

research snapshot

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COVID-19 related distress and gambling in elite athletes

What this research is about

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost everyone worldwide, but it has most clearly affected elite athletes. This is because all the major sport events have been cancelled until further notice. Due to the potential impact of COVID-19 on athletes, the player unions of elite players in major team sports in Sweden examined COVID-19-related consequences on the mental health in their members. The consequences may include worry and uncertainty about the future, depression, anxiety, and addictive behaviours such as gambling and alcohol use.

Problem gambling is known to be high among male athletes. Problem gambling is a repetitive pattern of gambling that results in harm. During the COVID-19 pandemic, people may spend more time online at home and increase their gambling. A recent study in Sweden found that while many people did not gamble more during the COVID-19 pandemic, those who did were more likely to have problem gambling.

Taken together, this article aimed to assess how COVID-19 might have impacted elite athletes from the top soccer, handball, and ice hockey leagues in Sweden. The researchers examined the athletes' self-reported consequences in areas of worry and uncertainty about the future, depression, anxiety, gambling, and alcohol use. They also aimed to investigate whether those consequences were related to certain demographics or sports type.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 327 elite athletes from the top soccer, handball, and ice hockey leagues in Sweden. Participants received an online anonymous web survey in May 2020. The survey was sent only to

What you need to know

This research examined how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted elite athletes. The researchers recruited 327 athletes from the top soccer, handball, and ice hockey leagues in Sweden. The results revealed that COVID-19-related distress was common in elite athletes. Over half felt psychologically worse during the pandemic. Many participants were worried about the future of their sport and their own future in sport. Women were more likely to feel worse and to have depression and anxiety than men. Few participants increased their gambling during the pandemic. But, those who did reported more severe gambling problems.

athletes over the age of 15. The companies, Patient Information Broker (PIB) and I-Mind Consulting, helped the researchers to collect the data.

The survey asked participants about their gender and age (younger or older than 25 years). Following a description of the pandemic's consequences on society, the researchers asked participants about changes in their psychological health during the pandemic. They then asked whether participants felt worried about the future of their sport in Sweden, and about their own future in their sport. The researchers also asked whether participants had planned for a dual career before and during the pandemic. A dual career referred to having another career aside from the sports career. The researchers then asked about changes in alcohol consumption and gambling habits during the pandemic.

To assess depression, the researchers used the 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9). To measure

anxiety, they used the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7). They assessed gambling problems by using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI).

What the researchers found

The results showed that a little over half of the participants felt psychologically worse since the pandemic. More women (72%) reported feeling worse during the pandemic than men (40%). About 66% felt slightly worried or very worried about the future of their sport, and 51% were slightly or very worried about their own future in their sport. More women (59%) reported being worried about their own future in their sport than men (46%). A total of 48% reported having planned for a dual career.

About 10% of the participants met the criteria for anxiety, and 9% met the criteria for depression. Again, anxiety and depression were more common among women. Participants with anxiety or depression were more likely to be worried about their own future in their sport.

Moderate-risk and problem gambling occurred in 10% of male athletes, but none in female athletes. Around 16% reported drinking more alcohol and 7% reported more gambling during the pandemic. People who reported gambling more during the pandemic had more serious gambling problems. Those who drank more alcohol during the pandemic were more likely to be worried about the future of their sport.

How you can use this research

Service providers could use this study to develop interventions to help athletes deal with COVID-19 related distress. Future studies could develop plans for long-term follow-up, as responses to the pandemic fluctuate. Future research could also explore distress in athletes who are involved in individual sports and Paralympic sports.

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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