

knowledge snapshot



A review of the impact of COVID-19 on gambling behaviours

What this article is about

Many countries imposed a lockdown in the spring of 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19. During the lockdown, land-based gambling venues were closed and major sports events were cancelled. The latter had an impact on sports betting. There are concerns that addictive behaviours have increased during the pandemic. There might have been an increase in online gambling, which is associated with a higher risk of problem gambling. This article is a review of research on the impact of COVID-19 on gambling behaviours. The authors explored the impact on the prevalence of gambling, transition to online gambling, and mental health among people who gamble.

What was done?

The authors followed the guidelines of the Scale for the Assessment of Narrative Review Articles. They searched for relevant articles on PubMed and Google Scholar. Articles must be published since January 2020 and written in English. The authors also included pre-prints. A pre-print is a research article that is shared publicly before it is peer-reviewed and published in a scientific journal. The authors excluded book chapters, commentaries, and letters from editors.

What you need to know

Prevalence of gambling

The authors identified 16 articles, including 14 published studies and two pre-prints. Most studies were carried out during the early phase of the pandemic in Northern Europe (Sweden, UK, Italy), North America (Canada, USA), and Australia. Most studies were online studies that surveyed the participants at only one point of time. Only two were

Why is this article important?

This article is a review of research studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gambling behaviours. The authors identified 16 studies that were written in English. Most studies were online surveys during the early phase of the pandemic. The majority of studies reported an overall decline in gambling. However, some people started gambling or gambled more during the pandemic. A number of studies reported an increase in online gambling. Increased gambling was associated with worse mental health, more substance uses, and more severe gambling problems.

longitudinal studies that followed the participants over a period of time. Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a decrease in gambling behaviours. But in some people, the pandemic has promoted gambling behaviours or problem gambling.

An online survey in Sweden during the early phase of the pandemic reported that most people did not change their gambling behaviours. Among those who did, more people decreased rather than increased their gambling. However, a follow-up survey that occurred after nine months into the pandemic found that more people increased their gambling than decreased their gambling. People who increased their gambling had more severe gambling problems. A study looking at the revenues of licensed gambling operators in Sweden found that changes in gambling pattern largely returned to pre-pandemic levels by the third month into the pandemic. An online survey in Italy found that 2.8% of participants who did not

gamble started gambling during the early phase of the pandemic. An Australian longitudinal study found a sharp decline in the number of people who gambled during the early phase of the pandemic. This was followed by a sharp increase in the next few months.

Transition to online gambling

A study in Sweden reported an overall decrease in gambling but a slight increase in online gambling. A survey that occurred after nine months into the pandemic found increases in some types of gambling, such as online and land-based horse betting. Another study in Sweden reported an increase in online casino gambling. However, the overall money spent on online casino decreased. In contrast, a longitudinal study in Switzerland reported an increase in online gambling and more intense gambling behaviours. A Canadian study with people who gambled online found that 54% continued to do so during the first six weeks of lockdown. People who gambled at a high risk level and those with moderate to severe depression and anxiety were more likely to gamble. An Australian study reported a decline in the number of people who gambled online from February to April 2020. However, some people increased their online gambling, particularly those who bet on sports.

The authors also noted a spike in stock market and Bitcoin trades during the pandemic. Thus, some people might have turned to these activities as a form of pastime and as a replacement activity.

COVID-19 related distress

An online survey in the UK found that gambling participation remained stable in the early phase of the pandemic. Almost a quarter of people who gambled reported that their mental health had been negatively affected, particularly people with gambling problems. An online survey in the USA reported an increase in online gambling among people with gambling problems. Increased gambling was associated with alcohol, tobacco, and pornography uses. A study in Canada found that most people reported alcohol use during the first six weeks of lockdown. About 40% of those respondents increased their alcohol use. A study in Sweden found that increased alcohol use was

associated with increased online gambling. A study in Italy found that people who gambled regularly or who started gambling during the pandemic had poorer well-being and greater depression, anxiety, and stress.

Who is it intended for?

This review is for policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders. The authors suggested standard regulations of online gambling platforms and frequent reviews of gambling patterns across different settings.

About the researchers

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