

# research snapshot

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## Problem gambling among homeless clinic attenders in Australia

### What this research is about

Gambling is very popular in Australia, with about 80% of adults having gambled in the past year. Australia also has the highest rate of gambling losses in the world. Because gambling is so common in Australia, many people may be at risk of problem gambling. Problem gambling is when someone experiences harm because of their gambling behaviour. Problem gambling can also have negative consequences for a gambler's friends and family, as well as the wider community.

People with problem gambling can be at higher risk of becoming homeless. One of the main reasons for this is because problem gambling can cause people to lose a lot of money. It can also damage their personal relationships and support networks, which may also contribute to homelessness. Additionally, people who are already homeless may continue to lose money to gambling. They may gamble in hopes of winning large sums of money, or simply as an escape from the stress of being homeless. A study in Canada found that 12% of homeless men had gambling disorder, and 46.2% had problem gambling at some point in their lifetime.

This study looked at problem gambling in homeless clinic attenders in Australia. The researchers had two goals. First, they wanted to estimate how many clinic attenders had problem gambling. Second, they wanted to understand how clinic attenders with problem gambling differed from attenders who did not have problem gambling.

### What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the clinical records of 2388 clinic attenders. The data were from attenders of mental health clinics associated with three

### What you need to know

Problem gambling is when someone experiences harm because of their gambling behaviour. People with problem gambling may lose substantial money to gambling. This could put them at risk of becoming homeless. This study looked at problem gambling in a sample of homeless clinic attenders in Australia.

A total of 289 (12%) homeless clinic attenders had problem gambling. Clinic attenders with problem gambling were more likely to be male, to have been married, and to have been employed for more than one year. They were also more likely to have their financial affairs managed by a Public Trustee than clinic attenders without problem gambling. Many clinic attenders with problem gambling also had mood disorders, psychotic illnesses, and substance use disorders. Therefore, problem gambling may be common in homeless populations and may co-occur with other disorders.

homeless hostels in inner city Sydney, Australia from July 2008 to December 2016. Over 90% of the clinic attenders were male.

The researchers grouped the clinic attenders based on their gambling history. If clinic attenders said gambling was the reason they became homeless, then the researchers considered them to have problem gambling. The researchers compared clinic attenders with problem gambling to those without problem gambling. Specifically, they compared the two groups on the following characteristics:

- i) demographic information (age, sex, marital status, employment history)
- ii) history of homelessness (sleeping in the open, duration of being homeless, previous loss of public housing tenancy)
- iii) mental health (psychiatric diagnoses, hospital admissions)
- iv) substance use (use of alcohol or other substances)
- v) whether their financial affairs were managed by a Public Trustee

### What the researchers found

About 12% of the clinic attenders said they became homeless because of gambling. Thus, the researchers considered them to have problem gambling.

Compared to clinic attenders without problem gambling, those with problem gambling were more likely to be male and to have been employed for more than one year. They were also more likely to have their financial affairs managed by a Public Trustee. These three factors were the strongest predictors of problem gambling in clinic attenders. Additionally, clinic attenders with problem gambling were more likely to have been married.

Clinic attenders with problem gambling were more likely to have mood disorders (depression/anxiety) than clinic attenders who did not have problem gambling. They were less likely to have a psychotic illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. However, 43% of attenders with problem gambling did have a psychotic illness. Therefore, psychosis was still very common in clinic attenders with problem gambling. Many clinic attenders also had substance use disorders. Alcohol use disorder was the most common substance use disorder among clinic attenders with problem gambling.

### How you can use this research

This study shows that problem gambling can sometimes lead to homelessness. Therefore, mental health assessments for homeless people could include screening for problem gambling. Earlier interventions for problem gambling could help prevent gamblers from becoming homeless.

### 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.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

