

Experiences of sports betting harm among young adults

What this research is about

When young people first reach the legal gambling age, they are at greater risk of gambling and experiencing harm from it. Previous research has found that young adults are most likely to engage in sports betting across all age groups. The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of sports betting harm among young people aged 18–25 years. This study also explored the barriers and catalysts for making change to betting behaviours, as well as the change strategies used.

What the researchers did

The researchers interviewed 50 young adults aged 18–25 years who reported sports betting harm. Participants had to be between 18 and 25 years old and live in Victoria, Australia. They had to report a moderate to high level of gambling harm related to sports betting in the past year, as assessed using the Gambling Harm Scale-20 (GHS-20).

A recruitment agency was hired to recruit participants from its pool of potential participants and through multi-media advertising. The researchers interviewed the participants themselves. Most participants were male (68%). Over half of participants (52%) experienced moderate sports betting harm (scores of 3–5 on the GHS-20), while the rest (48%) experienced high harm (scores of 6 or higher).

What the researchers found

Experiences of sports betting harm: Financial harm was the most frequently reported on the GHS-20. Participants discussed how financial harm built

What you need to know

This study sought to understand the lived experiences of sports betting harm among young people. The study examined the barriers and catalysts for making change, as well as the change strategies used. The researchers interviewed 50 Australian young adults aged 18–25 years who reported sports betting harm. Financial harm was the most frequently reported harm, followed by emotional harm. Participants also described harm to work and study, relationship harm, and harm to physical health. Barriers to making change included not being ready for change, not feeling that a change was needed, and confidence in beating the system. Catalysts for change included fear of addiction, realizing the extent of losses, and reaching a crisis point. Participants used various change strategies, with self-help strategies such as setting deposit limits the most common.

up over time through regular bets of moderate amounts. Some participants slowly realized this harm was happening, while others talked about how their realization was more sudden. Financial stress led some participants to gamble more as they chased their losses. For others, realizing that financial stress could prevent them from achieving longer-term goals or engage in other activities (e.g., moving out of home, buying a car) led them to see betting as unaffordable.

Emotional harm was also frequently reported. Participants experienced immediate regret and guilt after betting. But many also experienced declining

mental health over time, such as lower mood and sense of self-worth as well as anxiety. Some participants described concern and shame that they were becoming addicted. These negative emotions, together with financial pressures and worry about their future, led to higher levels of stress.

Some participants experienced negative impacts on work or study due to their sports betting. About half of participants used work or study time to gamble and were distracted by betting outcomes, which affected their performance.

Relationship harm was not as common. Some participants experienced tension and conflict in relationships. They spent less time with people that they cared about, including family and friends. A few participants reported harm to their physical health, such as stress rashes, less sleep, and exhaustion.

Barriers to making change: Some participants were not thinking about changing their behaviour. Some noticed that their gambling had worsened but were not ready to make change. A few participants felt they could make the change in the future if they had to. Some felt confident they could beat the system.

Catalysts for making change: Some participants discussed an increased understanding that betting can be addictive. They described fear of having an uncontrolled addiction or experiencing losses and realizing how easy it would be to get carried away. Other participants began to think about reducing their betting because it was not as enjoyable once it became 'less cool.' Some talked about how being forced to disclose their betting with family and friends, or changes in their circumstances (e.g., COVID lockdowns), led to a change in their betting.

Change strategies: Participants described several strategies for reducing or controlling their betting. Many used self-help strategies such as using budgeting tools, setting deposit limits, or deleting betting apps. Others stopped socializing with friends who bet a lot, while some reduced their alcohol use when betting. Two participants sought professional help. Overall, participants' use of change strategies varied in terms of success. Some felt that they had reduced the harm but would like to reduce it further. Others felt tempted to bet or were in a cycle of abstaining from betting and relapse.

How you can use this research

This research supports the need for improved consumer protection tools, education, and help-seeking among young people who bet on sports.

About the researchers

Nerilee Hing, Lisa Lole, Cassandra K. Dittman, Matthew Rockloff, and Matthew Browne are affiliated with the Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory in the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at CQUniversity in Bundaberg, QLD, Australia. **Vijay Rawat** is affiliated with the Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory in the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at CQUniversity in Melbourne, VIC, Australia, as well as the School of Psychology at Deakin University in Burwood, Australia. **Catherine Tulloch** is affiliated with the Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory in the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at CQUniversity in Sydney, NSW, Australia. For more information about this study, please contact Nerilee Hing at n.hing@cqu.edu.au.

Citation

Hing, N., Rawat, V., Lole, L., Tulloch, C., Dittman, C. K., Rockloff, M., & Browne, M. (2025). From 'quirky and cool' to 'addicted': Lived experiences of sports betting harm in early adulthood. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-025-01612-0>

Study Funding

This study was funded by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation.

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](#).

