

Risk of gambling-related harm is linked to psychological distress in Great Britain

What this research is about

According to the 2023 Gambling Survey for Great Britain, almost one-quarter (23.9%) of adults who gambled in the past year were considered at some risk of gambling-related harm. Gambling-related harm has been linked to psychological distress, which includes difficult emotional experiences like anxiety and depression symptoms. However, few studies have looked at this relationship using population-based surveys. It is also unclear whether the link between gambling and psychological distress is stronger for people who belong to certain sociodemographic groups.

In this study, the researchers looked at the extent to which gambling in the past year and risk for gambling-related harm were linked to psychological distress among adults in Great Britain. They also looked at whether the relationship differed based on factors like age, gender, and mental health history.

What the researchers did

The researchers analyzed data from the Smoking and Alcohol Toolkit Study in October 2022. This study is a monthly survey that recruits a new sample of participants representative of the general population of Great Britain each month. Questions on gambling were added to the survey in October 2022 for one time. For this study, the researchers used data from 1,987 adults aged 18 and older who reported on their gambling behaviour in the past year. Participants completed the survey through computer-assisted telephone interviews.

All participants answered questions about their sociodemographic characteristics and health,

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers looked at whether having gambled in the past year and being at risk of gambling-related harm were linked to psychological distress among adults in Great Britain. The researchers analyzed data collected from 1,987 adults aged 18 or older through a nationally representative household survey. Participants answered questions about their sociodemographic characteristics, gambling behaviour and risk of gambling-related harm in the past year, psychological distress in the past 30 days, and other health-related factors.

Participants who had gambled in the past year were no more likely to experience psychological distress compared to those who had not gambled. However, distress was more common among those at any risk of gambling-related harm relative to those with no risk. This difference became smaller after accounting for factors such as mental health history. The findings can inform policy and prevention efforts that are tailored to groups at higher risk for gambling-related harm.

including age, gender, occupational social grade, children in the household, mental health history, smoking, and alcohol use. They also completed the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) on how often they felt distressed over the past 30 days.

Participants who reported they had gambled in the past year completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) to assess their risk for gambling-related harm. Total scores on the PGSI were used to classify

participants into one of two categories: no risk (0 point) and any risk (1 point or more).

Because lottery gambling is relatively common and considered the least harmful form of gambling, the researchers repeated some of their data analyses without participants who only gambled on lotteries.

What the researchers found

On average, participants were 48.3 years of age. Slightly over half of the participants (51.2%) identified as women. Nearly half (48.2%) reported they had gambled in the past year, with the majority (58.4%) having gambled on lottery tickets only. Participants who identified as men, smoked, and had higher levels of alcohol use were more likely to have gambled in the past year. Participants aged 35 years and older were more likely to have gambled in the past year overall, but younger adults were more likely to participate in non-lottery forms of gambling.

About 3.3% of participants were identified as being at any risk of gambling-related harm based on their PGSI scores. This is equivalent to about 1.7 million adults in the general Great Britain population. People who were younger, identified as men, had less advantaged occupational social grades (e.g., lower-paid jobs, unemployed), and smoked were more likely to be at risk. Risk of gambling-related harm was also higher among participants with a history of mental health difficulties.

The researchers then looked at the relationship between gambling and psychological distress. Almost one-third of participants (31.2%) reported they had experienced moderate or severe psychological distress in the past 30 days. Those who had gambled in the past year were no more likely to experience distress than those who had not gambled. This remained true when participants who only engaged in lottery gambling were excluded from the analysis. The strength of the relationship between past-year gambling and psychological distress did not differ meaningfully based on any sociodemographic or health-related factors.

However, participants at any risk of gambling-related harm were more likely to report psychological distress, compared to those with no risk. This difference became smaller after taking into

account participants' sociodemographic characteristics, mental health history, smoking, and alcohol use. Mental health history explained most of this reduced difference. In other words, people at any risk of gambling-related harm might have been more likely to report distress, because they were also more likely to have a mental health condition.

How you can use this research

The findings can inform policy and prevention efforts aimed at groups that are more vulnerable to gambling-related harm, including men, younger people, and people who smoke.

About the researchers

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Citation

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