

research snapshot

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Comparison of people with and without illegal behaviours linked to gambling disorder

What this research is about

Gambling disorder is linked to illegal behaviours. Previous research found that between 27% and 60% of people with gambling disorder (GD) engaged in at least one illegal activity related to gambling. Illegal behaviours can be a variety of acts that lead to legal problems, such as theft, writing bad checks, embezzlement, prostitution, and tax fraud.

Research evidence suggests that gambling-related illegal behaviours is connected to more severe gambling symptoms. In this study, the researchers examined how adults with GD might engage in illegal behaviours, and how this might be related to symptom severity and psychosocial impairment.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data collected from 427 adults with gambling disorder. These adults had participated in clinical trials on pharmacotherapy or psychotherapy from 2003 to 2020. The researchers used data from participants' first visit within the trials. The trials were held in the metropolitan areas of Chicago, USA, and Minneapolis, USA. Participants were recruited through advertisements (internet, public places, and newspapers).

Participants in the trials were diagnosed with current gambling disorder according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder 5—DSM 5. People were excluded if they had bipolar I disorder, schizophrenia, or substance use disorder within the last three months.

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the following information: (1) demographics (age, biological sex, and education); (2) clinical features of

What you need to know

Gambling-related illegal behaviours are defined as illegal behaviours that occur after a person meets the criteria for gambling disorder (GD). The researchers examined how adults with GD might engage in illegal behaviours, and how this might be related to symptom severity and psychosocial impairment. The researchers used data from 427 adults with GD who participated in clinical trials. Participants were divided into two groups: those who engaged in gambling-related illegal behaviours and those who did not. About 43% of people with GD engaged in gambling-related illegal behaviours. This group was younger, started gambling earlier, and was younger when gambling first became problematic. Compared to people without legal problems, those with legal problems had worse gambling symptoms according to the Clinical Global Impression. They also reported more depressive symptoms, lower quality of life, and higher levels of nonplanning impulsivity.

gambling disorder; and (3) gambling-related illegal behaviours. Gambling-related illegal behaviours were defined as illegal behaviours that occurred after a person met the criteria for GD. These behaviours were performed either due to the financial stress of gambling losses or to continue gambling.

The interviewers used the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM; the Structured Clinical Interview for Gambling Disorder (SCI-GD); and the Minnesota Impulse Disorders Inventory (MIDI). Severity of gambling symptoms was assessed using the Gambling Symptom Assessment Scale (GSAS); the Yale-Brown

Obsessive Compulsive Scale modified for Pathological Gambling (PG-YBOCS); and the Clinical Global Impression scale.

Participants also completed the following:

- Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI)
- Sheehan Disability Scale (SDSS)
- Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAM-A) and Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HAM-D)
- Barratt impulsiveness scale, version 11 (BIS-11)
- Stop Signal Task (SST)
- Intra/Extradimensional Task (IED)

Participants were divided into two groups: those who reported a gambling-related illegal behaviour (“legal problems”) and those who did not engage in an illegal behaviour (“no legal problems”).

What the researchers found

A total of 242 people had no legal problems (57%). Another 185 people had gambling-related illegal problems (43%). On average, participants with legal problems were younger (46 vs 48 years). They started gambling at an earlier age and were also younger when gambling first became problematic. About 58% of those with legal problems sought help for their gambling in the past. In contrast, only 36% of people without legal problems sought help before.

Most participants with legal problems (96%) provided more details about their illegal behaviours. The most common illegal behaviour was writing bad checks or paying bills from accounts that did not have enough funds (75%). This was followed by theft (9.6%).

Compared to participants without illegal problems, those with legal problems had worse gambling symptoms according to the Clinical Global Impression. There were no differences in other measures of gambling severity (GSAS and PG-YBOCS). Those with legal problems reported more depressive symptoms and had a lower quality of life.

There was no difference between the two groups in terms of the likelihood of experiencing other mental health issues. But those with legal problems had higher levels of nonplanning impulsivity than those

without. Nonplanning impulsivity refers to acting quickly without thinking of future consequences.

How you can use this research

This study suggested that illegal behaviours should be considered as part of gambling harms. Practitioners can use this research to modify interventions to address gambling-related illegal behaviours.

About the researchers

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