

Understanding gambling in forensic psychiatric settings

What this research is about

People in forensic psychiatric settings are just as likely as people in the general population to gamble, but they are much more likely to experience gambling-related harms. In this study, the researchers looked at how forensic psychiatric patients view gambling and money management, how staff respond to patient gambling, and the institutional conditions that influence how gambling is managed in these settings.

What the researchers did

The researchers interviewed 8 forensic psychiatric patients and seven staff members. Participants were recruited from six medium-security psychiatric wards at two hospitals in Denmark.

The interviews took place between October 2024 and February 2025. The interview guide included open-ended questions about gambling and money management, experiences with debt, and the roles of staff and institutions in shaping these practices. During patient interviews, the researchers also used visual card-based prompts to help patients talk about topics like money, gambling, and daily routines.

The researchers then analyzed the data using reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes across interview responses.

What the researchers found

Patient perspectives

Many patients described gambling as something they repeatedly tried to stop or manage but

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers looked at how patients and staff in forensic psychiatric settings view gambling practices and money management. They interviewed eight patients and seven staff members in Denmark.

Patients described gambling as a common part of their daily life. They often gambled to cope with boredom, restlessness, and long periods of unstructured time. Many reported repeated cycles of trying to control or stop gambling and experiencing relapse, as well as debts and secrecy around financial problems. Gambling was sometimes connected to other addictions and might involve family members or romantic partners outside the ward. Staff generally had mixed views about whether gambling should be seen as a harmless recreational activity or a clinical concern. This led to inconsistent responses to patient gambling between staff and wards.

The findings suggest that gambling can affect forensic psychiatric patients' recovery, mental health, financial wellbeing, and therapeutic relationships. They can inform how gambling practices are addressed in these settings.

struggled to fully control. Some deleted gambling apps or signed up for Denmark's self-exclusion program, ROFUS, to block their access to gambling websites. However, several patients said they had returned to gambling after short periods of gambling exclusion. Small bets or occasional wins

sometimes led them to return to more problematic gambling patterns.

Patients often talked about how having long periods of unstructured time, especially in the evening and at nighttime, contributed to feelings of restlessness. Gambling gave them excitement, and a way to pass the time. Some patients also described gambling as similar to other addictive behaviours.

Many patients said they saw money and finances as private topics and did not want to discuss them with staff. Feelings of shame, fear, and wanting to maintain autonomy contributed to “hidden gambling economies” that were kept secret from staff and involved informal loans and debts.

For some patients, gambling was closely connected to relationships with people outside the ward. Family members or romantic partners sometimes participated in gambling activities with patients or helped them continue gambling despite the effort to self-exclude. In some cases, gambling was a way to have shared activity that helped patients maintain social connection and a sense of normalcy.

Staff perspectives

Interviews with staff members revealed an absence of a shared understanding regarding how gambling should be viewed and managed in forensic psychiatric settings. Some staff saw it as a relatively harmless recreational activity, whereas others saw it as an addiction-related problem that could increase risk, conflict, or emotional instability. Because there were no clear guidelines, responses to gambling varied between staff members and wards.

Staff also talked about difficulties with balancing patient autonomy with concerns about their safety and possible harms. Intervening in gambling-related behaviours sometimes made staff feel more like rule enforcers than supportive professionals, which could negatively affect trust and the therapeutic relationship.

How you can use this research

This study can inform how gambling practices and harms are addressed in forensic psychiatric settings.

About the researchers

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About Greo Evidence Insights

Greo Evidence Insights is an independent, non-profit organization specializing in research, knowledge mobilization, and evaluation in the health and well-being sectors. Greo transforms research and insights into actionable strategies to prevent and reduce harm related to gambling, gaming, technology use, and substance use. To learn more about funding for Research Snapshots visit [our website](#).

