

research snapshot

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Problem gambling during COVID-19: The effects of reduced exposure to gambling venues during lockdown

What this research is about

Gambling has become more available in the past two decades, leading more people to gamble. As a result, more people may suffer from gambling harms. Certain factors can increase the risk of experiencing gambling harms. For example, environments where gambling is readily available can encourage harmful gambling.

Italy has the largest gambling market in Europe. The rate of problem gambling is high at 3%. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Italy in early 2020, many areas of the country went into lockdown. During lockdown, gambling venues closed, although online gambling was still available. As a result, Italians spent 30% less on gambling during the lockdown. This study looked at Italian adults who were receiving treatment for gambling disorder. The researchers compared their gambling behaviour, symptoms, and cravings from before and during lockdown.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 135 adults with gambling disorder to participate in the study. All participants were living in the north of Italy and were receiving gambling treatment. Most participants were trying to abstain from gambling. Additionally, most of them gambled on slot machines in the past.

The researchers created the telephone interview questions. Then, healthcare professionals who were treating the participants prior to the lockdown performed the telephone interviews. The interviews occurred during the lockdown from April-May 2020. The telephone interviews focused on five main areas:

1. Participants' life conditions during lockdown (home environment, relationships, and emotional state).

What you need to know

During the initial COVID-19 lockdown in Italy, all gambling venues closed. How did this reduced access to gambling affect gambling harms? This study interviewed 135 adults in Italy who were receiving treatment for gambling disorder. The participants reported on their living conditions, emotional state, and gambling behaviour, symptoms, and cravings before and during lockdown. Overall, participants showed less gambling behaviour, fewer gambling disorder symptoms, and lower cravings during lockdown. Many felt the restricted access to gambling during lockdown helped improve their quality of life.

2. How the pandemic impacted them.
3. Their gambling behaviour, cravings, and symptoms during lockdown. The interviewers used the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) to measure problem gambling symptoms and behaviour.
4. Their use of other potentially addictive behaviours, such as alcohol or videogame use.
5. How participants felt things had changed from before to during lockdown.

What the researchers found

Life conditions during lockdown

Close to 80% of participants lived with others and many rated their relationships as being quite good. Participants who reported positive family relationships also reported lower problem gambling symptoms. Half of participants had positive emotional states during lockdown, whereas 24% had negative emotional states. Those who reported depressive feelings also reported higher problem gambling severity.

Impact of the pandemic

None of the participants had COVID-19. However, 41% knew someone who was affected by the virus and 10% knew someone who died from it. Those who knew someone who died tended to have more problem gambling symptoms.

Gambling behaviour, symptoms, and cravings

Only 6% of participants gambled during lockdown. Based on their SOGS scores, 16% of participants showed no problem gambling symptoms and 69% showed only one symptom. Only 4% met the SOGS criteria for problem gambling during lockdown. Many participants felt uninterested in gambling during lockdown and reported low cravings. Some attributed their low cravings to the reduced access to gambling. Those with higher gambling cravings tended to experience more problem gambling symptoms.

Frequency of other potentially addictive behaviours

Many participants spent more time watching TV, on mobile phone, and on the Internet during lockdown. About 26% of participants drank alcohol often during lockdown. However, increased alcohol use was not linked to increased gambling. Additionally, 11% reported playing videogames often, which was linked to higher problem gambling.

Changes from before to during lockdown

Over half of participants felt their relationships with family members improved during the lockdown, while 11% felt they worsened. Some participants felt their relationships improved because they gambled less due to the lockdown. Forty-six percent of participants felt their emotional state improved during lockdown. Again, some of them felt this was because they could not gamble. Finally, based on their SOGS scores, most participants had fewer gambling problems during lockdown compared to before.

How you can use this research

Overall, this study suggests that restricting access to gambling could benefit those experiencing problem gambling. Therefore, public policy could consider restricting access to gambling to reduce harms. This might include limiting the number of gambling venues and slot machines in a region, among other measures.

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.

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