Problem gambling can lead to serious harms for the person who gambles, their family, as well as the community. A number of studies have found that people who commit crime are more likely to experience problem gambling than the general population. The link between problem gambling and crime is a complex issue. While people with problem gambling may commit crime to cover up debts and other financial issues, financial pressure alone does not fully explain the link between the two.

People who commit crime often belong to socially disadvantaged groups. They are more likely to have low education, be unemployed, and have mental health problems. Similarly, people with problem gambling often face social disadvantages. There is little research on gambling and criminal behaviour from a societal perspective. In this study, the researchers combined data from a population survey and national registers in Finland. The aim was to examine whether sociodemographic factors might explain the link between problem gambling and crime.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the Finnish Gambling Harms Survey in 2017. Participants were 7,186 adults living in three regions in Finland. Slightly over half of the participants were women (52.3%). The survey excluded people who were in an institution, such as a prison or mental health institution.

In the survey, participants completed the 14-item Problem and Pathological Gambling Measure (PPGM). Participants were also asked if they had ever felt gambling was a problem for them. Based on the PPGM, the researchers placed the participants into four groups: (1) no gambling; (2) recreational gambling (gambling less than monthly); (3) at-risk gambling; and (4) problem or pathological gambling.

The researchers used Statistics Finland’s register data to find out if participants had ever been convicted of a crime in the past five years (2012 to 2016). The register data also included participants’ age, gender, and information reflecting social disadvantages. The latter included education, employment status, income level, and receipt of basic social assistance in 2016.

What you need to know

This study examined the link between problem gambling and crime using data from a population survey and national registers. Participants were 7,186 adults living in three regions in Finland. A total of 123 participants (2.1%) had been convicted of at least one crime before. Problem gambling was more common among people with a criminal conviction. However, factors reflecting social disadvantages were more strongly related to having a criminal conviction than problem gambling. These included receiving basic social assistance, low income, low education, and being unemployed. Male gender and younger age were also associated with having a criminal conviction. When these factors were taken into account, problem gambling was no longer associated with having a criminal conviction. These results suggest a need for social policies and interventions to consider socioeconomic inequality when addressing crime and problem gambling.
What the researchers found

Of the 7,186 participants, 123 participants (2.1%) had been arrested and convicted of at least one crime in the past five years. The most common types of crime were property or financial crimes (44.4%), and also traffic-related crimes (22.4%). The sentence could be a prison sentence, community service, or probation order. The researchers did not include petty fines, such as minor traffic offenses.

Having a criminal conviction was more common among men (3.7%) than women (0.7%). It was more common among people who had received basic social assistance (13.5%) than those who had not (1.5%). It was also more common among people with low income, those who were unemployed, and those who had low education. Low education was based on not having taken an examination required for entry into university or other higher education institutions.

Factors reflecting social disadvantages were more strongly associated with having a criminal conviction than problem gambling. About 8.8% of people with problem gambling had been convicted of a crime in the past five years. This was compared to 3.5% of people with at-risk gambling, 2.0% of people with recreational gambling, and 1.2% of people who did not gamble.

How you can use this research

The researchers suggest a need for social policies and interventions to consider socioeconomic inequality when addressing problem gambling and crime. They also suggest a need for service providers from different sectors to work closely together.

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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