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Impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on gambling frequency in the UK

What you need to know

Many gambling activities were restricted in March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Opportunities for gambling in the UK were available in online venues and in the form of lottery and scratch tickets only. The aim of this study was to assess the frequency of gambling pre-lockdown and during lockdown. The researchers surveyed 1028 UK adults in April 2020. Generally, gambling frequency decreased from before to during the lockdown. However, people with potential problem gambling continued to gamble several times a week and daily. People who experienced a change in their job situation (e.g., job loss) were more likely to report that their gambling increased during the lockdown.

What this research is about

In March 2020, the UK government implemented a nation-wide "lockdown" due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This lockdown restricted access to most recreational activities, including land-based gambling. Prior to the lockdown, in-person gambling was widely accessible in the UK. There were concerns that the lockdown could harm people who gamble. The lockdown caused people to feel more bored and socially isolated. Boredom and social isolation are risk factors for developing disordered gambling behaviours. Additionally, the lockdown caused many people to lose their jobs or reduce their work hours. Financial insecuirty can cause some people to gamble in a more risky way.

The goal of this study was to assess the effect of lockdown on people's gambling behaviour in the UK. The researchers wanted to know whether the first phase of the lockdown affected how much money people spent gambling and the frequency of their gambling. They also wanted to see whether the financial impacts of lockdown affected people's gambling behaviour.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants from a website called Prolific Academic. Participants needed to currently reside in the UK and to be experiencing a form of social exclusion. Social exclusion refers to the practice of staying away from non-household members to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Eligible participants completed the questionnaire online in April 2020. They filled out the Brief Problem Gambling Screen (BPGS-5), which assessed problems related to disordered gambling. The BPGS-5 was used to categorize participants into non-gambling, non-problem gambling (NPG), and potential problem gambling (PPG).

Participants were asked about their job situation and gambling behaviour before the lockdown (pre-lockdown) and currently (during lockdown). They were asked how frequently they gambled, how much they spent on gambling, and why they gambled. They were also asked if they thought their gambling had changed in frequency during the lockdown.

What the researchers found

There were 1,028 participants, with 72% being female. About 35% of participants were categorized as non-problem gambling, and 14% were categorized as potential problem gambling.

The researchers found that people who gambled monthly decreased their frequency of gambling from pre-lockdown to during lockdown. However, people who gambled more than monthly did not change their frequency of gambling from pre- to during lockdown.

Pre-lockdown, people with potential problem gambling were more likely to gamble several times per week. People with non-problem gambling were more likely to gamble one to two times per month. During lockdown, no differences were found between the two groups in terms of gambling frequency. The proportions of people who gambled several times a week or daily did not change from pre- to during lockdown for the two groups.

Pre-lockdown, people with potential problem gambling spent money in the ranges £26 to £50 and £101 to £200 more often than people with non-problem gambling. People with potential problem gambling were less likely to report spending smaller amounts of money (£1 to £25 and £26 to £50) from pre- to during lockdown. The number of people with potential problem gambling who gambled between £51 to £100, £101 to £200, and over £200 did not change from pre- to during lockdown.

18% of participants reported that their job situation had changed, potentially resulting in a loss of income (e.g., job loss, reduced work hours). Participants whose job situation had changed were more likely to report that their gambling frequency had increased.

How you can use this research

This research could be useful for gambling researchers. The results of this study indicate that many people gambled less frequently during the first phase of lockdown. However, many with potential problem gambling continued to gamble daily or several times a week. The researchers suggested that only those who were “most engaged” in gambling continued at the same frequency. They also found evidence suggesting that people suffering a financial loss increased their gambling during lockdown. More research on other phases of the lockdown and research that uses a longitudinal design would be beneficial.

About the researchers

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