

research snapshot

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The majority of gambling problems in Australia are caused by electronic gaming machines (EGMs)

What this research is about

With the exception of Western Australia, gambling opportunities have become increasingly available in Australia since the 1990s. Gambling has become a privatized market in Australia. Many forms of gambling (e.g., electronic gaming machines (EGMs), Keno, and sports betting) are easily available and accessible at pubs, clubs, and hotels.

Gambling participation, frequency, and spending vary widely across people who gamble. It has long been suggested that engagement in certain forms of gambling (e.g., EGMs) can be riskier than other forms. EGMs have been known to increase the risk of gambling harms, which can include financial distress, self-harm, and suicidal behaviours.

Research indicates that structural and situational differences between gambling forms contribute to differences in risk levels. For example, EGMs are characterized by a fast speed of play, continuous play, and audiovisual feedback. Most of these features tend to be absent in more traditional forms of gambling, such as scratch tickets or bingo. It follows that a high proportion of people seeking help for gambling problems report that EGMs are the main source of their problems.

The goal of the present study was to evaluate and compare the relative risk of available forms of gambling in Australia. The researchers also aimed to examine the relative contribution of each form on the total burden of harm of gambling problems in the Australian population.

What the researchers did

What you need to know

Gambling opportunities have increased considerably in Australia. Although gambling participation, frequency, and spending vary widely across people who gamble, research suggests that electronic gaming machines (EGMs) are a highly risky form of gambling. Research indicates that specific features (e.g., fast speed of play and audiovisual feedback) contribute to differences in risk levels between gambling forms. In this study, the researchers examined the relative risk of available forms of gambling in Australia. The researchers also aimed to evaluate the relative contribution of each form on the total burden of harm of gambling problems in the Australian population.

The researchers analyzed data from six state-based gambling prevalence surveys and one national survey in Australia. They found that EGMs contributed to over 50% of gambling problems in Australia. They also found that casino table games were equally as risky as EGMs. Casino games, however, were found to contribute less to gambling problems due to low participation. These results suggest that EGMs have the greatest burden of harm on the population. This research can be used to inform gambling policy.

The researchers analyzed data from six state-based gambling prevalence surveys and one national survey in Australia. The total number of participants was 71,103. Among them, 40,268 participants had gambled in the previous year. Each of the surveys involved telephone interviews. Participants were

recruited by random number dialing. Participants reported their demographics (e.g., age and gender), completed a measure of gambling problems (Problem Gambling Severity Index; PGSI), and reported on their participation in various gambling activities.

The prevalence and unique effects of frequency and engagement in each form of gambling were estimated.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that EGMs were the largest contributor (over 50%) to gambling problems in Australia. The results also showed that 90% of gambling problems were attributable to EGMs, casino gambling, and race and sports betting. Casino table games and EGMs were found to be equally risky at the individual level, but casino games contributed less to gambling problems due to low participation. Lottery was the most common form of gambling, with 40% of participants who engaged. However, bingo and lottery showed no risk for gambling problems.

These results indicate that EGMs have the greatest burden of harm on the population. The researchers suggested this is because EGMs uniquely combine high risk gambling with a high participation rate and high frequency of gambling among participants. These characteristics are different from risky, but less commonly played, casino games.

How you can use this research

This research can be used to inform gambling policy and public approaches to reducing gambling harm (e.g., reduce availability of EGMs, restrict certain game features that increase risk, and implement features that may prevent excessive spending). The researchers suggested that EGM regulation should be a primary focus of action in Australia. More innovative policy ideas relating to EGMs should be tested due to the uneven impact of this form of gambling.

About the researchers

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