

research snapshot

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Online casino gambling and live sports betting are associated with problem gambling and being over-indebted

What this research is about

Online gambling is becoming popular in many countries in recent years. There are concerns that problem gambling may be more common in online gamblers than offline, land-based gamblers. Problem gambling can lead to serious negative consequences, including debts and mental health distress.

In Sweden, online casino gambling and live sports betting are two gambling activities most common in patients seeking treatment for gambling problems. At the same time, a recent public health report has noted a change in gender patterns in gambling. Specifically, the rate of problem gambling in women may have surpassed that of men in recent years. This is in contrast with previous research in which men were found to be at higher risk.

This study examined whether specific online gambling activities are associated with debts and problem gambling. It also investigated how debts and problem gambling are related to mental health distress, gender, and other sociodemographic characteristics.

What the researchers did

Participants were 1004 Swedish adults who had gambled on an online casino or betting site at least 10 times in the past year. They were recruited through the web panel of a market survey company. Slightly over three-quarters of participants (78%) were men.

In the survey, participants reported their gambling involvement across 10 different activities in the past 30 days. Given the focus of this study, participants were divided into four groups according to online casino gambling and live sports betting. The groups were: 1) those who gambled on both activities; 2)

What you need to know

This study found high rates of problem gambling and moderate-risk of problem gambling in Swedish online casino gamblers, and even higher rates among those who gambled on both online casino and live sports betting. People who participated in these two gambling activities were most likely to have been over-indebted (e.g., not able to pay bills). Those who participated in online casino gambling also expected themselves to be over-indebted in the near future. Having problem gambling was associated with greater mental health distress and alcohol use problems. In contrast to previous research, problem gambling was more common in women than men.

those who gambled on online casino games only; 3) those who gambled on live sports betting only; and 4) those who did not gamble on either activity.

Participants also reported their total gambling losses in the past 30 days. The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was used to assess their gambling behaviour and problems. The Kessler Scale-6 (K6) was used to assess mental health distress such as feelings of hopelessness, nervousness, and depression.

In terms of financial issues, participants reported if they had ever borrowed money due to their gambling in the past year, and if they had debts that were sent to a collection service or to the Swedish Enforcement Authority. Participants also reported if they ever felt being over-indebted (e.g., not being able to pay bills) in the past year and at some point in their lifetime, and if they expected to be over-indebted in the next two months. Sociodemographic factors were also

collected including age, gender, education, and history of treatment for alcohol and drug problems.

What the researchers found

Based on the PGSI, 13% of participants were experiencing problem gambling. Another 19% were at moderate risk of problem gambling. Problem gambling was more common in women (24%) than men (10%). Participants with problem gambling were most likely to have been over-indebted before and to have borrowed money due to their gambling. Risks of being over-indebted and borrowing money were also higher among those with moderate-risk compared to those with low-risk or no gambling problem.

About 18% of participants reported both online casino gambling and live sports betting. Among this group, 44% were experiencing problem gambling. One-third (28%) had a history of being over-indebted, and one-fifth (20%) expected to be over-indebted in the near future. This group of participants was the most likely to have borrowed money and to have their debts sent to an enforcement authority before.

About 16% of participants reported online casino gambling only. Among those participants, 18% were experiencing problem gambling. Also, 18% had been over-indebted in the past and 15% expected to be over-indebted in the near future.

Another 36% of participants reported live sports betting only, and 30% reported neither activity. Few participants in these two groups were experiencing problem gambling (4% in each group). Also, few participants had been over-indebted (6% in each group), or expected to be over-indebted (4% of live sports bettors and 3% of those reporting neither).

Overall, participants with a history of being over-indebted had greater mental health distress and alcohol use problems. They were likely to participate in both online casino gambling and live sports betting. Expectation of being over-indebted in the near future was also associated with greater mental health distress, alcohol use problems, and online casino gambling. Surprisingly, participants who expected to be over-indebted reported a higher level of education.

How you can use this research

This study suggests a need for public health prevention and policy efforts to address the risk associated with online gambling, in particular online casino gambling. Public health efforts may also want to tackle the risk of problem gambling in women. Screening for problem gambling is also recommended in consumer credit counselling settings.

About the researchers

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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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