

research snapshot

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The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the treatment and help-services for gambling problems in Finland

What this research is about

In Finland, 3% of people experience gambling problems. An additional 21% of concerned significant others (CSOs) also experience harms due to their loved one's gambling. There are different levels of treatment and help services for problem gambling in Finland. For example, peer support is available through different organizations. Generalized services and specialized services such as debt counselling are also available.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted gambling across the world. Overall, studies suggested that gambling had decreased during lockdown in many countries. This appeared to also be the case in Finland with the closure of electronic gaming machines (EGMs). The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted treatment services for gambling. During lockdown, some services were closed while others moved online.

To date, the impacts of COVID-19 on treatment services for gambling are not well known. In this study, the researchers explored the experiences and views of people who gambled and CSOs on treatment and help-seeking during the pandemic.

What the researchers did

The researchers collected data through three separate online questionnaires in Spring of 2020. The online questionnaires were conducted separately by three organizations. The organizations included the University of Helsinki, the SOSPED Foundation, and the Finnish Association for Substance Abuse Prevention. While the goals of the questionnaires differed slightly, all three surveys included questions related to treatment and help services during the COVID-19 lockdown.

What you need to know

The COVID-19 lockdown had resulted in an overall decrease in gambling. But, the lockdown also resulted in the closure of help services for gambling while some services moved online. The researchers explored the experiences and views of people in Finland regarding treatment and help services during the lockdown. Three online questionnaires were conducted in the Spring of 2020 in Finland. The researchers were interested in questions related to help services. A total of 847 participants completed the online questionnaires. The majority engaged in gambling (688 participants), 97 were concerned significant others (CSOs), and 62 were both. The reduction of gambling resulted in less need for services. The closure of services had negative impacts on people experiencing gambling problems. But, participants were generally positive about online services. Participants also made suggestions on how to improve services during and after COVID-19.

The questionnaires were sent out widely through different online channels. The online channels included social media, online forums, and websites of treatment and help services. In total, there were 874 participants. The majority were people who gambled (688 participants), 97 were CSOs, and 62 were both.

For this study, the researchers were interested in questions related to services. The questions asked if the need for gambling support had changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked what supports and services would be helpful to them during the pandemic. Other questions were related to

how gambling harms could be prevented during the lockdown. Participants were also asked if they or someone they knew experienced harm due to the closure of services during COVID-19.

As the questions were open-ended, the researchers used content analysis to organize, code, and interpret the data. In total, 632 responses were coded with the help of a software program.

What the researchers found

Like other countries, gambling appeared to have decreased in Finland during the pandemic. There was also a reduction in the need for services. Only 3 participants reported seeking help. This was likely due to the reduction of gambling activities. Some participants reported relief that EGMs were no longer available. Others noted the need to maintain the positive changes when EGMs became available again.

Regarding the impact of service closure, some participants reported their services had closed. CSOs in particular reported being concerned about how the closure would impact their loved one's gambling. Other participants reported that their services moved online and were not as helpful. However, some participants reported that the online environment provided more opportunities to stay in touch.

Participants' suggestions on how to improve services were related to COVID-19 specific suggestions and long-term changes. For example, participants noted that the new online tools for gambling (e.g., online chats) should be kept even after the lockdown. More general suggestions included maintaining low-threshold services that people could easily access.

Participants also provided suggestions on how to prevent gambling harm. The suggestions fell into four overall categories. The first was information campaigns that could be done both online and offline. The second was implementing mandatory limit settings. The third was keeping some of the availability restrictions of EGMs after the pandemic. The last was to adopt a more public health approach. This would include integrating gambling services into broader health and social welfare services.

How you can use this research

This research can be used to better understand the needs of people who gamble and their CSOs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research can also be used to improve existing gambling services not only during COVID-19, but also beyond.

About the researchers

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