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Problem behaviours in adolescents: Subgroups and differences between them

What this research is about

Problem behaviours such as smoking, drinking alcohol, antisocial behaviour, and gambling often start in adolescence. Adolescents who engage in more than one of these behaviours (multi-problem behaviours) are at greater risk of continuing these behaviours in adulthood. This can lead to serious negative consequences, such as mental health disorders. Adolescents who engage in multi-problem behaviours may be motivated by similar reasons. However, more research is needed to better understand this phenomenon.

The goal of this study was to better understand adolescents with multi-problem behaviours. The researchers aimed to examine adolescents who smoked, abused alcohol, exhibited antisocial behaviour, and had gambling experience. The researchers sought to identify subgroups of adolescents based on the levels of multi-problem behaviours. The researchers wanted to know if there were differences in problem behaviours and mental health between those who gambled problematically and those who did not. They also wanted to know if there were any gender differences.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the Survey of Adolescent Life in Västmanland in Sweden. Students aged 15 to 18 completed the survey in class. For this study, the researchers were interested in the 1526 students who reported they had gambling experience.

The survey consisted of several questionnaires. The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was used to assess symptoms related to problem gambling. Higher scores indicated more problem gambling symptoms.

What you need to know

Adolescents often engage in problem behaviours including smoking, drinking alcohol, gambling, and antisocial behaviour. The authors of this study aimed to identify subgroups of adolescents based on their engagement in smoking, drinking, gambling, and antisocial behaviours. They used data from a large survey of 15- to 18-year-olds in Västmanland, Sweden. The authors identified four subgroups of adolescents. Two groups reported high levels of problem gambling along with high levels of alcohol use and antisocial behaviour. One group also had high rate of daily smoking. The third group reported high endorsement of antisocial behaviour but low levels of other problem behaviours. The fourth group reported low levels of all problem behaviours. The two groups that gambled also had the greatest level of mental health problems, including ADHD symptoms and depression.

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-Consumption (AUDIT-C) was used to identify high levels of alcohol use. The researchers created a 16-item questionnaire to measure antisocial behaviour. The Karolinska Sleep Questionnaire (KSQ) assessed sleep quality and issues. The Depression Self-Rating Scale, Adolescent version (DSRS-A) measured symptoms related to depression. The World Health Organization Adult ADHD Self Report Scale (ASRS) assessed symptoms related to ADHD. Psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., headache, feeling nervous) were assessed with nine items from the WHO scale. The adolescents were also asked about tobacco use.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified four subgroups of adolescents. The largest group (85% of participants), named “Low Risk”, were characterised by low levels of the four problem behaviours. The second group, named “Moderate-High Risk with Gambling”, were characterised by high levels of problematic alcohol use and gambling, high levels of antisocial behaviour, but low rate of daily smoking. This group consisted of 7% of the participants. The third group, “Moderate-High Risk without Gambling”, included 6% of participants. This group was characterised by high levels of antisocial behaviour and low levels of problem gambling and alcohol consumption. There was nearly a 50% chance of a participant being a daily smoker in this group. The fourth group, “High Risk”, comprised of 2% of the participants. These participants were characterised by daily smoking, very problematic alcohol and gambling, and very high levels of antisocial behaviour.

There were more boys in all four subgroups than girls. Participants in the High Risk group had more psychosomatic, depressive, and ADHD-related symptoms compared to the Low Risk Group. They also reported more sleep problems compared to the Low Risk group. Rates of ADHD were similar between the two Moderate-High Risk groups and the High Risk group. The two Moderate-High Risk groups differed in depressive symptoms. The Gambling group had more depressive symptoms than the group without Gambling. Overall, the Low Risk group had the lowest rates of mental health problems. The Moderate-High Risk with Gambling and High Risk groups had the highest rates of mental health problems.

How you can use this research

The researchers concluded that problem gambling might occur for the same reasons as other problem behaviours. This was because none of the groups had high rates of only problem gambling. Both groups that reported high rates of problem gambling also reported high rates of alcohol use, antisocial behaviour, and mental health problems. This research could be useful to public health, treatment providers, and other researchers.

About the researchers

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Citation

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