

Influences of sports betting and related harm from childhood to early adulthood

What this research is about

Participation in sports betting is common among young people between 18 and 24 years of age. However, people who place sports bets are at higher risk of gambling harm. Given this, it is important to understand what drives young people to participate in sports betting. In this study, the researchers looked at risk factors for sports betting and related harm among young adults, exploring how these influences interact and change over time from childhood to early adulthood.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 50 young adults between 18 and 25 years of age through a market research agency. All participants lived in Victoria, Australia, and reported experiencing moderate or high harm from sports betting in the past year on the Gambling Harm Scale-20 (GHS-20).

Participants completed online interviews by video conference between September and November 2023. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to one hour. The interview asked the participant about their experiences with gambling and sports betting, exposure to gambling, and influences from people in their life and their environment.

The researchers analyzed participants' interview responses to identify key themes. These themes were then organized chronologically by developmental stage, consistent with the researchers' goal of mapping participants' journeys toward sports betting and related harm.

What the researchers found

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers looked at Australian young adults' journeys into sports betting and related harm. The researchers interviewed 50 young adults between 18 and 25 years of age who lived in Victoria, Australia. All participants reported experiencing moderate or high harm from sports betting in the past year. Through these interviews, the researchers explored how influences on sports betting changed from childhood through adolescence and into early adulthood.

Pro-gambling influences were present at every stage of participants' lives. Gambling was introduced in childhood through family activities, advertising, and simulated gambling in video games. During adolescence, exposure became more intense through peer culture and increased engagement with simulated gambling. By early adulthood, gambling was seen as a rite of passage that was reinforced by peers, constant advertising, and tailored promotions. The findings can inform strategies and regulations to prevent gambling harm early in life.

Most participants were between 22 and 25 years of age (70%). There were more males (68%) than females (30%), with one participant identified as non-binary. Based on the GSH-20, 26 participants experienced moderate harm related to sports betting (score of 3–5), and 24 experienced high harm (score of 6 or higher).

A key overarching theme was that pro-gambling influences were present at all stages of participants' lives. In childhood, many participants were exposed to gambling through family traditions, social events, and outings to gambling venues. But for some participants, their parents and cultural/religious upbringing discouraged gambling. Participants also said they were exposed to gambling advertising through sports broadcasts. Moreover, many engaged in simulated forms of gambling in video games, like loot boxes and casino-style minigames. Some participants felt that it normalized gambling and shaped their intentions to gamble with money.

During adolescence, participants' exposure to gambling appeared to become more intense. Sports betting advertisements became more visible and personally relevant, especially for those interested in sports. Peer influence became more prominent, with betting being discussed and encouraged in friend groups. Betting sometimes took place underage using shared or fake accounts. Simulated gambling often increased during this developmental stage and, for some participants, acted as a stepping stone to gambling with real money. By the ages of 16 or 17, many participants had already formed clear intentions to gamble as soon as they turned 18.

Many participants described the experience of gambling legally once they turned 18 as a rite of passage. Some described the bonuses for opening betting accounts as a turning point toward regular, harmful sports betting. Peer influence remained strong in early adulthood, with betting often embedded in social activities like watching sports at pubs. But for some participants, it shifted from social to more solitary betting over time. Participants also described seeing sports betting advertisements everywhere through television, social media, and direct marketing like texts and emails. The more they engaged with betting, the more targeted promotions they received. Some participants reported cycles of deleting and reinstalling betting apps in response to promotional offers. Smartphone apps were described as making betting instant and easy, and betting with electronic money felt less tangible than with cash, which some felt that it reduced their awareness of how much money they were spending.

How you can use this research

The findings can inform the development of strategies and regulations aimed at preventing gambling harm early in the life course.

About the researchers

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Citation

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