

knowledge snapshot



How common are gambling problems among people in poverty?

What this article is about

People who live in poverty often spend a higher proportion of their income on gambling than people not living in poverty. Poverty refers to when people are so poor that they may not meet basic needs like food and housing. People with lower incomes, on government assistance, and without a job are more likely to experience gambling problems. Poverty creates a context of stress. People living in poverty may gamble to reduce stress and to win money in the hope of a better life.

Researchers and policy makers are interested in the relationship between gambling problems and poverty. Research suggests that gambling venues and opportunities are more often located in communities where people have low incomes. More research is needed to identify the social and health issues that may make people more likely to develop gambling problems. There may be little research on this topic because gambling remains a hidden problem among people with low incomes.

In this review, the authors investigated how common gambling problems are among people living in poverty. They also explored whether there is any evaluation of interventions for people who live in poverty and have gambling problems.

What was done?

The authors searched for research studies in 11 online academic databases. They included 27 studies in their review. All studies involved adult participants and used screening tools to assess participants for gambling problems. Some studies investigated participants' experiences with poverty and homelessness. Other studies compared participants

Why is this article important?

Gambling problems are a serious issue for people living in poverty. The authors reviewed 27 research studies to determine how common gambling problems are for people in poverty. These studies suggest that people are more likely to develop gambling problems if they live in disadvantaged communities, have low incomes, are jobless, experience homelessness or use shelters, are in treatment for drug or alcohol addiction, and are suffering from serious health problems. Policy makers can work with service providers to create integrated programs that support people living in poverty who experience gambling and other health concerns.

who were disadvantaged and advantaged. Being disadvantaged refers to when people do not have access to the goods and services they need to live a comfortable life including safe housing, education, and jobs. Some studies examined the impact of being disadvantaged at a neighbourhood level (e.g., living in poor neighbourhood where more people are unemployed). Other studies compared participants with low incomes and high incomes.

For each study, the authors recorded participants' race, ethnicity, age, and sex. They recorded the screening tool each study used to assess participants for gambling problems. The authors also pulled information about how the researchers defined poverty and what their key study findings were.

What you need to know

Of the 27 studies, 12 studies were published in the US, 7 in Canada, 4 in the UK, 3 in Australia, and 1 in South Africa. Few studies explored the relationship between poverty and gambling problems, although many estimated a higher prevalence of gambling problems among people living in poverty. Most studies found that a higher proportion of people in disadvantaged communities have gambling problems than people from advantaged communities. A high proportion of people using shelters, being treated for drug or alcohol addiction, and experiencing serious health problems had gambling problems.

Most research suggests that people with low incomes are more likely to have gambling problems than people with higher incomes. One study suggests that U.S. veterans, who used mental health services, were at higher risk of gambling problems if they had higher incomes. People who are jobless may be more likely to have gambling problems than people with jobs. People with part-time jobs may be more likely to have gambling problems than people with full-time jobs.

People who experience homelessness are at greater risk of gambling problems. One study examined found that a greater number of people experienced gambling problems before becoming homeless. People with gambling problems may be more likely to experience mental health and substance use concerns.

Research suggests that people may start gambling to cope with distress they experienced as a child or youth. People also gamble to deal with problems in their life. There is a high level of stigma associated with having gambling problems and living in poverty. Thus, it is difficult for people to reveal their gambling problems and seek help because of shame. The authors found no studies that evaluated intervention programs for people with gambling problems and living in poverty.

Who is it intended for?

This article is intended for policy makers, service providers, and researchers. Researchers can explore the relationship between poverty and gambling. They could investigate whether people experience poverty

before developing gambling problems or if their gambling problems bring about poverty. Policy makers can work with service providers to create integrated programs that support people living in poverty and experiencing gambling and other health problems. Public health programs and campaigns may help improve public awareness and understanding of gambling and its harms.

About the researchers

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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.

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