

# research snapshot

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## How prevalence and types of criminal convictions vary with gambling behaviour

### What this research is about

Previous research has found that criminal convictions are more common among people with gambling problems compared to the general population. However, little is known about how prevalence and types of criminal convictions vary with gambling behaviour. The purpose of this study was to examine the connections between gambling behaviour and prevalence, and types of criminal convictions.

### What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the Finnish Gambling 2019 population survey. Using the Population Register Center database, 7800 people aged 15 to 74 years old were invited to complete a telephone survey. People living in institutions (e.g., prisoners) were excluded. Participants whose native language was not Finnish, Swedish, or Sámi were also excluded. A final sample of 3993 responses was used in this study.

The survey data were combined with register-based information from Statistics Finland. Register-based data included criminal convictions and sociodemographic background data.

The following measures were used in this study:

- Information on number of criminal convictions was available from 1977 to 2020. Information on type of criminal convictions was available from 1992 to 2020. The types of criminal convictions were divided into (1) property and financial crimes; (2) violent crimes; and (3) traffic-related crimes and other crimes.
- Socioeconomic disadvantage was measured by whether the respondents received basic social allowance in the previous year.

### What you need to know

The purpose of this study was to examine the connections between gambling behaviour and prevalence and types of criminal convictions. Data from a total of 3993 respondents were used. This dataset combined responses from the Finnish Gambling 2019 population survey and register-based data. The findings show that about 14% of respondents had one or more criminal convictions. Convictions were more common among men (22%) than women (6%). Age, gender, and social disadvantage were strongly linked to having convictions. Engaging in at-risk gambling and risky alcohol use were also linked to having convictions. Respondents who gambled to escape and those played electronic gaming machines were more likely to have multiple convictions in general and to have financial or property crime convictions.

- Gambling severity was measured using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). Scores were analyzed both as a range (0–27 points) and as a dichotomous variable (1 point or higher vs. 0 point and non-gambling).
- Risky alcohol use was measured using the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (Audit-C). A score of 5+ among women and 6+ among men indicated risky level of alcohol use.
- Psychological distress was measured using the Mental Health Index (MHI-5). A score lower than 52 reflected psychological distress.
- General health was measured with one item where participants self-rated their general health.

- Types of gambling games played.
- Gambling motives were measured by asking participants about their primary motive for gambling and then additional motives. Gambling motives were grouped into six categories: money, enhancement, escape, worthy causes, challenge/developing skills, and socializing.

### What the researchers found

About 14% of respondents had one or more criminal convictions. Convictions were more common among men (22%) than women (6%). Scoring at least one point on the PGSI was linked with a higher chance of having at least one conviction. Respondents with violent crime convictions spent more money per month on gambling compared to those with other convictions. Respondents with violent crime convictions also had the highest average PGSI score.

Age, gender, and social disadvantage were strongly linked to having convictions. Respondents who were 35 years or older were more likely to have been convicted than younger people. Criminal behaviour was more common among men and those receiving basic social allowance. Also, having at least one conviction was more common among those with risky alcohol use.

The findings show that male gender, being 35 years or older, receiving basic social allowance, scoring one point or more on the PGSI, risky alcohol use, and self-rating one's health as poor predicted having at least one conviction. Also, those who gambled to escape were more likely to have a financial or property crime conviction. Playing four or more game types predicted having at least one violent crime, traffic-related or other crime convictions.

Escape as a motive for gambling and playing electronic gaming machines (EGMs) were stronger predictors of having multiple convictions than risky alcohol use. They were also stronger predictors than age group. Respondents who played scratch cards were less likely to have more than one conviction. Convictions were more common among those who played casino games, non-casino table games, or online poker. But this relationship was not statistically

significant after taking into account gender, being on basic social allowance, and PGSI score.

### How you can use this research

Practitioners can use this research to improve early identification of those with at-risk gambling.

### About the researchers

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