannot help gambling, indicating a possible onset of addiction.

## **6. A Socio-cultural and Gender-based Interpretation of the Lucanian Study**

Applying the approach of Bond et al. (2023), gambling in Basilicata is configured as a lifestyle, linked to social networks and consumer environments. Physical locations (bars, tobacco shops, or arcades) and virtual locations (apps, or betting sites) become spaces for socialization and identity building, especially for young people. Gambling takes on a

compensatory function, with different features: economic for the unemployed, relational for the elderly, and symbolic for minors.

Gordon and Reith (2019) emphasize that gambling is a ritual practice that reflects cultural norms and social tensions. In Basilicata, gambling is perceived as a means of getting rich (46%) or fulfilling desires (27%), with a consumerist view of reality. Only a minority interpret it as a physiological need or a social activity.

The normalization of gambling is encouraged by advertising, the widespread availability of gaming devices, and media coverage. The risk is that of a "McGambling Society" (Goodman, 1995), where gambling becomes entertainment, consuming style, and addiction. In this context, educational agencies (family, school and church) appear weakened and unfit to counteract new forms of addiction.

The contribution of Bond, Widdop, and Myers (2023) introduces an innovative perspective in the sociology of gambling, shifting the focus from pathological individual behavior to a relational and contextual reading of gambling as a "lifestyle." In this view, gambling is not just an episodic practice, but a structural component of social identity, supported by networks of relationships, consumption environments, and forms of social capital.

In the case of Basilicata, data collected between 2022 and 2024 clearly show how gambling is integrated into the daily lives of many people, with an average annual per capita expenditure of €2,100 and widespread participation among adults, seniors, and minors. This pervasiveness cannot be understood uniquely through individual variables (age, income and gender) but requires an analysis of gambling trajectories as 'social careers' (Sbaragli, 2019), influenced by family, community, and professional environments.

Bond et al. (2023) argue that social capital — understood as the set of relationships, trust, and shared norms — plays a crucial role in shaping gambling practices. In Basilicata, gambling is often legitimized and passed down within the family: 78% of minors gamble with money provided by their parents, and 32% say that adult family members (especially fathers and grandparents) are regular gamblers. This data confirms the hypothesis that family and community networks can act as "incubators" for gambling-oriented lifestyles.

Moreover, the presence of environments with high relational density — such as bars, tobacco shops, arcades, and even schools — contributes to the normalization of gambling. As highlighted by Bond et al., social networks not only facilitate access to gambling, but also shape its motivations and representations: gambling to get rich, to relax or to feel part of a group. In Basilicata, 46% of adults surveyed believe that gambling is the fastest way to improve their economic situation, while 27% associate it with the fulfillment of desires. These motivations are consistent with a consumerist lifestyle, where risk is an integral part of identity building.

The concept of a 'gambling career' proposed by Bond et al. is also clearly reflected in the progression observed among minors in Basilicata: 5% already show signs of addiction, with monthly expenses exceeding €120 and compulsive behavior. These young people are not simply 'at risk' but are already on a gambling trajectory supported by permissive environments, family role models, and easy access to gambling devices. In this case, social capital acts in a negative sense, reinforcing potentially harmful practices.

Finally, Bond et al.'s approach allows gambling to be interpreted not as individual deviance, but as an expression of a local culture, where gambling is part of a shared social routine. In Basilicata, the presence of non-resident workers, tourists, and students contributes to amplifying the volume of gambling in the most attractive municipalities, generating a "relational density" that favors the spread of gambling as a lifestyle.

These results are confirmed by the 50% increase in visits by minors to Ser.D centers in Basilicata recorded in 2024, clearly indicating that gambling is also deeply rooted among young people, with educational and social implications that *require* urgent attention.

## 7. Final Observations and Research Prospects

Gambling in Basilicata is a normalized, widespread, and culturally rooted social phenomenon. Its prevalence among adults, the elderly, and especially minors reveal systemic fragility in educational institutions, particularly the family, that often legitimizes and transmit dysfunctional models.

Gender differences are also significant: women tend to prefer games of chance in private settings, while men prefer strategy games in public settings, with greater exposure to risk (Venne et al., 2020; Kairouz et al. 2023; Guzzo, 2024). Within this framework, stigma operates asymmetrically: female gamblers are subject to greater social invisibility and moral judgment, whereas male gamblers tend to normalize their behavior through community-based legitimizing networks. Gambling thus functions as an identity-building mechanism, where social capital and life trajectories shape culturally embedded and gender-differentiated gambling styles.

The crime-generating dimension of gambling in southern Italy, and in Basilicata in particular, is exacerbated by the presence of usury and money laundering networks run by mafia organizations (Sciarrone et al., 2023). Gambling thus becomes a source of social, economic, and psychological vulnerability, with long-term effects on public health and community cohesion.

Considering these findings, there is an urgent need to promote integrated public policies that can address the phenomenon in an intersectional and interprofessional manner. Action must be taken on primary socialization agencies (family, school and community) and secondary socialization agencies (media, institutions), promoting a culture of prevention and awareness.

To summarize, applying Bond, Widdop, and Myers' (2024) sociocultural model to data from Basilicata allows us to:

- Reinterpret gambling as a relational practice and not just an individual one;
- Understand the role of family and community networks in transmitting gambling-oriented lifestyles;
- Highlight how social capital can act both as a protective factor and as a risk vector;
- Analyze gambling careers as social processes, influenced by shared environments, models, and expectations.
- This approach reinforces the need for public policies that do not focus exclusively on treating pathological gamblers but instead intervene in social networks, consumption

environments, and educational agencies to interrupt risk trajectories before they become entrenched.

- Future research should explore gambling trajectories in relation to territorial inequalities, gender dynamics, and processes of social stigmatization, adopting narrative and participatory approaches to give voice and agency back to those involved.

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