

research snapshot

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Risk of problem gambling is greater for adolescents living in areas with higher income inequality

What this research is about

Problem gambling has a social and geographical gradient. That is, problem gamblers are more likely to live in disadvantaged areas, be unemployed and have lower income. People who face income inequality are more likely to take risks, including gambling in the hope of escaping poverty. They may believe that they cannot reach what they desire (e.g., money, status) via conventional means (e.g., a job). Thus, gambling is seen as a way to gain money. The stress of living in poor conditions can also drive people to gamble to cope with negative moods. To date, no studies have investigated the link between income inequality and problem gambling in adolescents.

On the other hand, social support may protect adolescents against problem gambling. A few studies have found that adolescents without a gambling problem have more support from parents and friends than those who are at-risk or problem gamblers. Support from teachers can also lower the likelihood of engaging in gambling activities.

The main aim of this study was to examine if Italian adolescents living in regions with higher income inequality would be more likely to gamble problematically. Another aim was to examine if perceived social support would protect adolescents from problem gambling. Perceived social support was the extent of support the adolescents believed they had from families, friends, teachers, and classmates.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the 2013–2014 Health Behavior in School-aged Children Survey (HBSC) Study. This survey invited students from Grade 6 (11-years old) to Grade 10 (15-years old) in 1,050

What you need to know

This study investigated the link between income inequality and at-risk or problem gambling (ARPG) among adolescents. It also examined the role of perceived social support. Participants were 15-year-old adolescents living in Italy. The results showed that there was a North-South gradient for the prevalence of ARPG, with ARPG being more common in the Southern, Islands and Central regions than in Northern Italy. Adolescents who lived in poorer regions with higher income inequality were more likely to be ARPGs. With regard to social support, adolescents who reported more support from families and teachers were less likely to be ARPGs. Support from friends and classmates was not associated with ARPG.

schools across 21 regions in Italy to participate. Questions about gambling were completed by 15-year-olds only. Thus, data from 20,791 15-year-olds were analyzed for the purposes of this study.

The survey included the South Oaks Gambling Screen-Revised for Adolescents (SOGS-RA) to assess gambling behaviours and consequences. Based on the SOGS-RA, the adolescents were grouped as “non-problematic gamblers” and “at-risk or problem gamblers” (ARPG). In addition, the survey asked about family structure and perceived social support. Family structure assessed if the adolescents lived with two parents or in other types of family setup (e.g., single-parent families). Perceived social support was based on the extent of support the adolescents believed they had from parents, friends, teachers, and classmates.

Data on regional income inequality were taken from the National Institute of Statistics (Istat). The Gini index is a measure of income or wealth distribution among citizens in a society. Based on this index, the researchers grouped the 21 regions into regions of low, medium, and high income inequality.

What the researchers found

About 37% of the adolescents reported having gambled at some point in their lifetime. The rate of ARPG was 6%. There were more boys who had gambled in their lifetime than girls.

At the individual level, boys were more likely to be ARPGs than girls. Adolescents not living with two parents were more likely to be ARPGs than those living with two parents. Adolescents from more affluent families were less likely to be ARPGs than those from less affluent families. Adolescents who reported more support from families and teachers were less likely to be ARPGs. Social support from friends and classmates was not associated with rate of ARPG.

There was a North-South gradient for the prevalence of ARPG, with ARPG being more common in the Southern/Islands/Central regions than in Northern Italy. Adolescents who lived in regions with higher income inequality were more likely to be ARPGs. Overall, these results showed that adolescents who lived in poorer regions with higher income inequality were more likely to gamble problematically.

How you can use this research

This study is important for public health and policy making. It demonstrates a need for policy actions to address inequalities and limit access to gambling among youth. Public health needs to implement problem gambling prevention programs in regions with higher inequalities. Programs should target adolescents who lack social support from parents and teachers, and educate parents, teachers, and school administrators about problem gambling among youth.

About the researchers

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Citation

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Keywords

Gambling, adolescent gambling, youth gambling, problem gambling, inequality, representative survey

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