What this research is about

Online gambling is becoming more popular among youth. Although the legal gambling age in Canada is 18 years old, minors can have access to online gambling platforms. For example, minors can access gambling through informal gambling groups organized by peers and offshore gambling sites. A survey conducted across Canada showed that 10% of the 10,035 youth reported gambling in the last 3 months. Adolescents who gamble online are more likely to experience greater problem gambling severity. In addition, they can be more prone to poor mental health conditions and problems such as delinquency.

Gambling may lead to serious consequences. People are considered to be at risk if they experience one or two negative effects of gambling. This could include higher levels of distress, alcohol dependence, and family problems. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of gambling.

Psychological, socialization, and sociodemographic factors contribute to gambling among youth. This is true both at the individual level and at the area level. Psychological risk factors include being prone to physical and verbal aggression and having symptoms of depression and anxiety. Socialization risk factors include having parents or peers who gamble. Individual-level risk factors include being male and part of an ethnic minority. One sociodemographic risk factor is income inequality, which has been linked to the risk of problem gambling. This is especially true when people feel they have little ability to improve their financial status in typical ways.

This study examined the relationship between income inequality and online gambling among adolescents. It also looked at whether mental health and social factors might influence this relationship.

What you need to know

Research shows that income inequality has a negative impact on population health and may be linked to online gambling. This study examines the role of income inequality on the chance of taking part in online gambling among adolescents. The researchers used data from the 2018–2019 Cannabis, Obesity, Mental health, Physical activity, Alcohol, Smoking, and Sedentary behaviour (COMPASS) survey. This study shows that higher income inequality was associated with higher chance of online gambling among male youth. Furthermore, youth facing higher income inequality had more depressive and anxiety symptoms, lower psychosocial well-being, and lower school connectedness. All of these led to a higher chance of online gambling.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the 2018–2019 Cannabis, Obesity, Mental health, Physical activity, Alcohol, Smoking, and Sedentary behaviour (COMPASS) survey. The COMPASS recruited adolescents from 136 high schools across Canada’s four largest provinces: Ontario, Quebec, British Columbia, and Alberta. At the personal level, the survey measured online gambling using the following question: "In the last 30 days, did you gamble online for money?" The survey also collected demographic information, such as age, sex, race/ethnicity, and available spending money per week. Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Center for...
Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale Revised (CES-D). Anxiety symptoms were assessed using the General Anxiety Disorder-7 Scale (GAD-7). Also, psychosocial well-being was assessed using the Flourishing Scale. School connectedness was measured using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health SCS.

At the school-level, administrators completed a survey on school-based programs available to promote mental health. School postal codes were linked to the 2016 Census Data to obtain their Census Divisions. The researchers measured the level of income inequality using the Gini coefficient. This is the most used measure of income inequality. It ranges from 0 (perfect equality, with small income gap) to 1 (perfect inequality, with large income gaps).

What the researchers found
A total of 70,134 students from 136 schools had complete data and were included in the analysis. The 136 schools belonged to 43 Census Divisions. Overall, 50.2% of participants identified as females. Just under 70% of participants identified as White. Of the 136 schools, 94.1% were public schools, and 64.4% offered mental health programs. Around 3.2% of students reported gambling online in the last 30 days. Overall, online gambling was more prevalent in males (5.2%) than in females (1.1%). The Gini coefficients ranged from 0.30 to 0.46 across the schools.

The relationship between income inequality and the chance of online gambling was only significant among males. Thus, further analysis was only conducted among this group.

The researchers found that characteristics of the school environment were linked with online gambling. Specifically, higher income inequality based on the Census Divisions was associated with increased chance of online gambling. This suggested that male youth facing higher income inequality were more likely to gamble online. Finally, youth facing higher income inequality had more depressive and anxiety symptoms, lower psychosocial well-being, and lower school connectedness. All of these led to a higher chance of online gambling.

How you can use this research
This research can be used to explore the impacts of income inequality on online gambling in youth. It can inform interventions that target youth who may be at risk of gambling and mental health problems.

About the researchers
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Citation

Study funding
This study was funded by the Women & Children’s Health Research Institute Innovation Grant. In addition, Roman Pabayo is a Tier II Canada Research Chair in Social and Health Inequities.

About Greo
Greo has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. Greo is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization with almost two decades of international experience in generating, synthesizing, and mobilizing research into action across the health and wellbeing sectors. Greo helps organizations improve their strategies, policies, and practices by harnessing the power of evidence and stakeholder insight.

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