

# research snapshot

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## The relationship between alcohol use and gambling in Finnish youth

### What this research is about

Adolescence is a critical developmental period. During this period, risk-taking behaviours, such as gambling and alcohol use, can emerge. In 2019, about 41% of 15- to 17-year-old Finnish adolescents had gambled during the previous year, and 30% of 15- to 16-year-olds drank alcohol.

Some studies showed that gambling was more common in boys than in girls, but that there were no such differences with alcohol use. Research suggests that early gambling may be linked with developing pathological gambling later in life. The same has also been reported for alcohol use. In addition, youth at risk of problem gambling were found to be more likely to drink alcohol and to have alcohol-related problems. The reverse was also true: youth who drank alcohol were more likely to gamble. This can in part be explained by the Problem Behaviour Theory (PBT), which states that problem behaviours are actions that deviate from social and legal norms. This theory states that one form of problem behaviour (e.g., drinking) increases the likelihood of another problem behaviour (e.g., gambling), resulting in a problem behaviour syndrome.

Due to the increase in online gambling marketing, online gambling has become more accessible to youth. Even though age limits have been put in place, there is a deficiency in the enforcement of these age limits. In Finland, changes regarding the legal gambling age and alcohol use regulations were made in the 2010s, which had led to a decrease in both behaviours.

The aim of this study is to look at the trends in the relationship between gambling, alcohol use, and

### What you need to know

This study examines the trends in the relationship between gambling, alcohol use, and drunkenness in Finnish youth from 2008 to 2019. The data were collected from 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders during a school day. The researchers found that the prevalence of youth gambling decreased by more than half between 2008 and 2019. However, the difference was higher in 2019 between youth who gambled and drank alcohol/got drunk and those who did not gamble and did not drink often. These results suggest a polarization of risk-taking behaviours: problems with gambling and alcohol use tend to cluster in some adolescents.

drunkenness in underage youth in Finland over a 11-year period (from 2008 to 2019).

### What the researchers did

The researchers used data that had been collected over six waves from the national, cross-sectional School Health Promotion Study (SHPS) (2008–2009, 2010–2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019). The survey was conducted during a school day, and the questions covered health, health behaviours, and school experiences among 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders (14- and 15-year-olds and 15- and 16-year-olds) in Finland.

The data were collected in an anonymous and voluntary way and lasted for 30 to 45 minutes. From 2008 to 2013, the data were collected using the paper-and-pencil format. Afterwards, the data were collected electronically. To measure gambling, the survey asked, “how often do you gamble?” on a 5-points scale. In addition, alcohol use was measured

with questions about frequency of drinking and drunkenness-related drinking. The number of adolescents who participated in the SHPS was as follows: 108,649 in 2008–2009; 102,545 in 2010–2011; 99,478 in 2013; 50,404 in 2015; 74,544 in 2017; and 89,294 in 2019.

## What the researchers found

The researchers found that in 2019, 35.1% of boys had gambled, 40% had used alcohol, and 28.8% had gotten drunk at least once. Overall, gambling was the most common form of risk-taking behaviours among boys. However, in 2013, gambling dropped to the same level as alcohol use, and fell below it in 2019. In addition, in 2019, 8.4% of girls had gambled, 38.5% had used alcohol, and 26.9% had gotten drunk at least once. For girls, alcohol use was the most common form of risk taking.

The researchers found that the co-occurrence of gambling and alcohol use, as well as of gambling and drunkenness, was more common in boys than in girls.

There was also a significant decrease in gambling in both girls and boys. The level of gambling was more than halved between 2008 and 2019. Alcohol and drunkenness also decreased during this period.

Finally, gambling was more common in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders who consumed alcohol compared to those who did not consume alcohol. Amongst boys who used alcohol or who got drunk, regular gambling decreased. However, occasional and non-gambling increased from 2008 and 2019. Amongst girls who consumed alcohol or who got drunk, their gambling habits decreased during the period of the study.

Overall, the prevalence of youth gambling was more than halved between 2008 and 2019. However, the difference between boys who did not gamble and did not drink alcohol for more than once a month and boys who did gamble and drink often was higher in 2019 than it was in 2008. Amongst girls, the difference was also higher in 2019 between those who gambled regularly and drank alcohol and those who did not gamble and drink. These results suggest a polarization of risk-taking behaviours: problems with

gambling and alcohol use tend to cluster in some adolescents.

## How you can use this research

This research can be used to inform harm reduction policies on gambling and alcohol use in adolescents. It can also be used to help in the protection of youth from these risk-taking behaviours and their consequences on multiple levels.

## About the researchers

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