

Gambling behaviour and motives among adolescent and young recreational athletes in Spain

What this research is about

Adolescence and youth are developmental stages that involve major physical, emotional, and social changes. During these stages, young people may be especially vulnerable to risk behaviours, such as gambling. Previous research has examined gambling among elite and professional athletes, focusing on adults. There is little research on recreational athletes or adolescent athletes. Moreover, research on gambling among athletes in Spain remains scarce.

The purpose of this study was to examine gambling among adolescent and young recreational athletes, and to explore how gambling modality (online vs. offline), betting on one's own sport and different gambling activities, might relate to problem gambling severity and gambling motives. The study also explored gender differences.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants through local sports clubs and snowball sampling, by asking athletes to share the study link with peers who met the inclusion criteria. An athlete is a person who takes part in an organized team or individual sport with regular competition, values achievement and high performance, and participates in structured, often intensive, training.

To be included in this study, participants had to be recreational athletes in a sport officially recognized by the Spanish Sports Federation. Participants had to engage in at least four hours of sport practice per week to be considered a recreational athlete. In total, 244 recreational athletes aged 15 to 35 years old

What you need to know

This study examined gambling among adolescent and young recreational athletes and explored how gambling modality (online vs. offline), betting on one's own sport, and gambling activities might relate to gambling severity and gambling motives. Participants were young people aged 15 to 35 years old who were recreational athletes in a sport officially recognized by the Spanish Sports Federation. A total of 244 participants completed an online survey. The study found that gambling was common among recreational athletes, with 73% having gambled in their lifetime and 16% being at-risk or experiencing problem gambling. Men were more likely than women to report problem gambling and stronger motives to gamble. Online gambling, sports betting, and engaging in card games were associated with having greater risk of or problem gambling. Athletes who bet on their own sport and those who engaged in certain gambling activities, especially slot machines, tended to report stronger gambling motives.

completed an online survey. Most participants were male (68%) and students (63%).

In the online survey, participants completed questions about the following:

- The sport they practiced regularly. Sports were categorized as either individual or team sports. A few sports, like track and field, were excluded from this categorization as they could not be easily sorted as an individual or team sport.

- Gambling involvement, including lifetime and past-month gambling, gambling modality (online vs. offline) and gambling activities. Gambling activities were divided into strategic (e.g., poker) or chance-based games (e.g., lotteries).
- Problem gambling severity, measured using the South Oaks Gambling Screen adapted to Spanish. Scores between 0 and 1 indicated non-gambling or non-problem gambling; scores of 2–3 points indicated at-risk gambling; and scores of 4 or higher indicated problem gambling.
- Gambling motives, assessed using the Gambling Motives Questionnaire adapted to Spanish.

What the researchers found

Sport participation. The most frequently reported sport was football (47%), followed by basketball (18%). Overall, more participants played team sports (84%) than individual sports (11%).

Gambling behaviour. Most participants (73%) had gambled at least once in their lifetime. The most common gambling activities were offline lotteries (30%), offline bingo (33%), offline card games (28%), and offline sports betting (26%). Most participants gambled offline only (50%), while 5% gambled online only and 17% gambled both online and offline. Most participants scored as non-problem gambling (84%), while 16% were at-risk or were experiencing problem gambling. Participants most strongly endorsed gambling for enhancement motives.

Gender differences. Men played team sports more frequently compared to women. Men were more likely to participate in card games, offline casino games, and sports betting. They participated in strategic games more than women. No gender differences were observed for chance-based games. Men were also more likely to gamble online and to report problem gambling.

Gambling severity. Engaging in card games, sports betting, and online gambling were associated with having more greater problem gambling.

Gambling motives. Participants who bet on their own sport and those who gambled on slot machines had higher enhancement motives. But participation in team sports was linked to lower enhancement motives.

Participants who bet on their own sport had higher social motives. Those who engaged in card games, casino bingo, and slot machines also reported higher social motives. Coping motives were linked to slot machine gambling, while financial motives were linked to engaging in casino games and slot machines.

How you can use this research

Practitioners can use this research to identify young athletes who may be at greater risk for gambling-related harms, particularly male athletes and those who bet on the sport they play.

About the researchers

Ana Estévez, Maitane Llanos, and Gema Aonso-Diego are affiliated with the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. For more information about this study, please contact Ana Estévez at aestevez@deusto.es.

Citation

Estévez, A., Llanos, M., & Aonso-Diego, G. (2026). Gambling behavior among adolescent and young recreational athletes: The role of gender, gambling modality, and sport characteristics. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2026.2659696>

Study Funding

This study was funded by the Directorate General for the Regulation of Gambling and by a Postdoctoral grant from the Ministry of Science and from the European Union NextGenerationEU/PRTR.

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