

● Dreams of winning big often end in tears as betting industry surges

# Residents speak out about gambling habits

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Every month, when Sonja Halgryn's salary drops into her bank account, she stakes her entire pay cheque on online gambling.

But within minutes, the Gqeberha mother's hopes are dashed as the money slips away.

Sometimes, she manages a small win, but instead of immediately cashing out, she reinvests her winnings, only to lose it all again.

This cycle of excitement followed by disappointment continued until she received an eviction notice, forcing her to get help.

Halgryn is not alone. She said she chose to speak out to help others in similar situations.

Her experience also reflects a growing trend in SA, where the gambling industry has exploded.

In the financial year ending in March, R1.1-trillion was wagered, a staggering 40.2% increase from the previous year, while gross gambling revenue (GGR) soared to R59.3bn.

According to the national gambling board's latest stats, revenue growth was highest for the Western Cape and Mpumalanga at 53.6% and 49.3%, respectively.

Limpopo and the Northern Cape also experienced high growth at 42.1% and 29.5%, respectively.

The remaining provinces saw low or declining growth figures.

Gauteng and Free State's GGR grew by 2.5% and 4%, respectively.

KwaZulu-Natal, North West and the Eastern Cape saw declining revenues at 0.8%, -2.5% and -7.7% each.

Eastern Cape Gambling Board (ECGB) spokesperson Pumeza George said they had a string of measures in place to support individuals struggling with addiction.

But for some, like Lizeel Badenhorst, 44, these measures simply do not work.

Badenhorst was found guilty of stealing close to R18m from Gqeberha law firm DTS Attorneys, where she was employed as the accountant.

She started gambling in February 2010, and between 2014 and 2015 she "borrowed" money from her employer's trust account for the first time.

"I was using virtually all of my salary on gambling, and anticipated that whenever I

would visit the casino, I would make a big win and replenish the money I had taken from the trust account," she told the commercial crimes court earlier this year.

Her casinos of choice were Boardwalk and Galaxy Bingo at the Moffett on Main shopping centre.

But despite several self-imposed bans at both these establishments, once the gambling bug bit, she would have herself removed from their "banned" lists after completing mandatory counselling — and then continue her crippling habit.

Her addiction eventually grew beyond her control, and from 2018 she said the amounts taken from DTS escalated.

In another matter, disgraced accountant Jonathan Blow was sentenced to 22 years behind bars for stealing more than R50m to fuel his gambling addiction.

Blow, who worked for two SUPERSPAR stores in Nelson Mandela Bay, previously admitted that between July 2020 and September 2022 he had on

**'I had to move out my apartment as I couldn't pay rent. I lost everything. As a single mother, it's not easy'**

different occasions stolen money from the trading bank accounts of the Despatch and Sunridge stores.

Halgryn, a mother of two, said she felt "disgusted" by her gambling habit.

"If I lose it all, my income for the month is gone and I need to rely on other people to keep me going," the receptionist said.

"But if I do win something, that means I am getting some of the money that other gamblers have lost."

She started gambling in mid-2023.

"There were times where I used my whole salary on [online gambling sites]."

She said her thinking was that she would be able to double her income.

"I used to play this game called Aviator."

Aviator is a game where players bet on how long they think a virtual aeroplane can fly before crashing.

The longer the aircraft stays airborne, the higher the multiplier value assigned, hence more potential winning amounts.

"I have won big on Aviator before, but my problem was that I then gambled my winnings."

Halgryn, 41, said the situation got so out of control she had to borrow money from family.

"I had to move out my apartment as I couldn't pay rent. I lost everything. As a single mother, it's not easy."

A Gqeberha nightclub owner, who declined to be named, said she would easily gamble R40,000 a night.

"I gamble online or at [a casino]," she said.

"Once I put R20,000 in and walked out with R175,000. That's a feeling you can't describe."

But, sadly, she said there

were other times when she lost big.

"I used the club's money about R10,000, and I lost it."

"It was supposed to go towards new couches for our lounge area."

She said she was trying to get help as the banning option did not work for her.

Central resident Aniele Vuyisile, 31, said she had only played the Lotto, but the problem was she used her grocery money for it.

Luckily for her, she has since given up.

George said the provincial gambling board had several initiatives to support individuals who may be struggling with gambling addiction.

This includes:

- A 24/7 toll-free counselling line managed through the SA Responsible Gambling Foundation where professionals immediately implement support to affected individuals;
- Dedicated employees that receive walk-ins, and provide support and assist with exclusions (should a gambler wish to exclude themselves from

gambling activities); and

- Educational awareness campaigns conducted across the province, providing awareness and promoting responsible gambling through print or social media.

George said the board had also partnered with mass events across the province to leverage the numbers to promote responsible gambling.

"A survey we conducted in the previous financial year indicates that the [board's] messaging on responsible gambling reached about 964,354 people in the Buffalo City Metro and Amathole district alone, while about 792,000 were reached in the Nelson Mandela Bay metro in the 2022/2023 financial year."

George said punters or players who wished to ban themselves could visit their official website, offices or licensed operators.

● If you need help with a gambling problem for yourself or someone you know, call the National Responsible Gambling toll-free counselling line on 0800-006-008.