

Prevalence and health outcomes of people affected by another's gambling across relationship types in Sweden

What this research is about

Research has documented that gambling can harm not only the person who gambles but also people close to them, including partners, friends, parents, siblings, children, and colleagues. Affected others (AOs) may experience financial, relational, emotional or psychological, health-related, cultural, work- or study-related, and criminal harms. The harms faced by AOs are shaped both by their relationship to the person who gambles and sociodemographic factors. For instance, people in intimate relationships often experience greater gambling-related harms, due to shared finances and day-to-day responsibilities.

There is little research investigating the health outcomes of AOs across different relationship types. This study examined the prevalence of AOs within the Swedish population across different relationship types, and how health outcomes might differ for different categories of AOs compared with non-AOs.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data collected by Statistics Sweden as part of a national survey on health and gambling in 2021. The sample was drawn from the Swedish population register, with the aim of creating a representative group of the Swedish population based on sex, age, and risk of problem gambling.

Participants were invited to join the study through mail. Sociodemographic information was pulled from the register. In the survey, participants were asked to report on the following:

What you need to know

Affected others (AOs) are people negatively affected by another's gambling. The harms AOs experience can vary based on the relationship type and sociodemographic factors. This study estimated the prevalence of AOs in the Swedish population across different relationship types, and examined how health outcomes might vary for different categories of AOs compared with non-AOs. A total of 7,343 participants completed the survey. Among them, 742 (11%) reported being an AO. In general, AOs were more likely to report mental distress, especially AOs who were family members. Hazardous drinking and at-risk gambling were elevated among AOs who were family members and friends. AOs were also more likely to experience negative relational outcomes, such as increased arguments and exposure to violence.

- **Affected other status.** Participants noted if someone in their close social environment experienced problem gambling in the past 12 months, and whether that person was a family member or close relative, a friend, or a colleague or schoolmate. Participants could report more than one relationship.
- **Mental health.** Participants reported mental distress in the past 30 days (using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale) and past-year thoughts of suicide.
- **Behavioural health.** Participants reported personal gambling (Problem Gambling Severity

Index), hazardous alcohol use (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-Consumption), and high daily video gaming (i.e., playing digital games for more than 3 hours per day).

- **Relational health.** Participants reported whether they had more frequent arguments with close others, exposure to violence, and problems with management at work.

What the researchers found

A total of 7,343 participants completed the survey, among whom 742 (11.1%) reported being an AO. Friends were the most common (5.4%), followed by family members or close relatives (3.8%) and then colleagues or classmates (3%).

Young people were most likely to report being an AO. Men were more likely to be an AO to a friend, whereas women were more likely to be an AO to a family member or close relative. Income was unrelated to AO status, but those with upper-secondary education were more likely to be an AO compared to those with pre-secondary or tertiary education. People born outside of Nordic countries and single people with children were most likely to report being an AO to a friend.

AOs more frequently reported negative health outcomes compared to non-AOs. More than half of AOs reported moderate mental distress, and one in ten reported serious mental distress. Suicidal thoughts were more common in AOs who were family members (8%). After adjusting for sociodemographic factors, at-risk gambling, and hazardous drinking, AOs remained to be at greater risk of mental distress. The risk of moderate mental distress was most pronounced in colleagues and schoolmates, and serious mental distress was most common in family members. But AO status was no longer associated with thoughts of suicide.

AOs were more likely to experience at-risk gambling than non-AOs, especially family members and friends. AOs were also at an elevated risk of hazardous drinking, especially friends. There were no significant differences between AOs and non-AOs in terms of high daily video gaming.

AOs were at an elevated risk of experiencing increased arguments, especially colleagues and

classmates. Exposure to violence was associated with AO status for friends. Problems with management at work was strongly associated with AO status, especially for colleagues and schoolmates.

How you can use this research

This research suggests the need to consider relationship type when addressing gambling-related harms faced by AOs. The findings can inform public health and support services.

About the researchers

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