

Length of continuous gambling sessions unrelated to problem gambling risk among people who regularly gamble on slot machines

What this research is about

Although online gambling has increased in popularity, many people who gamble still do so in land-based venues like casinos. Being able to identify people who may be experiencing harms from gambling is an important step for successful intervention attempts.

There are a number of visual signs and gambling-specific behaviours that may indicate a person is experiencing harms, such as repeated withdrawals and emotional distress. Research has consistently found that electronic gaming machines (EGMs) are associated with higher risk for problem gambling (PG) and associated harms. People who gamble on EGMs for longer periods and take fewer breaks are considered to be at higher risk. Moreover, EGMs allow for continuous gambling without breaks, which places people at higher risk for harms.

However, evidence on the role of gambling session length appears to be mixed. One study found that EGM session length did not effectively distinguish people at low vs. high risk for gambling-related harms. Additionally, previous research relies on self-reported data, though people often underestimate their own gambling involvement. One way to address this is to examine session length using account-based tracking data in place of self-reports.

This study aimed to explore if longer session length, shorter break length, and more continuous gambling would be associated with higher risk for gambling harms. The researchers analyzed data collected from people who regularly gambled on

What you need to know

Although online gambling has become increasingly popular, many people still gamble at land-based venues. Electronic gaming machines (EGMs) have been found to be particularly linked to gambling harms. It has been suggested that EGM session length could be a good indicator for identifying people at risk of gambling harms; however, research findings have been mixed.

In this study, the researchers examined the relationships between problem gambling (PG) and EGM session length and break length. Using datasets provided by two Australian land-based casinos, they analyzed if higher Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) scores would be associated with longer EGM sessions, shorter break length between sessions, and more continuous gambling without a break in between sessions. Overall, there no meaningful relationships between PGSI scores and session length, break length, or continuous gambling. The results suggest that the length of gambling sessions on its own may not be a good indicator of gambling harms.

EGMs at a land-based casino in Australia using their loyalty membership card.

What the researchers did

Data were provided by an Australian land-based casino to Focal Research Consultants as part of an

international research project funded by the National Research Council of Canada (NRC-IRAP). For this study, the researchers used data from 1,332 customers of the casino who regularly gambled on EGMs (i.e., at least 6 or more times in the past year). Only EGM sessions where participants used their loyalty membership card to gamble were analyzed. The EGM session data were collected for 12 months from March 2021 to February 2022. The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was administered to participants in March 2022.

A gambling session was defined as a distinct period of gambling on a single EGM, beginning when participants inserted their loyalty card and ending when they removed it from the machine. Breaks were periods of not gambling on EGMs during a visit to the casino.

The researchers replicated the study using data provided by another Australian land-based casino located in a different jurisdiction. Participants were 866 loyalty members whose EGM session data were collected between April 2023 and March 2024. These participants completed the PGSI in April 2024.

What the researchers found

First, it was found that PGSI scores were not significantly related to how much time a person spent at the casino (i.e., overall visit length), the length of gambling sessions, the length of breaks between gambling sessions, or the extent of continuous gambling without a break in between sessions. These findings were in direct contradiction to what was initially hypothesized. It was found that people with higher PGSI scores spent more time gambling on a single EGM in a session, but the effect was small.

The researchers then attempted to confirm their findings with a second dataset collected from 866 loyalty members of a different casino. Once again, there were no notable relationships between PGSI scores and length of EGM sessions, length of breaks, or extent of continuous gambling.

How you can use this research

The results of this study help to clarify the relationship between problem gambling severity

and EGM session length. Importantly, it was found that there were no meaningful associations between PGSI scores and the length of gambling sessions or the length of breaks between sessions. This indicates that session length by itself may not be a good indicator of gambling harms. The use of multiple indicators could better support the detection of people who may be experiencing gambling harms. These findings could be of interest to researchers, policy makers, and casino staff who attempt to identify people at risk of gambling harms.

About the researchers

Melissa Salmon, Sophie Wang, Tracy Schrans, and Tony Schellinck are affiliated with Focal Research Consultants Ltd, Halifax, Canada. **Piyush Puranik** and **Kasra Ghaharian** are affiliated with the International Gaming Institute, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV, USA. For more information about this study, please contact Piyush Puranik at piyush.puranik@unlv.edu.

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