What this research is about

Past research shows that the more one gambles, the greater the likelihood of harm. Gambling-related harm may be financial, relationship, family, or work-related. Past research has established various low-risk gambling limits to help gamblers avoid gambling-related harm. For instance, one study estimated the following limits: gambling no more than 3 times per month, spending no more than $1000 Canadian per year on gambling, and spending no more than 1% of household income on gambling. Exceeding these limits increased the risk of harm. However, most studies have used cross-sectional data (i.e., both gambling behaviours and harms were measured at a single point in time). But gambling behaviours are known to change over time.

The current study aimed to establish a new set of low-risk gambling limits using longitudinal data from two Canadian studies (i.e., gambling behaviours and harms were measured over time). It then compared these limits to those reported in previous studies using cross-sectional data. The current study also estimated the risk of future harm if gamblers exceeded any of the low-risk gambling limits.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from two studies: The Leisure, Lifestyle, and Lifecycle Project (LLLP) and the Quinte Longitudinal Study (QLS). Both studies tracked gambling in Canadians over time. Data from 809 adults living in Alberta came from the LLLP. Data from 3,054 adults living in the Quinte region in Southeastern Ontario came from the QLS. Both studies collected data during the same time frame (2006 and 2011) and involved similar measures. They both captured gambling behaviours (time spent gambling per month, total amount of money spent on gambling per month, and percent of income spent on gambling). The researchers recoded data on frequency and spending to ensure that data from the two studies were comparable. In particular, losses were recoded to be positive and wins were recoded as zero to reflect that the participant had not spent money on gambling during that period.

Both studies also captured seven consequences of gambling using the Problem Gambling Severity Index. These included: feeling guilty, betting more than one could afford, recognition of a problem, health problems, financial problems, being criticized by others, and borrowing money to gamble. The researchers defined harm as experiencing two or more consequences in the past 12 months. They used receiver operating characteristics (ROC) analysis to determine the optimal low-risk gambling limits.

What you need to know

The current study aimed to establish low-risk gambling limits using gambling data collected over time. Data were from 3,863 adults who participated in the Leisure, Lifestyle, and Lifecycle Project (LLLP) in Alberta and the Quinte Longitudinal Study (QLS) in Ontario. The low-risk gambling limits were: gambling no more than 8 times per month, spending no more than $75 Canadian per month on gambling, and spending no more than 1.7% of income on gambling. Gamblers who exceeded any of these limits were four times more likely to experience future harm from gambling than those who did not.
What the researchers found

Based on the results from both the LLLP and QLS, the low-risk limits were gambling no more than 8 times per month, spending no more than $75 Canadian on gambling per month, and spending no more than 1.7% of income on gambling. Gamblers who exceeded any of these limits were four times more likely to experience future harm from gambling than those who did not. However, the overall strength of prediction was low. This means that these low-risk gambling limits have limited ability to accurately predict the experience of harm from present gambling behaviour.

The low-risk gambling limits in this study were higher than those reported in previous studies using cross-sectional data. However, the risk curves and optimal low-risk limits established from the LLLP and QLS were similar. This suggests that the present findings using longitudinal data may be more accurate for most gamblers than previous estimates using cross-sectional data.

How you can use this research

Public health can use the low-risk gambling limits to inform gamblers of the risk of harm if they choose to exceed them. However, not all gamblers who exceed the limits will experience harm, and the limits do not provide complete protection from harm. Therefore, public health messaging should inform gamblers of these limitations. Public health and research should determine any additional guidelines and cautionary messages for more vulnerable gamblers.

About the researchers

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Citation


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Low-risk gambling limits, problem gambling, longitudinal cohort study

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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.

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