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An Australian national prevalence study of concerned significant others harmed by gambling

What this research is about

Gambling harms refer to the negative consequences from gambling that reduce health and wellbeing. Aside from the person who gambles, gambling harms can extend to others in the social network. These people are “concerned significant others” (CSOs) and may include family members, friends, and co-workers. CSOs may experience harm in many life areas, such as emotional, financial, and relationship. The characteristics of CSOs and their relationship with the person who gambles can influence the types and number of harm experienced. The aims of this study were to estimate the national prevalence of CSOs in Australia and identify their characteristics. Another aim was to compare the types and number of harms experienced by CSOs based on their relationship to the person who gambles and their gender.

What the researchers did

Data for this study were drawn from a national telephone survey in 2019. Survey respondents were Australian adults aged 18 years and older. They were selected via random dialling to mobile phones. A total of 15,000 adults completed the survey. The researchers examined the responses from 11,560 adults who were asked if they had been harmed by another person’s gambling in the past 12 months.

In the survey, participants were asked if they engaged in 13 forms of gambling in the past year, and if they gambled online on any of the forms. Participants who gambled completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), except those who gambled only on lotteries and/or bingo less than weekly.

Participants who did not gamble and those who gambled online were asked if they had been

What you need to know

Concerned significant others (CSOs) are people who have been negatively affected by another person’s gambling. This study estimated the national prevalence of CSOs in Australia and identified their characteristics. It also compared the types and number of harms experienced by CSOs based on their relationship to the person who gambles and their gender. Data were drawn from a national telephone survey and included 11,560 adults. Around 6% of the participants were CSOs. Emotional harms were the most common type of harm. This was followed by relationship, financial, health, and work/study harms, respectively. CSOs reported the most harm from a former partner, followed by current partner, other family members, and non-family members. Women reported more harm and were more likely to report harm from a family members’ gambling. Men were more likely to report harm from a non-family member’s gambling.

negatively affected by another person’s gambling in the past year. Those who answered “yes” were CSOs. They were asked about their relationship to the person whose gambling had harmed them most, and which of the 25 harms they had experienced. The 25 harms fell into five broad categories: emotional, financial, health, relationship, and work/study.

All participants were asked about their gender, age bracket, location of residence, and number of mobile phones they regularly used. Participants who gambled online were asked further demographic questions. These included marital status, Indigenous status, highest education, etc.

What the researchers found

Prevalence and comparison to non-CSOs

A total of 696 participants reported that they had been harmed by another person's gambling. Thus, around 6% of the adult population in Australia were CSOs. Compared to non-CSOs, CSOs were more likely to gamble and to experience some risk of problem gambling. CSOs were younger and more likely to be never married, living in a relationship, or divorced/separated. In contrast, non-CSOs were more likely to be married or widowed. CSOs were also more likely to be born in Australia and to mainly speak another language other than English at home.

Types and number of harm and relationship

CSOs most commonly reported being harmed by a friend's gambling (33%). This was followed by spouse or intimate partner (21.7% when including current and former partner). Intergenerational harm also occurred, including being harmed by the gambling of parents (11.8%) and children (6.3%).

Emotional harms were the most common type of harm, especially anger and distress. Relationship harms were the second most common, particularly relationship tension and conflict. This was followed by financial harms, such as reduced savings, and health harms, such as loss of sleep due to stress. Fewer CSOs reported work/study harms.

CSOs who had been harmed by a former partner's gambling reported the most harm. This was followed by CSOs who had been harmed by a current partner, a parent, and a child, respectively. Overall, CSOs who had been harmed by a family member's gambling reported more harm than CSOs who had been harmed by a non-family member's gambling. Women reported more harm than men and were more likely to report harm from a family members' gambling. Men were more likely to report harm from a non-family member's gambling.

How you can use this research

This study can inform public health, clinical practice, and policy making. It suggests that support for CSOs should take into account gender differences and relationship to the person who gambles.

About the researchers

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Citation

Hing, N., Russell, A. M. T., Browne, M., Rockloff, M., Tulloch, C., Rawat, V., Greer, N., Dowling, N. A., Merkouris, S. S., King, D. L., Stevens, M., Salonen, A. H., Breen, H., & Woo, L. (2022). Gambling-related harms to concerned significant others: A national Australian prevalence study. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions, 11*(2), 361–372.

<https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2022.00045>

Study funding

Funding was provided by Gambling Research Australia.

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