

Study into underage access to online gambling and betting sites.

Involving:

Michael Smeaton (Remote Gambling Specialist) – GamCare

Andrew Poole (Young Persons Officer) – GamCare

Andrew Chevis – Citizencard

John Carr - CHIS: Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety

Background into study

For several years now it has been known within the online gambling industry that debit cards such as visa electron, solo and switch are available to under 18's. Some debit cards from certain banks are even available to children as young as 11 years old. Current figures from APACS (Association for Payment Clearing Services) estimate that 45% of all 16 and 17 year olds own a debit card, which is around 675,000 young people. This figure does not include young people between 11 and 15 who may also own a solo or visa electron debit card. The overall figure is therefore more likely to be nearer to a million under 18 card holders.

This prevalence of debit cards for under 18's is important as online gambling and betting sites accept these cards as means of setting up an account, although there are question marks regarding the operators ability to distinguish between customers under the age for gambling and those over the age. The majority of sites don't appear to employ any age or ID verification systems, thus potentially allowing children as young as 11 to register and gamble.

The following are some of the banks that currently supply debit cards to under 18's:

Natwest

Lloyds

Bank of Scotland/Halifax

RBS

Barclays

HSBC

Abbey National

The potential for some underage to access gambling opportunities on the Internet and other remote forms such as Interactive TV and Wireless, is certainly a concern that needs to be addressed. The issue is also amplified because of the growth of the Internet industry over the last few years, and the extensive and at times aggressive advertising of gambling opportunities that are becoming increasingly prevalent throughout the Internet. It is estimated that there are at least 1,500 Internet gambling and betting sites currently online, and Internet gambling is now one of the highest products advertised on the Internet. This has led to an increased exposure of gambling opportunities to all those that use the Internet including those under the age of 18.

Age verification systems currently available

There are currently several age and ID verification solutions currently available and being used by a small minority of the industry, including Experian and Verify Me. Both work by searching available governmental and financial database records to find evidence that are registered at the address you claim to be at and that you are over 18. Evidence such as a credit rating and inclusion in an electoral role, for example, will demonstrate that you are above the required age. Both systems automatically check the customers' personal records at point of registration and acceptance or refusal is instant. No other data such as credit or debit card details are needed. If there is a lack of evidence and the customer is refused then the operator would have to request visual proof of ID to be sent in.

These systems are currently being used by all operators within the jurisdictions of Alderney and the Isle of Man where age and ID verification is a requirement within the regulations. Unfortunately however, these are the only current jurisdictions that have included such requirements within the regulations although the UK is expected to establish the same requirements when the new Gambling Bill comes into force in the next couple of years.

Outside of the above two jurisdictions, there is a lack of regulatory pressure to insist on such age verification measures. However there are a lot of operators who claim to already have in place adequate systems to prevent access from minors. A few operators are known to have decided to utilise the services of Experian or Verify Me, although it is unsure how most of the other operators are effectively blocking access. We are aware that some operators may be using the above system on a manual basis, where an account may be suspended but not straight away after registration, but more likely the day after. This does mean however that the customer is still likely to be able to gamble on that site until a request for further ID is made.

The Study

In order to assess the risk of young people gambling through the Internet, and examine how the standards of the online gambling industry with regards to blocking underage access, we have tested a range of online sites' ability to verify the age of a new customer setting up an account. The online sites consisted of betting sites based in UK and offshore casino sites, managed by UK and non-UK companies that are based in jurisdictions such as Alderney and Gibraltar.

To carry out the test a volunteer was selected who owned a solo debit card and was 16 years old. The volunteer was made fully aware of the circumstances of the study and was carefully supervised during the process – their parent was also present at all times.

It must also be emphasised that at no point did the volunteer place a bet on any of the sites. Instead they were asked to register an online account with the operator, using their own name, address and other personal details. However when asked to enter their date of birth the volunteer signified that they were 21.

The Results

In all 37 sites where tested. As mentioned earlier these ranged from UK regulated betting sites, to offshore betting sites and offshore casinos. The sites were rated to have passed or failed based on a simple criteria. If the customer was able to register their personal details including name, address and age (which as stated earlier was put as 21) and those details were accepted so that individual was able to log-on to the site, then that site would have failed. If after entering the personal details the account was blocked and a request was made for further proof of age and ID then the site passed.

Successful Sites

Out of the 37 sites only 7 effectively blocked the player at point of registration. A breakdown of these sites is below:

4 sites were based in Alderney, these were

www.luckyme.co.uk

www.skybetvegas.com

www.virgingames.com

www.hardrockcasino.com

2 sites (UK Based) had successfully implemented an age verification system, these were

www.nationallottery.co.uk

www.ladbrokes.com - Whilst the national Lottery accepts accounts for 16+ they did request extra proof of ID, which is their policy for anyone registering under 18.

1 site didn't accept Solo debit cards, this was
www.cyberslotz.co.uk

Unsuccessful Sites

That left 30 sites that were unable to block access of an underage player at point of registration. These were

www.888.com
www.bet365.com
www.betdaq.com
www.betdirect.net
www.betfair.com
www.bluesq.com
www.casinoonnet.com
www.celebpoker.com
www.coral.co.uk
www.galacasino.co.uk
www.gamingclub.co.uk
www.jackpotjoy.com
www.littlewoodsgameon.co.uk
www.meccagames.com
www.paddypower.com
www.paradisepoker.com
www.punt2punt.com
www.racingpostcasino.co.uk
www.skybet.co.uk
www.sportingbet.com
www.sportingodds.com
www.stanjames.com
www.stanleybet.com
www.totalbet.com
www.tote.co.uk
www.ukbetting.co.uk
www.vegasvilla.com
www.victorchandler.co.uk
www.victorchandlercasino.com
www.willhill.co.uk

The Bigger Picture

Whilst only 37 sites were tested – compared to approximately 1,500 sites worldwide – most of these sites have direct connections with the UK market or are regulated in the UK. There were still a lot more sites that we didn't test due to time restraints. However the sites we did test were a selection of the most popular sites and brand names and so are expected to reflect the current state of the market.

The results also cover a wider population of sites as several of the operators who were unable to block underage access, also run and manage other gambling sites under a different name, where the same flaws in age verification would be present.

Another factor to take into consideration is that many sites allow you to set up one account but then use that account on different platforms. Thus being the case means that our volunteer would have been able to gamble with an operator on the Internet, Interactive Television, mobile phone and telephone betting using the same account that they registered online.