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Gambling-related cases of death by suicide recorded in the National Violent Death Reporting System

What this research is about

Estimating the social costs of gambling-related harms reliably is critical to addressing this public health issue. However, there is a lack of high-quality relevant data. It is important to understand the burden of gambling-related harms in the US context, given the rapid expansion of legal gambling.

Previous research has reported a relationship between problem gambling and high suicide rates. Rates of attempted suicide and experiencing suicidal thoughts are much higher among people with severe gambling problems than the general population. One factor that contributes to suicidal behaviours among people experiencing gambling problems is the significant debt that results from gambling losses. While the social costs of gambling are difficult to quantify, there are many methods to estimate the cost of death by suicide.

This study aimed to examine the usefulness of using data from the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) to better understand the relationship between death by suicide and gambling in the US.

What the researchers did

The data for this study were obtained from the Restricted Access Datafile of the NVDRS. The NVDRS collects information on all violent deaths that are officially recorded in the US. The researchers collected data on all cases of death by suicide involving adults aged 18 and older from 2003 to 2020. The dataset included 296,317 cases.

The researchers examined the narratives presented in the coroner/medical examiner and law enforcement reports. They defined a case as gambling-related if the case met one or more of the following criteria:

1. The person who died by suicide was identified as having a gambling problem or gambling disorder, either by diagnosis or informally.

What you need to know

The public health burden of gambling is hard to estimate. Death by suicide presents a substantial public health cost that can be more easily measured. The current study examined data from the National Violent Death Reporting System in the US. The aim was to detect cases of death by suicide where gambling was identified as a factor. There were 296,317 cases of death by suicide from 2003 to 2020. Gambling was mentioned as a factor in 1,306 cases (0.44%).

Gambling-related death by suicide was more likely to involve men than women, and middle-aged people than older or younger people. It was also over-represented in people identified as Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Alaska Native. It was under-represented in people identified as Black or African American. Gambling-related death by suicide was over-represented in cases where alcohol use was suspected; cases with significant financial problems; and cases where intimate partner problems were involved. It was under-represented in cases involving people with a mental health diagnosis. The rate of gambling-related death by suicide in Nevada was around nine times higher than the rate in the overall sample.

2. The person who died by suicide was identified as having significant debt due to their gambling or the gambling of someone close to them.
3. The person who died by suicide was found on the premises of a gambling venue or observed on such premises shortly before the event.
4. Gambling was mentioned in the summary of a suicide note or was communicated as a motivating factor for suicide to someone else.
5. Artifacts of gambling were found on the person who died by suicide (e.g., lottery ticket, casino player card).

What the researchers found

The researchers identified 1,306 cases of death by suicide where gambling was mentioned as a factor. This amounted to 0.44% of all cases of people who lost their life to suicide between 2003 and 2020. There were fewer gambling-related cases in the age groups of 18 to 30 years old and 71 or older. There were more cases in the middle-aged groups of 41 to 50 and 51 to 60 years ago. Males were over-represented in gambling-related cases than females.

The researchers observed significant variations across race/ethnicity. There was an over-representation of people identified as either Asian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Alaska Native in gambling-related cases of death by suicide. There was an under-representation of people identified as Black/African American and Hispanic.

Marital status also played a role. People who were divorced or identified as married or in a civil union/domestic partnership at the time of death were over-represented in gambling-related cases. There was an under-representation of people who were widowed in gambling-related cases.

Suspected alcohol use, financial problems, and intimate partner problems were clearly over-represented in gambling-related cases of people who lost their life to suicide. But there was an under-representation of people with a mental health diagnosis.

Across the US, the state with the highest rate of gambling-related cases of death by suicide was Nevada (4% compared to the overall 0.44%). The other states with a high rate were Delaware (1.10%), Washington (1.03%), and Oklahoma (1.00%).

How you can use this research

This study can inform research on the relationship between people who lost their life to suicide and gambling in the US. The findings may also be of interest for prevention and treatment providers.

About the researchers

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Citation

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