

Personality traits as risk factors for problem gambling and substance use disorders among people in prison

What this research is about

Addictive behaviours like problem gambling are common among people in prison. People with problem gambling are more likely to commit criminal offences, as well as experience mental health and social challenges. They are also more likely to commit crime again due to their gambling problems. It is important to understand and reduce the risk factors for problem gambling among people who are in prison, as this information could inform strategies for treatment and prevention of criminal offences.

Antisocial and borderline personality disorders, depression symptoms, and traumatic experiences are common among both people who commit crimes and those with problem gambling. It is possible that these factors increase the risk of problem gambling among people in prison. Substance use disorders are also common among people in prison. It is unclear whether the risk factors for problem gambling differ from those for substance use disorders among people in prison.

In this study, the researchers looked at risk factors associated with problem gambling and lifetime substance use disorders among people in prison in Finland. Specifically, they explored factors such as past experiences of trauma, personality disorders, and mental health problems.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data collected by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare as part of a larger study on health and wellbeing among people in prison. Data were collected from adult convict prisoners (i.e., people serving unconditional fixed-term or life prison sentences) who were in prison between 2020 and 2022.

What you need to know

Problem gambling and substance use disorders are common among people in prison. In this study, the researchers looked at whether the risk factors differ for problem gambling, lifetime drug use, and lifetime alcohol use problems among 527 adult convict prisoners in Finland. This study used data collected between 2020 and 2022, as part of a larger study on health and wellbeing among people in prison.

Problem gambling was associated with a higher likelihood of committing theft or property crimes than other crimes. Having a higher number of borderline personality traits was related to both problem gambling and alcohol use problems. Having a higher number of antisocial personality traits was related to both drug use and alcohol use problems. Screening for personality disorders could be an important tool for reducing the risks of addictive behaviours among people in prison.

Participants filled out a survey asking about their demographic characteristics, problem gambling, depression symptoms, and traumatic experiences. Some participants also completed a clinical interview that assessed personality disorders, lifetime drug use, and lifetime alcohol use problems. Problem gambling in the year before being in prison was assessed using the Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen (BBGS). The 10-item Trauma Screening Questionnaire (TSQ) was used to assess experiences of various forms of abuse, both as an adult and as a child. The Depression Scale (DEPS) was used to assess depression symptoms. The Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV Axis I Personality Disorders (SCID-II) was used to assess personality disorders. In

total, 527 participants filled out the survey. Among them, 330 also completed the clinical interview.

What the researchers found

Almost half of the participants (49%) reported that they gambled. Gambling was more common among men (51%) than women (42%). Gambling was more common among people who were convicted of theft or property crimes (63%) than those who were convicted of other crimes (47%). About 13% of the participants were classified as having probable problem gambling (score of 1 or higher on the BBGS). On average, people with probable problem gambling were younger than those without probable problem gambling.

In terms of risk factors, having committed theft or property crimes, less severe trauma symptoms, and a higher number of borderline personality traits were related to problem gambling. Having a higher number of antisocial personality traits was related to lifetime drug use. Having a higher number of borderline and antisocial personality traits, being male, being older, and being unable to work were related to having a lifetime alcohol use problem.

These results suggest that the risk factors for addictive behaviours among people in prison are different for gambling, drug use, and alcohol use problems. However, borderline and antisocial personality disorders could be risk factors for at least one of these addictive behaviours.

How you can use this research

The findings can inform prevention strategies, rehabilitation efforts, and treatment for people who are in prison and experiencing problems with addictive behaviours. Screening for personality disorders could be an important consideration to reduce the risk of addictive behaviours like problem gambling in this population. This, in turn, might help prevent reoffending due to gambling problems. This study also suggests screening for gambling problems in different mental health settings, including substance use treatment clinics.

About the researchers

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