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Italians turn to illegal gambling during lockdown

Silvia Sciorilli Borrelli in Rome 14 hours ago

6-8 minuti

In a café on a quiet street in a working-class suburb of southern Rome, dozens of men line up metres apart to place their bets, an activity that has flourished despite its prohibition under Italy's three-month coronavirus lockdown.

A bald man behind the counter serves espresso coffees to a middle-aged couple. A man to his right collects €5, €10 and €20 banknotes from gamblers keen to take their chances on Danish, German, South Korean, Costa Rican, Belarusian and Estonian football matches.

The venue is one of many thousands of ordinary cafés across Italy that are licensed by companies with state concessions to sell lottery tickets, operate slot machines and take bets. Under the terms of Italy's lockdown, cafés such as this can serve drinks but should not allow gambling on the premises.

In 2019 there was a slot machine for every 151 Italians, the highest rate per inhabitant in Europe © Alessandro Bianchi/Reuters

While much of Italy has opened up and lottery games, such as the popular SuperEnalotto draw, resumed last month, sports betting, slot machines, bingo halls and casinos remain shut, a blow to a sector whose total revenues after prizes were just above €19bn in

2019. In April, the first full month of lockdown in Italy, turnover was down 26.4 per cent while tax revenue was down 37.6 per cent

compared with the same month last year, according to customs agency estimates.

Many in Italy's ruling coalition between the anti-establishment Five Star movement and the centre-left Democratic party believe that a protracted closure of the gambling sector will help combat addiction.

"Slot machines and gambling activities should be the last to reopen . . . if they never reopened it would be even better. We are fighting for citizens' health," tweeted Vito Crimi, the interim leader of Five Star, last month.

With restrictions expected to be lifted in some regions from next week, some argue that closure only fosters illegal gambling, threatens jobs and deprives the state of much needed tax revenue. "There is a market for gambling activities in Italy. It is legal and it is lucrative for the state," said Andrea Ruggeri, a member of Forza Italia, a centre-right opposition party. "Every other business has reopened. Keeping gambling activities shut [has allowed] illegal activities to thrive."

National anti-mafia prosecutor Federico Cafiero de Raho ©
LaPresse/Alamy

Even before the lockdown, national anti-mafia prosecutor Federico Cafiero de Raho had warned that Italians could be spending up to

€20bn a year on illegal gambling.

Police chief Franco Gabrielli said in April that “the closure of gambling venues and the suspension of betting activities and games managed by the national customs agency could increase the recourse to illegal online gambling”.

The Financial Times has seen multiple receipts from gamblers in Rome, Sicily and Milan that bore an official customs stamp and appeared legitimate but were dated during the time of the lockdown when gambling venues were supposed to be shut down.

Several customers at the café in southern Rome were unaware

that what they were doing was illegal. “What are you talking about, this is perfectly legal, look at this,” said one pensioner, showing the receipt he received for his bet. At the top of the receipt, it displayed the national customs and monopolies agency logo. On the streets outside, middle-aged men loitered, offering the elderly and those without access to the internet the chance to gamble online.

A €5 betting slip on a German football match bearing the logo of the responsible Italian agency despite the gambling industry being on lockdown

Last month, customs agency officials and financial police carried out several [inspections](#) across Italy to determine whether gambling venues were respecting Covid-19 restrictions. In some cases they seized illegal machines and fined operators.

“It is not surprising that closures of this highly regulated sector have prompted illegal activities, which is why we have 3,000 police agents patrolling the territory and operations to fight such activities

are ongoing,” **Marcello Minenna**, the customs agency’s newly appointed director-general, told the Financial Times.

“On June 8, 10 people linked to the Sicilian mafia were arrested for setting up an intricate illegal betting network across various Italian regions aided by sector operators involved in money-laundering activities,” Giuseppe Governale, the chief of the national anti-mafia investigative agency (DIA) told the FT. He added “the temporary suspension of betting venues will have increased the tendency, especially for gambling addicts, to turn to illegal online channels”.

Italians gamble more than €100bn each year. According to data analytics group YouTrend, in 2019 there was a slot machine for every 151 Italians, the highest rate per inhabitant in Europe. About 400,000 Italians have some form of gambling addiction, a 2017 report by the Italian national research council of Pisa suggested.

Illegal gambling is nothing new, the DIA chief said.

Criminal organisations have operated in the gambling sector for almost 200 years. “Which is why saying criminal organisations thrive in this sector is an understatement,” Mr Governale said.

For the operators, it is big business. Mr Governale said estimating their exact revenue was complicated because these were “real criminal holding [companies] that operate on an international level, we’re talking about impressive figures”. The DIA last year confiscated assets worth hundreds of millions — including paintings by Giorgio De Chirico, Antonio Ligabue and Renato

Guttuso — from mafia clans running illegal betting rings.

At the café in southern Rome there is no hint of organised crime, yet people have continued to engage in betting activities during the three-month suspension. “Business is business,” said a woman sitting outside the café.