

research snapshot

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Treatment of problem gambling in the criminal justice system in Canada

What this research is about

Many people with gambling problems are also involved in the criminal justice system. One potential reason for this overlap is that problem gambling often results in financial difficulties. People with problem gambling may feel compelled to turn to income-generating crimes (e.g., theft, fraud) to pay off debts. They may also be involved in violent crimes. Research has shown that problem gambling may result in poor outcomes, such as a higher risk of committing crimes again after being released.

There is evidence that treating problem gambling can improve outcomes after release from correctional settings. Unfortunately, access to treatment for problem gambling is nearly impossible in correctional settings. Problem gambling is also not typically screened for when people are first incarcerated. As a result, little is known about treating problem gamblers in a correctional system setting. Specific barriers to treatment, as well as potential gender differences, are poorly understood.

The aim of this study was to ask experts in this field for their opinions on the treatment of problem gambling in correctional settings. The three key issues investigated were barriers to treatment, potential gender differences in treatment, and how treatment would be best deployed in correctional settings.

What the researchers did

Sixteen experts were interviewed for this study. The experts were people who had knowledge and experience of problem gambling within the criminal justice system. The experts came from a range of backgrounds. Some experts provided treatment for people recently released from prison. Others worked

What you need to know

People with problem gambling who are in the criminal justice system would benefit from treatment for their gambling. However, little is known about how to best treat this population. Sixteen experts were interviewed to gain knowledge about gambling treatment in correctional settings. Three key issues were examined: 1) barriers to treatment, 2) gender differences in treatment, 3) how to best implement treatment. Several themes were identified for each issue and discussed in detail. One key finding was that there is a lack of awareness of problem gambling within correctional settings. Several recommendations were made to improve treatment in these environments.

in treatment services for people not involved in the criminal justice system. Most of the experts worked in Canada and had experience with clients with substance abuse problems. They were asked to provide their thoughts and opinion on the three key issues. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were then read and coded into themes.

What the researchers found

Five themes were identified for the issue of barriers to treatment of problem gambling. Many experts reported that availability and accessibility of treatment programs are a significant barrier. Programs for problem gambling are rare in correctional settings. The second theme was lack of awareness that problem gambling is a concern in correctional settings. This lack of awareness stems

from people with power in these settings, such as lawyers, guards, and judges. The third theme was institutional and structural issues, such as security routines and lockdowns, that interfere with program access. The fourth theme was stigma, resistance, and fear of repercussions. The fifth theme was barriers to implementing a gambling treatment court.

Four themes were identified for the issue of sex and gender differences. The first theme was emotional and relationship concerns. Experts noted that more emphasis is placed on emotions and the impact of gambling on families with women. The second theme was practical issues, particularly for community programs. These issues include access to transport and childcare. The third theme was types of crimes. Experts felt that men with problem gambling tend to be risk-takers, are more aggressive, and may have committed crimes unrelated to gambling. Women with problem gambling tend to commit non-violent crimes. The fourth theme was types of gambling, as the preferred type of gambling tends to differ between men and women.

The next issue was how programs should be implemented in correctional settings: stand-alone or part of other treatment programs, such as substance use programs. Some experts noted that other programs have worked well by combining substance use and gambling problems. Other experts argued that gambling is distinct from substance use and should be treated differently.

How you can use this research

This research could be useful for gambling treatment providers and anyone interested in treatment of problem gambling in the criminal justice system. The researchers made several recommendations to overcome barriers to gambling treatment in these settings. It is also important that men and women may benefit from different approaches to treatment. This study also showed that there needs to be greater awareness about problem gambling in correctional settings.

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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