

# research snapshot

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## Mobile health apps for problem gambling that are available in Australia

### What this research is about

Health apps available on mobile devices (mHealth apps) are increasingly being used in health treatment. People with problem gambling have difficulties controlling their gambling behaviour despite it causing harm. mHealth apps for problem gambling are easy to access and can reduce the costs of treatment. However, only a few apps are currently available.

A recent study has reported that people with problem gambling accept mHealth apps as a treatment option. However, little is known about the quality of available apps. User ratings and download rates reflect popularity rather than quality. Some researchers have relied on other means, such as feedback from users and treatment providers. In this study, the researcher examined mHealth apps for problem gambling that are available in Australia. The focus was on whether the apps were designed by experts with experience in problem gambling, costs, updates, functions, and user downloads and ratings.

### What the researchers did

The researcher looked for apps available in Google Play and Apple iTunes stores in January 2020. The apps must have been developed specifically for quitting and controlling gambling. Non-gambling specific apps that could be used to reduce gambling behaviour (e.g., apps that track finances and spending) and generic addiction apps were not included.

The researcher found 17 apps that Australians could access. Few of the apps appeared on the first page of the search results. Thus, they were not readily visible to potential users. The researcher downloaded the apps to identify their functions.

### What you need to know

Mobile health apps (mHealth apps) are increasingly being used in health treatment. However, few mHealth apps for problem gambling are currently available. In January 2020, the researcher found 17 apps available to Australians from the Google Play and Apple iTunes stores. Most of the apps were free or had low costs. Most of the apps had three or fewer functions. The most common functions were information about problem gambling and blocking software for users to restrict or block access to gambling sites. The apps generally had no or few user reviews. Their download rates varied greatly. The average for the most recent update was more than 12 months ago. This study shows the need for more apps that are professionally designed and based on research evidence and theories.

### What the researchers found

#### *Involvement of problem gambling experts*

Of the 17 apps, 11 provided policies regarding the protection of user privacy. Four apps had expert involvement. Gamban was designed by people with problem gambling, treatment providers, and the gambling industry. GT was designed by treatment providers and a registered charity group. Gambling Help was designed by a state council in the United States. Stay on Track was designed by an Australian state government and a gambling support organization. The remaining apps were designed by app developers without expert experience. User ratings and downloads for these apps were comparable to the four apps with expert involvement.

## Costs and updates

Nine apps were free to use. Three apps were free to download and users would have to pay a subscription fee for additional functions. Five apps were freemium and included in-app purchases. The costs were generally low for these purchases. The apps varied in the number of days since their last update, ranging from 64 days to 1,850 days. The average was 433 days. This meant the average for the most recent update was more than 12 months.

## Downloads and user ratings

Number of downloads was available for 13 apps available in Google Play. The number of downloads ranged from 50 to 10,000. The average was 2,573 downloads. In general, downloads for these apps were considerably less than what had been reported for mHealth apps for substance uses. The apps had few or no reviews. The average user rating was 3.3 out of 5. Two apps had a rating of 5 out of 5, but they were rated by fewer than 10 users. The two apps with more than 50 user ratings both scored 3.3.

## Functions

The researcher identified 13 functions across the apps. Fourteen apps had three or fewer functions. Three apps had four or more functions, and two of these apps had high download rates of 10,000 times. The two most common functions were information about problem gambling (e.g., reasons for quitting and treatment tips) and blocking software to restrict or block access to gambling sites. These two functions were each offered by six apps. However, information was mostly basic and subjective. As for blocking software, some reviews claimed that it would also restrict use of social media apps or web browsing. Three apps had reviews that claimed the software was ineffective.

Other functions were offered by fewer apps, such as abstinence tracker for users to keep record of days not gambling and emergency helpline. Some of the apps had unique functions. For example, Gambling/BetBlocker had a panic button that users could use to lock their phone for a period of time and a productivity tracker to log non-gambling behaviour.

Stay on Track had a bet planner that users could use to pre-plan their bets. Three apps claimed they hosted functions that were actually links to external websites.

In terms of aesthetics, some apps came across as appealing and professional looking while others were very basic.

## How you can use this research

This study shows a need for more apps that are designed with input from experts in the area of problem gambling. The content should be based on research evidence and relevant theories. Future research could evaluate mHealth apps for problem gambling, including user engagement and outcomes.

## About the researchers

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## About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (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 safer 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).

