



Public Health:

An Approach to Gambling

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Introduction

Gambling is a growing public health concern with diverse impacts on individual and community health and well-being. The harms from gambling can have both short- and long-term financial, physical, emotional, and cultural impacts on the gambler, as well as on their friends, family, and community more broadly.

A public health perspective of gambling harm encourages a shift from a narrowed focus on individual gamblers to a broader understanding of the physical, sociocultural, and environmental contexts in which problematic gambling behaviour develops. This proactive public health framework emphasizes the need for interventions and policies that prevent or mitigate gambling-related harm, promote healthy lifestyle choices, protect vulnerable or high-risk groups, and reduce population health inequities.

key messages

- Gambling harm is influenced by a range of sociocultural and environmental determinants
- Gambling can intensify a person's experience with mental health issues or substance misuse
- A public health approach to gambling is needed to address gambling harm
- Several jurisdictions have adopted a public health response to gambling, and lessons learned through their experiences can inform strategies to address gambling in Ontario

Gambling and Social Determinants of Health

Many societal, behavioural and biological determinants influence the distribution of gambling harm in the population. These factors include:

Income: Higher income is associated with greater participation in recreational gambling and with higher total spending. Lower-income individuals are at a higher risk of suffering from the negative consequences of gambling, and spend a greater proportion of their income on gambling.

Education: Lower education is associated with problem gambling. People with higher education are more likely to gamble online.

Gender: Men tend to engage in recreational gambling more than women. Problem gambling is also more prevalent among men, although women tend to develop problematic gambling more quickly than men.

Race and ethnicity: Gambling is more frequent among visible minorities than Caucasian respondents, particularly among individuals who identify as black or Chinese. Research has also shown that problem gambling is more prevalent among Indigenous groups compared to the general population.

Living conditions: Higher neighborhood disadvantage, unstable housing conditions, and homelessness are associated with problem gambling behaviour.

Mental Health: Greater participation in gambling is related to a range of negative mental health outcomes.

Behavioural factors: Obesity and sedentary behaviour are associated with more frequent rates of gambling, and obesity is also associated with problem gambling behaviour.

Substance use: Higher participation in gambling is associated with increased tobacco use, alcohol consumption, and use of other substances, including cannabis. Problem gamblers are five times more likely to report tobacco dependence, 11 times more likely to report cannabis dependence, and 23 times more likely to report alcohol dependence.

Age: Older adults represent the highest proportion of gamblers. Gambling is also highly prevalent among adolescents. Individuals in both of these age cohorts are particularly vulnerable to gambling related harms.

Public health interventions to address gambling harms

Regulation of Gambling Content, Packaging, and Labelling: This may include gambling-related warning messages in games and advertising; restricting the use of misleading feedback; and tracking gambling behaviour to enforce mandatory limits.

Education, Communication, Training, and Public Awareness: Educational strategies are needed to ensure that community healthcare workers, educators, parents, and the general public are aware of the warning signs of problem gambling, especially for adolescents and young adults.

Advertising, Promotion, and Sponsorship: These interventions may include restricting advertising that provides false perceptions about the harms of gambling; restricting gambling promotion and sponsorship material aimed at children and adolescents; developing counter-marketing strategies to reduce the appeal of gambling, by emphasizing gambling risks; and highlighting tactics employed by the gambling industry to increase profits.

Regulating Accessibility: Regulating or increasing the minimum age for gambling to protect adolescents and young adults from gambling harms; reducing casino operating hours; removing ATMs from gambling venues; and imposing limits on monetary withdrawals.

Research, Surveillance, and Exchange of Information: Coordinating community surveillance efforts to understand the health impacts of gambling in the population.

About the Authors

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About Us

GREO is an independent knowledge translation and research exchange organization that aims to eliminate the harms 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.

For the full length report including references, or to learn more about GREO, visit www.greo.ca or email us at jess@greo.ca.