

research snapshot

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A framework of gambling as a virus and the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on gambling participation and gambling disorder

What this research is about

The idea that gambling is like a virus might have important considerations for the prevention of gambling disorder. In this study, the researcher proposed that gambling disorder shares some characteristics of viral spread, such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, gambling disorder is a disease, like COVID-19. It is also caused by the action of an external agent. This external agent already exists, but certain environmental conditions favour its spread. Such environmental conditions may include an absence of regulation to limit gambling supply. This turns gambling disorder into a public health issue.

Prevention is needed to limit the spread of gambling disorder. This includes limiting the supply of and access to gambling activities. But once people have been exposed to and suffer from gambling disorder, other measures, such as psychological treatments, are needed. Moreover, just as there are less lethal variants of COVID-19, there are gambling games that are less addictive and harmful than others. Thus, measures to prevent gambling disorder need to be tailored to each type of games.

This study then examined changes in gambling that occurred one year after the lockdown measures implemented in Spain to limit the spread of COVID-19. The researcher examined changes to frequency of gambling and evolution of gambling disorder as the lockdown measures limited access to gambling.

What the researchers did

A total of 2,903 people (55.6% women and 44.4% men) between the ages of 15 and 85 participated in this study. The average age was 36.5 years old. Participants responded to an internet survey on

What you need to know

This study presents a conceptual framework for the prevention of gambling disorder. In this framework, gambling is assumed to act like a virus, similar to SARS-CoV-2. Gambling disorder, as a disease, is caused by the action of an external agent. And certain environmental conditions favour its spread. Therefore, preventive strategies should aim to prevent gambling from affecting most people. These strategies include limiting the availability of and access to gambling.

The researcher then evaluated the effects of anti-COVID measures on gambling participation and gambling disorder. These measures limited different types of gambling to a different extent. The researcher found that restrictive measures to combat COVID-19 worked to reduce frequent gambling for all types of gambling. The greatest decrease was for land-based gambling. However, they did not seem to be enough for people who already had gambling disorder. Most people who suffered from gambling disorder before the pandemic also had the disorder after the COVID-19 measures were implemented.

gambling behaviour between May and November 2021. This survey evaluated gambling before and after restrictive measures were taken to combat COVID-19. The researchers categorized gambling participation into three groups based on the restriction conditions applied by the government to prevent COVID-19:

- No restrictions: online gambling.
- Moderate restrictions: lotteries. There were two months without lottery draws at the

beginning of the lockdown period. After the lockdown period, lotteries returned to pre-pandemic conditions.

- Severe restrictions: land-based gambling. During lockdown, access to some game types was prevented and the capacity of gaming halls was limited.

The researchers measured gambling participation and gambling problems before and one year after the COVID-19 measures were implemented. The Brief Problem Gambling Screen (BPGS) was used to assess gambling problems before the pandemic. The NORC DSM-IV Screen for Gambling Problems (NODS) was used to assess gambling problems after the COVID-19 measures were implemented.

Participants who played different types of games on a regular basis (at least 1–2 times per month) were selected for analysis. The researchers compared gambling participation and gambling disorder across the two time points.

What the researchers found

The researchers found a reduction in frequent participation for all types of gambling after the COVID-19 measures were implemented. These included lotteries, land-based gambling, and online gambling. The greatest decrease was for land-based gambling. The researchers also found that the type of gambling with a lower percentage of new people gambling on it was lotteries (5.33%). There were no differences in the percentages of new people who engaged in land-based and online gambling. Women reported fewer gambling problems than men. According to the NODS, 5.9% of women suffered from gambling disorder, compared to 10.5% of men. In terms of risky gambling, the percentage was 10.9% among women compared to 20.4% among men.

The researchers found that more participants showed gambling problems after the restrictive measures were implemented compared to before. Most participants (74.6%) who suffered from gambling disorder before the pandemic also had the disorder after the measures were implemented. Only 6.4% of the participants who did not have gambling disorder

before the pandemic developed the disorder afterwards. Of the participants with gambling disorder after the pandemic, 21.6% had the disorder before. Only 0.6% of those without current gambling disorder had the disorder before the restrictive measures were implemented.

How you can use this research

This research can be used to better understand how COVID-19 restrictive measures have affected gambling. The findings can also inform gambling interventions.

About the researchers

Mariano Chóliz is affiliated with the Gambling and Technological Addictions Research Unit in the School of Psychology at the University of Valencia in Valencia, Spain. For more information about this study, please contact Mariano Chóliz at mariano.choliz@uv.es.

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