What factors contributed to prisoners’ gambling problems before they entered prison?

What this research is about

There is a strong link between problem gambling (PG) and crime. Problem gamblers usually experience financial difficulties from their gambling behaviours. As a result, they may commit crimes to finance their gambling and pay off their gambling debts. These crimes may include selling drugs, theft, or fraud.

Past research in Australia has reported that the rates of PG among prisoners are higher than among the general population. However, little has been done to help prisoners break the cycle of gambling and crime. It is necessary to understand prisoners’ attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling, and the situations that may trigger their gambling behaviours.

The current study examined the relationship between attitudes about gambling, triggers for gambling, and the severity of PG among prisoners who had a history of problem gambling before they entered prison.

What the researcher did

Participants were 66 prisoners with a history of PG from eight prisons in Western Australia. Participants completed three questionnaires about the severity of their gambling problems, attitudes, and situations that would trigger gambling before prison.

The Early Intervention Gambling Health Test (EIGHT) Gambling Screen assessed the prisoners’ lifetime PG severity. The Gambling Attitudes and Beliefs Survey (GABS) assessed their attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling. Higher GABS scores indicated that the prisoners thought gambling was exciting and socially important, and luck and strategies played a role in winning. Finally, the Inventory of Gambling Situations (IGS) identified the types of situation in which the prisoners had gambled heavily in the past.

What you need to know

Prisoners in Australia with a history of problem gambling (PG) were asked about the severity of their gambling, their attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling, and situations that would trigger gambling before they entered prison. The results suggested that attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling did not directly influence the severity of PG. However, if the prisoners had positive attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling, they were more likely to react to trigger situations for gambling. These triggers had more impact on the severity of their PG. Triggers might include social pressure, need for excitement, and worry about debts among others. It is important to help prisoners deal with their trigger situations and change their attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling. Without any intervention, these prisoners may be caught in a vicious cycle of gambling debts and criminal activities upon their release from prison.

These situations included: Positive Affect Situations (pleasant emotions, social pressure); Gambling Cycle Situations (need for excitement, worried about debts, winning and chasing, confidence in skill); Negative Affect Situations (negative emotions, conflict with others); and Temptation Situations (urges and temptations, testing personal control).

What the researcher found

Among the prisoners in the study, 96.9% were problem or pathological gamblers. Most of them reported having more than 2 gambling trigger situations. Positive Affect Situations were the most
common triggers for the prisoners to gamble before they entered prison.

Scores on the EIGHT Gambling Screen and the GABS were both related with the IGS subscales of Urges and Temptations, and Winning and Chasing. These results suggested that the prisoners were highly motivated by their craving or urge to gamble and the temptation to gamble in the hope of a big win. Thus, they suggested that the prisoners were caught in a cycle of winning and chasing.

Scores on the EIGHT Gambling Screen were also related to the IGS negative affect situations, such as being worried about debts and conflict with others. This showed that problem gambling among the prisoners had an impact on finances and relationships. In contrast, scores on the GABS were more related to IGS positive situations, such as social pressure, building confidence in skills, and the need for excitement. This suggested that the prisoners’ PG severity was linked to the mistaken belief that they had control over gambling, their enjoyment of the social aspects of gambling, and the excitement that they experienced from gambling.

There was no relationship between the EIGHT Gambling Screen and the GABS. This suggested that attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling did not directly contribute to the severity of PG among the prisoners. The prisoners’ attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling related more to their trigger situations for gambling. Thus, attitudes towards and beliefs about gambling were the foundation for gambling, but attitudes and beliefs alone did not contribute to the development of gambling problems. The prisoners also needed to experience the trigger situations for gambling, such as negative emotions or peer pressure to gamble. If the prisoners had positive attitudes towards gambling, they were more likely to react to trigger situations for gambling.

How you can use this research

This study shows that there is a need to provide gambling treatment and education within prisons. Treatment providers and clinicians should use the IGS to identify the types of situations that would trigger a prisoner to gamble heavily in the past. They should help these prisoners deal with their trigger situations for gambling. They should also offer education to help prisoners change their positive attitudes towards and mistaken beliefs about gambling. Without any intervention, prisoners with gambling problems may continue the cycle of gambling debts and criminal activities upon their release from prison.

About the Researcher

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