

research snapshot

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Changes in gambling patterns nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden

What this research is about

There are concerns that gambling and problem gambling might increase during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sweden, the lockdown in March 2020 greatly reduced gambling opportunities, especially with the closing of casinos and cancellation of major sports events. However, sports betting returned to a normal level early in the summer when sports events restarted. In October 2020, the Swedish government imposed new restrictions in response to a new surge of COVID-19 cases. While casinos remained closed this time, sports betting was available.

In a previous study in April/May 2020, the researchers found that people who gambled more during the pandemic were at high risk of problem gambling. In this study, they examined changes in gambling patterns at a later time point in the pandemic.

Another aim of the study was to explore the potential impact of the temporary gambling regulations in Sweden. The regulations were passed in July 2020 in response to the concerns that COVID-19 might increase problem gambling. The regulations are in place until at least June 2021. The regulations require people to set limits on deposits and time spent playing online casino games and land-based electronic gaming machines (EGMs).

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants through the web panel of market research company Userneeds. The survey took place from November 20–29, 2020. A total of 2029 participants completed the survey. All participants were at least 18 years old. A large part of the survey was the same as the one used in April/May 2020. Both studies included the Problem Gambling

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers examined changes in gambling patterns around nine months into the COVID-19 pandemic in Sweden. A total of 2029 adults completed an online survey in November 2020. The results showed that 6% of participants gambled more and 4% gambled less. An increase in gambling was associated with more severe gambling problems, greater alcohol use, and higher mental distress. Moderate-risk and problem gambling were common among people who increased their gambling. Only 30% of people were aware of the temporary gambling regulations during COVID-19. Awareness was much higher among people with moderate-risk or problem gambling and those who had self-excluded before.

Severity Index (PGSI) to assess participants for gambling problems. The Kessler-6 was used to assess participants for mental distress. Participants were asked about their engagement in several types of gambling in the past year (e.g., online and land-based sports betting, land-based EGMs, and online poker).

Participants reported whether they had changed the amount of time they spent at home, their alcohol use, and their gambling during COVID-19. In the current survey, those who said they had increased or decreased their gambling were asked for the reasons. Participants also reported which gambling types, if any, they started for the first time during COVID-19.

Participants were asked whether they had ever used self-exclusion through the nationwide service (Spelpaus) and the longest time period chosen (1, 3, 6, or 12 months). In addition, participants read a brief

description of the temporary gambling regulations. Participants were asked if they had ever heard about the regulations and if their gambling had changed as a result. They also reported if they had used the time or deposit limits for online casino games and EGMs.

What the researchers found

Of the 2029 participants, 10% experienced moderate-risk or problem gambling and 3% had self-excluded before. In terms of gambling during COVID-19, 6% reported gambling more and 4% reported gambling less. Slightly over half (54%) reported no change in their gambling, and 36% did not gamble. In contrast to the study in April/May 2020, the current study found a greater proportion of participants reporting an increase than a decrease in gambling.

About 62% of participants who gambled more experienced moderate-risk or problem gambling. This was in comparison to 30% of participants who gambled less and 9% of participants who reported no change in their gambling. The most common reason for increasing or decreasing gambling was because of changes in everyday life. An increase in gambling was associated with more severe gambling problems, greater alcohol use, and higher mental distress.

Most participants (91%) did not try a new type of gambling during COVID-19. Among the small number of participants who did, many experienced moderate risk or problem gambling. For example, among those who tried online casino gambling for the first time, 71% had moderate-risk or problem gambling. Among those who tried online sports betting, it was 62%.

Only 30% of participants were aware of the temporary gambling regulations during COVID-19. Men were more likely than women to be aware of the regulations. Awareness was also higher among those with moderate-risk or problem gambling, those who had self-excluded before, and those who gambled in the past year. About 2% of participants reported the regulations increased their gambling, and 1% reported the regulations decreased their gambling. Most participants who said they had increased or decreased their gambling because of the regulations experienced moderate-risk or problem gambling.

How you can use this research

This study can inform policy makers, clinicians, and researchers. Screening for changes in gambling behaviours may help detect people at risk of problem gambling. Also, gambling operators could put in place preventive measures for people who are at risk.

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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