

# research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



## Suicide, problem gamblers, and their offspring

### What this research is about

Problem gambling is linked to poor quality of life. Past research shows that problem gamblers have increased rates of suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completed suicides. It is unknown whether these suicidal behaviours are a part of problem gambling, a complication of problem gambling, or a result of other existing psychiatric or addictive disorders. Researchers examined the rate of suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completions in problem gamblers. They compared these rates to non-problem gamblers.

Past research also shows that problem gambling runs in families. Therefore, the researchers also examined the rates and odds of suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completions in the first-degree relatives (i.e., offspring, siblings, and parents) of problem and non-problem gamblers.

### What the researcher did

Participants were 95 problem gamblers, 91 non-problem gamblers (controls), and 1075 first-degree relatives of the problem gamblers and controls. The problem gamblers and controls were 18 years of age and above from Iowa. Controls were group-matched to problem gamblers for age, sex, and educational level. Of the first-degree relatives, 103 were offspring of the problem gamblers, and 130 were offspring of the controls. All participants were interviewed in person or by telephone.

Researchers placed the problem gamblers into 3 groups. The first group had no suicidal behaviour. The second group had suicidal thoughts only. The third group had past suicide attempts. The researchers collected information on demographics, age of onset for problem gambling, and problem gambling severity. They also measured impulsiveness and psychiatric comorbidity.

### What you need to know

Problem gamblers have increased rates of suicidal behaviours. It is unknown whether these behaviours precede or follow the onset of problem gambling. This study examined the relationship between suicidal thoughts and attempts in problem gamblers, controls, and their family members. Thirty-four problem gamblers had attempted suicide compared to 4 controls. In 13 of these participants, the attempt occurred before problem gambling onset. Sixty problem gamblers had suicidal thoughts compared to 12 controls. Suicidal behaviour in problem gamblers indicated problem gambling severity and the presence of other psychiatric disorders. Offspring of problem gamblers had higher rates of suicide attempts than control offspring.

Finally, they captured family history of psychiatric disorders, gambling disorder, and suicide attempts. Researchers collected similar information for controls and first-degree relatives.

The researchers compared the three problem gambling groups for demographic and other recorded factors. They also compared rates of suicidal behaviour among problem gamblers and controls. Finally, they compared suicidal behaviour among first-degree relatives of problem gamblers and controls.

### What the researcher found

Of the problem gamblers, 35 had no history of suicidal behaviour, 26 had a history of only suicidal thoughts, and 34 had a history of past suicide attempts. These groups were similar in demographic characteristics. Problem

gambling severity was higher in the groups with suicidal thoughts or attempts, compared to the group with neither. Impulsiveness, anxiety, and mood disorders were also higher in the groups with suicidal thoughts and attempts. Of the problem gamblers with a history of suicide attempts, the suicide attempts happened before the onset of problem gambling in 13 subjects. In 14 subjects, the suicide attempts occurred during the course of problem gambling. In 7 subjects, the suicide attempts occurred both prior to and during problem gambling onset.

Of the controls, 75 had no history of suicidal behaviour, 12 had a history of only suicidal thoughts, and 4 had a history of past suicide attempts. These results suggest that suicidal thoughts and attempts are frequent in problem gamblers and occur at higher rates than among controls.

Suicidal thoughts and attempts were lower among problem gambler relatives compared to their problem gambler family member. The rate for suicide attempts was not greater among problem gambler relatives than control relatives. However, suicide attempts and completed suicides were more frequent among problem gambler offspring compared to control offspring.

#### How you can use this research

The findings suggest that problem gambling is a major risk factor for both suicidal thoughts and attempts. Clinicians should be aware that suicidal behaviour can arise as a complication of problem gambling. Thus, they should monitor these behaviours in problem gamblers and intervene if necessary. The findings are also relevant to treatment providers. Due to the risk for suicidal behaviour in problem gambler offspring, they may wish to consider family therapy in addition to individual therapy.

#### About the Researcher

**Dr. Donald W. Black** is a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. **Dr. William Coryell** is also a professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. **Dr. Raymond Crowe** is a former distinguished research faculty member at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. **Brett**

**McCormick** is a PhD student in the Department of Epidemiology at the University of Iowa College of Public Health. **Martha Shaw** is a researcher in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine. **Dr. Jeff Allen** is a statistician at American College Testing, and a former PhD student at the University of Iowa College of Public Health.

To contact the researchers, please write to [donald-black@uiowa.edu](mailto:donald-black@uiowa.edu).

#### Citation

Black, D. W., Coryell, W., Crowe, R., McCormick, B., Shaw, M., & Allen, J. (2015). Suicide ideations, suicide attempts, and completed suicide in persons with pathological gambling and their first-degree relatives. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 45(6), 700-709. doi: 10.1111/sltb.12162

#### Keywords

Pathological gambling, suicide ideation, suicide attempt, completed suicide, family

---

#### Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

