

Evaluating a school-based gambling prevention program for Spanish adolescents

What this research is about

Adolescents may be especially vulnerable to problem gambling behaviours. This is due to their developmental stage, as well as widespread gambling marketing. Interventions designed to prevent gambling among adolescents are crucial. But there have not been many prevention programs evaluated in Spanish-speaking populations. The aim of this study was to examine the effectiveness of “What’s at stake?”, a gambling prevention program designed for adolescents in Spain.

What the researchers did

The ‘What’s at stake?’ (WAS?) program involves four 50-minute sessions delivered by trained facilitators. It aims to increase awareness of gambling risks, reduce positive beliefs and attitudes toward gambling, and help students recognize advertising tactics and resist social pressure to gamble.

The researchers conducted a randomized controlled trial with secondary school students in Spain. Participants were students in 3rd, 4th, and 1st BACH grade of secondary education, aged 14 to 17 years.

Classes were randomly selected within each participating school, with entire classes assigned to the experimental or wait-list control group. Classes were eligible if they belonged to a school that agreed to participate and if school leadership and the teacher agreed that the intervention could take place during regular class time. Students were included if they provided assent to participate and their parents/guardians provided consent. Students also had to be able to understand and complete the questionnaires in Spanish without help.

What you need to know

This study evaluated “What’s at stake?” (WAS?), a gambling prevention program for adolescents in Spain. The researchers recruited secondary school students for the study. Classes were randomized within each participating school, with classes assigned to the experimental or control condition. In total, 5,022 students were assigned to the experimental group and 1,286 to the control group. Overall, the WAS? program led to short-term preventive effects, including decreases in intention to gamble, gambling severity, gambling motives, and normative perception that peers engage in gambling. The proportion of students with at-risk or problem gambling decreased in the experimental group.

Students were excluded if they had documented cognitive or learning difficulties that prevented them from understanding the intervention or questionnaires. They were also excluded if they were not present on the baseline assessment day, or if they had already participated in the ‘What’s at stake?’ program during the current academic year.

Participants completed questionnaires at baseline before the intervention (T1) and one week after (T2). The questionnaires asked about the following:

- (1) Intention to gamble in the near future.
- (2) Gambling severity, assessed using the South Oaks gambling Scale–Revised for Adolescents. A score of 0–1 indicated non-gambling or no problem gambling, a score of 2 to 3 indicated at-risk gambling, and a score of 4 or higher indicated problem gambling.

- (3) Gambling motives, assessed using the Gambling Motives Questionnaire.
- (4) Risk perception, assessed using the PR subscale of the Early Detection Gambling Addiction Risk Questionnaire–Adolescents (EDGAR-A). This subscale measures beliefs about the negative consequences of gambling.
- (5) Normative perception, assessed using the PN subscale of the EDGAR-A. This subscale measures beliefs about gambling among peers.

In total, 5,022 students were assigned to the experimental group and 1,286 to the control group. Around 51% were female. At T2, 4,303 students in the experimental group and 686 in the control group completed the post-intervention questionnaires.

What the researchers found

Intention to gamble: Students in the experimental group showed a greater reduction in their intention to gamble after the intervention. Students in the control group showed less change. There were no differences based on whether students had or had never gambled before.

Gambling behaviour: At baseline (T1), both groups showed similar levels of gambling severity. But after the intervention, the experimental group showed a decrease while the control group had minimal change. Specifically, in the experimental group at baseline, about 35% of students had at-risk or problem gambling. After the intervention, this decreased to about 13%, while the percentage of students with no gambling/no problem gambling increased from 65% to 87%. While both males and females in the experimental group showed a decrease at T2, the difference was more pronounced for females.

The researchers noted that this decrease seen at one week after the intervention likely reflects a change in perception and awareness, rather than true behavioural change.

Gambling motives: Gambling motives increased in the control group at T2 compared to T1, but decreased in the experimental group.

Risk perception: At T1, students in the experimental group already saw gambling as slightly more risky

compared to the control group. At T2, there was an increase in risk perception in the control group, but the experimental group showed minimal change.

Normative perception: Students in the experimental group were less likely to think that their peers engage in gambling after the intervention. The perception of students in the control group stayed about the same.

How you can use this research

This research can support schools and education policy makers in the implementation of structured, school-based gambling prevention programs.

About the researchers

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