What this article is about

Gambling is a major industry in many countries. In 2015 alone, the gambling industry earned about 450 billion US dollars worldwide. In many countries, the governments have some control over gambling companies. Thus, there is pressure on governments to protect their citizens from gambling-related harms. This has led to the development of responsible gambling (RG) models.

RG practices aim to prevent or reduce harms from gambling. They try to promote protection from and awareness of gambling harms. In general, RG models focus on giving gamblers information about gambling harms so that they can make informed choices. For example, self-exclusion programs allow gamblers to ban themselves from gambling for a period of time if they think they are having problems. However, a main criticism of these RG models is that they make the gamblers responsible for reducing harm. For example, gamblers have to choose to join a self-exclusion program to benefit from it. However, many people believe that governments and gambling operators should take on more responsibility for reducing harm.

This review had three main goals:

i) To identify existing studies on RG;
ii) To map the characteristics and main themes of the studies on RG;
iii) To identify gaps in the research and areas for future study.

What was done?

The authors created a list of search terms, such as “responsible gambling” and “problem gambling”. They searched for articles with these terms in 6 databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, SOCIndex, Academic Search Complete, and Business Source Complete. They performed the searches in February 2017 and April 2018. They found 6565 unique articles. They reviewed the articles to check that they met the following criteria:

i) Written in English or French;
ii) The abstract must contain keywords such as “responsible gambling”;
iii) RG must be a focus of the article.

In total, 142 articles met all three criteria. The researchers recorded when the articles were published, and what country the authors were from. They noted the authors’ field of study (e.g., psychology, public health, business). They also looked at where each article mentioned RG (e.g., in the introduction, methods, or results). Finally, they recorded the main themes of the studies (e.g., do they focus on RG tools, legal aspects, or risk factors for problem gambling?).
What you need to know

All of the articles were published between 2001–2017. They came from 23 different countries. However, most of the articles came from Australia (35%), Canada (22%), England (10%), and the United States (9%). Most of the articles with a primary focus on RG came from the fields of psychology (44%) and business (33%). Secondary articles that included RG as one component of the study came from the fields of business, medicine, and psychology. For most articles, RG was mentioned in the introduction and discussion sections. Interestingly, it was rarely included in the keywords of the articles.

About 50% of the articles focused on RG tools and interventions, and how they can reduce gambling-related harms. For example, testing whether pop-up messages or self-exclusion programs are effective. About 10% of articles focused on describing RG concepts. Another 10% critically evaluated RG, usually from a critical social science perspective.

In summary, most of the research came from the psychology and business disciplines. However, problem gambling is a public health issue, so there is a need for more research from the public health perspective. Additionally, much of the research focuses on RG tools and interventions. However, these interventions tend make individual gamblers responsible for protecting themselves from gambling-related harms. Thus, more research should focus on the responsibility that governments and gambling operators have to reduce harm to gamblers. There is also a lack of research on the environment, such as advertising and marketing, in relation to RG.

Who is it intended for?

This article is intended for people who research RG and gambling-related harms. The authors identified gaps in the literature and recommended areas for future research.

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 or emailing info@greo.ca.