

Understanding why gambling-related suicides are underreported to improve detection

What this research is about

People who experience problem gambling have a higher likelihood of dying by suicide. Gambling-related deaths are likely underreported because gambling is rarely explored or documented during suicide death investigations. Unlike substances, there are no standard procedures for determining whether gambling contributed to a person's death. As such, it may be challenging to understand the true impact of gambling-related harms and to develop effective prevention strategies.

In this study, the researchers looked at how gambling is currently identified in suicide death investigations in Australia. They also explored how the detection and monitoring of gambling-related suicides can be improved.

What the researchers did

The researchers analyzed data collected for a larger study. Participants were 32 adults living in Australia who had experienced a suicide attempt related to gambling, had lost a loved one to gambling-related suicide, or were professionals working in related areas (e.g., death investigation, gambling policy). They were recruited between February 2022 and December 2024.

Participants took part in online semi-structured interviews, which lasted one hour on average. The interviews covered gambling experiences, insights about gambling-related suicide and how it is investigated in Australia, and ideas for ways to improve gambling-related suicide prevention. The researchers then analyzed interview responses to identify common themes.

What you need to know

Gambling-related suicides are likely underreported. In this study, the researchers looked at how gambling is currently identified in suicide death investigations in Australia, as well as ways to improve how it is detected and monitored. The researchers recruited 32 adults living in Australia who had experienced a suicide attempt related to gambling, had lost a loved one to gambling-related suicide, or were professionals working in related areas (e.g., death investigation). Participants were interviewed online between 2022 and 2024.

The researchers identified three main themes: the ways that information is gathered, weighted, and reported in death investigations, together with stigma and shame that lead people to hide their gambling; complexity in determining the exact role of gambling in suicide deaths; and systemic barriers to detecting gambling (e.g., limited police training). The findings can inform policy efforts aimed at improving the detection and prevention of gambling-related suicides.

What the researchers found

There were 18 male and 14 female participants. Among them, 23 had experienced a suicide attempt related to gambling, 3 were affected by the gambling-related suicide of a loved one, and 6 were professionals.

The researchers identified three main themes that could explain why gambling may not be recognized

as a factor in suicide deaths. The first is related to the ways that information is gathered, weighted, and reported in death investigations, together with stigma and shame that often keep gambling hidden. Participants who struggled with gambling talked about feeling embarrassed and hiding it from friends and family. As a result, police investigators often do not know that gambling was involved in a person's life. This is compounded by the fact that police investigators must file reports on suicide deaths within 24 hours, allowing little time to gather details that may reveal a role of gambling.

Family members may also be reluctant to share information about gambling debts or financial problems to protect their loved one's reputation. Even when evidence of gambling appears at a death scene, witnesses sometimes ask police not to include it in their reports.

The second theme is that determining the actual role of gambling in suicide is challenging. When investigators look into suicide cases, they often find multiple problems happening at the same time, such as relationship breakdown, financial stress, and mental health concerns. As a result, gambling is often documented as just one factor among many, rather than a primary cause. This makes it difficult to accurately estimate how many suicides are due to gambling. In contrast, participants who survived gambling-related suicide attempts noted gambling as the main driving factor.

Further, there is no single consistent definition of what makes a suicide "gambling-related," making it difficult to standardize how these cases are recorded. Some professionals suggested taking an approach where if there is any mention of gambling, it is recorded without trying to judge the extent that it contributed to the suicide.

The third theme reflects that the current system is not structured to detect gambling in suicide cases. Police officers receive little training on gambling-related harms, and there is no standard question about gambling on police report forms. Some professionals thought the addition of this question to police forms might be helpful. But others expressed concern that it might end up being a box ticking exercise and miss important details.

Moreover, gambling companies gather data about customer activity and gambling patterns, but this information is not accessible to professionals (e.g., death investigators) who may be able to use it to understand the role of gambling in suicide deaths.

How you can use this research

The findings can inform policy efforts aimed at improving the detection and prevention of gambling-related suicides.

About the researchers

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