

knowledge snapshot



A review of risk and protective factors for problem gambling in youth

What this article is about

Problem gambling is defined by continuous gambling behavior that leads to negative consequences. These consequences could include financial and relationship problems. Gambling prevalence rates are reportedly higher in youth compared to adults, although this may be due to issues in research methods. Research has shown that gambling problems in adults can emerge from childhood and adolescent experiences.

Early risk factors for the development of problem gambling have been mostly studied in cross-sectional research, which collects data at a single point of time. Many risk factors have been associated with problem gambling. Examples include male gender, impulsivity, family problems, and early gambling onset. Some early protective factors have also been identified in the literature. Protective factors decrease the risk of developing problem gambling. Examples include coping strategies, social support, and parental monitoring. While cross-sectional research provides some insight, longitudinal research that follows participants over time is needed.

The aim of this systematic review was to identify risk and protective factors that are longitudinally associated with the development of gambling problems. The focus is on risk and protective factors in children (0-12 years), teens (13-17 years) and young adults (18-25 years).

What was done?

The researchers did an academic and grey literature search. They searched electronic databases and Google using search terms related to problem gambling, study design, risk and protective factors. Articles were included if they longitudinally examined

Why is this article important?

There is limited evidence on early risk and protective factors for the development of problem gambling. This review identified 15 studies, published in 23 articles from 1990 to 2015. All of the studies were longitudinal studies that followed participants over a period ranging from five weeks to 32 years. Meta-analysis found significance for 15 risk factors and three protective factors. These factors had mainly small to medium effect sizes. The risk factors were similar to those found for other problem behaviours such as alcohol and drug use. This suggests that prevention efforts should target multiple problem behaviours. The review also identified a lack of longitudinal research, specifically for protective factors in the development of problem gambling.

risk or protective factors in relation to problem gambling. Articles were limited to risk and protective factors measured in children (0-12 years), teens (13-17 years), and young adults (18-25 years). The search was restricted to articles published from 1990. Fifteen studies, published in 23 articles, were deemed relevant and included in the review.

The researchers extracted data from the studies to perform meta-analyses. Data included study details (e.g., sample size), the measures used, and statistical methods. The risk of bias for each study was also assessed.

Risk and protective factors were classified according to the socio-ecological model. This model takes into account the context of each factor. The contexts include the individual level, relationship level, community level, and societal level.

What you need to know

Most of the included articles were from the USA, Canada, and Australia. Many studies were published from 2000 onwards, and employed a standardized measure for problem gambling. The most commonly used measures were the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) and the SOGS-Revised Adolescent.

Sponsorship from the gambling industry was rarely reported. Follow-up periods ranged from five weeks to 32 years. Only half of the studies had follow-up periods longer than five years.

The included studies examined 88 different factors in association with problem gambling. Of these, 55 factors were examined in one sample and thus not included in the meta-analysis. The remaining 33 factors included 29 individual, two community, and two relationship factors.

Of the 33 factors, there were 15 risk factors associated with problem gambling. The strongest risk factors were problem gambling severity, male gender, and number of gambling activities in the past 12 months. Poor academic performance was also a strong risk factor. Risk factors with small effect sizes included frequency of alcohol use, antisocial behaviors, cannabis use, depressive symptoms, illicit drug use, impulsivity, sensation seeking, tobacco use, under-controlled temperament, and violence. Meta-analysis found small to medium effect sizes for these factors. However, there was high variation in the effect sizes reported across studies.

There were three protective factors, including parental supervision, socio-economic status, and social problems. All of these factors had small effect sizes. An additional 15 factors were not significant. These included factors such as age, aggression, anxiety, attention, big early gambling win and loss, early gambling onset, distress, religious attendance, and suicidal ideation.

Who is it intended for?

This review is intended for gambling prevention and treatment providers to guide their efforts in counteracting risk factors or reinforcing protective

factors. The risk factors are similar to those found for other problem behaviours such as drug use. Thus, prevention efforts should target multiple problem behaviours. This review can also aid researchers in the design of future longitudinal studies.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Gambling, systematic review, risk factors, protective factors, longitudinal studies, youth

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