

# knowledge snapshot



## A review of the association between gambling problems and suicidality

### What this article is about

Gambling is a fun leisure activity for most people. However, it can sometimes lead to gambling problems, or even the development of gambling disorder. Previous studies have suggested that gambling problems and suicidality are associated. The term “suicidality” describes different aspects of suicide, including suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide. Suicidal ideation involves thoughts about wanting to die or killing oneself, but it is not accompanied by behaviours to commit said actions. Suicide attempts are defined as behaviours that potentially injure oneself with some intent to die. Suicide is defined as a self-injurious behaviour with some intent to die which results in death.

It is unclear how gambling might be associated with suicidality. Some researchers have proposed that with an increase in gambling problems (and increased mental and financial strain), people may become socially isolated and believe suicide is their only option. The causal direction may be reversed; people who are contemplating suicide may begin to gamble to cope with their distress. A third possibility is that other underlying factors, like mental health issues, may explain the association.

This article is a review of existing research studies on the association between gambling problems and suicidality. The researchers aimed to (1) examine the prevalence rates of suicidality among people with gambling problems; (2) examine whether people with gambling problems are more likely to experience suicidality than people without gambling problems; and (3) examine the current evidence on the causal direction between gambling problems and suicidality.

### Why is this article important?

Past research suggests that gambling problems are associated with suicidality (suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide). The researchers reviewed 107 studies on the association between gambling problems and suicidality. They found a lifetime prevalence rate of 31.6% for suicidal ideation and 13.2% for suicide attempts among people with gambling problems across the studies. Both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were more likely to be experienced by people with gambling problems. But the lack of longitudinal research limited conclusions about the causal direction of this association.

### What was done?

The researchers followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses 2020 guidelines and the Meta-analytic Reporting Standards. They searched for relevant studies using several scientific databases and Google Scholar. Studies must be written in a European language. Studies must also provide enough data on prevalence rates of suicidality or comparisons of people with and without gambling problems. Two different researchers first screened the titles and abstracts of the identified studies. Then, the full texts of the remaining studies were screened to determine eligible studies.

### What you need to know

The researchers identified a total of 107 eligible studies. Ninety-nine articles were from peer-reviewed journals, four were doctoral theses, and four were abstracts from conferences. These studies were published from 1987 to 2023, and sample sizes ranged

from 24 to 4,027,731 participants. Most studies were from North America (44%) and Europe (31%).

Many of the studies (86%) were cross-sectional, meaning they collected data from participants at one timepoint only. In most studies, gambling problems and suicidality were assessed by clinical interviews (40%) or self-report questionnaires (37%). In the remaining studies, gambling problems were based on self-categorization (e.g., calling a helpline). Data on suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were also mostly collected through clinical interviews (44%) and self-report questionnaires (48%). The rest used data from medical records or health registries.

The researchers found a lifetime prevalence rate of 31.6% for suicidal ideation and 13.2% for suicide attempts among people with gambling problems. People with gambling problems had a higher chance of experiencing lifetime suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than people without gambling problems. People with gambling problems also had a higher chance of having suicidal ideation than people with other mental health conditions (e.g., substance use disorder, depression). Only two studies provided data on gambling problems and suicide. Both studies showed that people with gambling problems had a higher risk of dying by suicide.

The prevalence rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts varied across specific studies. For suicidal ideation, the number of female participants vs. male participants appeared to affect the estimates. But the direction of this effect was inconsistent. Regarding suicide attempts, studies with a higher number of participants with mental disorders reported higher estimates. Studies with a smaller sample size reported lower prevalence estimates for suicide attempts.

The findings suggest that there is a complex relationship between gambling problems and suicidality. It is unclear, however, what the causal direction of this relationship is like. There was a lack of longitudinal studies that followed participants over time. More longitudinal studies are needed to further examine gambling problems and suicidality.

## Who is it intended for?

Public health officials, clinicians, and gambling researchers can use this research. Preventing problem gambling may be a promising strategy to prevent the development or exacerbation of suicidality symptoms

## About the researchers

**Joakim Hellumbråten Kristensen, Ståle Pallesen, Jonas Bauer, Tony Leino, and Eilin K. Erevik** are affiliated with the Department of Psychosocial Science and the Norwegian Competence Center for Gambling and Gaming Research at the University of Bergen in Bergen, Norway. Tony Leino is also affiliated with the Department of Health Promotion at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health in Bergen, Norway. **Mark D. Griffiths** is affiliated with the International Gaming Research Unit in the Psychology Department at Nottingham Trent University in Nottingham, UK. For more information about this study, please contact Joakim Kristensen at [joakim.kristensen@uib.no](mailto:joakim.kristensen@uib.no).

## Citation

Kristensen, J. H., Pallesen, S., Bauer, J., Leino, T., Griffiths, M. D., & Erevik, E. K. (2023). Suicidality among individuals with gambling problems: A meta-analytic literature review. *Psychological bulletin*. Advance online publication.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000411>

## Study funding

This study was funded by the Norwegian Competence Center for Gambling and Gaming Research.

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