

# research snapshot

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## Developing low-risk gambling limits in Australia

### What this research is about

From a public health perspective, gambling problems exist across a continuum of risk. Harms that arise from gambling problems occur to people who gamble, as well as their families and communities. Responsible gambling has been used as a framework to guide policies and programs that aim to prevent gambling harm. Current guidelines focus on behaviours that people can take to prevent harm, such as leaving bank/credit cards at home and setting how much money to spend.

A few studies, mostly from Canada, have identified low-risk gambling limits. The suggestion is that gambling beyond those limits increases the risk of experiencing harm. Most studies have used a relative risk approach, which weighs the ability of the limits to accurately identify someone experiencing harm versus someone not experiencing harm. More recently, it has been argued that low-risk gambling limits should be based on absolute risk. This approach has been used to establish low-risk drinking limits. It involves setting the limits so that the chance of someone who drinks within the limits and suffers from an alcohol-related condition is below some risk level. This study aimed to use a relative risk approach to identify low-risk gambling limits in Australia. It also explored the relative and absolute risk associated with gambling beyond these limits.

### What the researchers did

The researchers used three data sources: (1) the second and third surveys of the Social and Economic Impact Study (SEIS) of Gambling in Tasmania; (2) the 2014 Survey on Gambling, Health, and Wellbeing in the

### What you need to know

In this study, the researchers developed a set of low-risk gambling limits in Australia. They also explored the relative risk and absolute risk associated with exceeding the limits. The limits were: gambling frequency of 20–30 times per year; gambling spending of AUD \$380–\$615 per year (USD \$240–\$388 per year); gambling spending of 0.83–1.68% of gross personal income; and two types of gambling activities per year. Except for the number of gambling activities limit, exceeding the limits predicted later harm. In relative risk, people who gambled beyond the limits were 3–20 times more likely to experience harm. In absolute risk, they would have a 5–17% risk of experiencing harm. Gambling within the limits could also lead to some degree of harm.

Australian Capital Territory (ACT); and (3) the Tasmanian Longitudinal Gambling Study (TLGS).

The researchers determined the low-risk gambling limits using four indicators: (1) gambling frequency; (2) gambling spending; (3) gambling spending as a percentage of personal income; and (4) number of types of gambling activities including lotteries. To measure harm, the researchers used items from the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The PGSI has 7 items that assess negative consequences and 2 items that assess behavioural symptoms. The researchers used a cut-off of two or more negative consequences to indicate that a person was experiencing harm.

### What the researchers found

*Establishing the low-risk gambling limits*

The researchers used the Tasmanian SEIS and the ACT surveys to determine the low-risk gambling limits. The limits were: gambling frequency of 20-30 times per year; gambling spending of AUD \$380–\$615 per year (USD \$240–\$388 per year); gambling spending of 0.83–1.68% of gross personal income; and two types of gambling activities per year.

The low-risk gambling limits applied to both men and women and across all age groups. People who gambled were most likely to exceed the number of gambling activities limit, followed by the gambling frequency limit. Fewer people exceeded the two gambling spending limits. If people did exceed the limits, they tended to exceed more than one limit.

#### *Risk associated with exceeding the limits*

The researchers tested if exceeding the low-risk gambling limits would predict harm in the future using the TLGS surveys. Except for the number of gambling activities limit, the other limits predicted higher risk of harm. People who exceeded these limits, especially the gambling spending limits, were more likely to experience harm in the future.

The relative risk approach showed that people who gambled beyond the limits were 3.4–20.2 times more likely to experience harm than people who gambled within the limits. The absolute risk approach showed that people who gambled beyond the limits had a 4.7–17.1% risk of experiencing harm. Yet, gambling within or below the limits could also lead to some harm.

In the Tasmanian SEIS and ACT surveys, only 6.8%–11.5% of people who gambled beyond the limits were actually experiencing harm. The limits are better able to identify people with gambling harm, however, in settings in which there are more people with gambling harm. Besides gambling venues, these settings include mental health services, alcohol and drug use services, and gambling counselling services.

#### **How you can use this research**

This study can be used by policy makers, clinicians, and researchers when developing guidelines for low-risk gambling in Australia. However, more research is still needed to confirm these low-risk gambling limits.

#### **About the researchers**

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#### **Citation**

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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.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

