

research snapshot

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Trauma and stressful life events are linked to gambling problems in UK men

What this research is about

Problem gambling and pathological gambling are defined by continuous gambling behavior that leads to negative consequences. Consequences can include money problems and relationship breakdowns. Traumatic events in childhood have been shown to increase the risk of developing gambling problems. Stressful life events in adulthood, such as job loss, have also been linked to gambling problems.

Past research has found that problem and pathological gamblers tend to have other mental health problems, particularly substance and alcohol use. Few studies have examined if substance and alcohol misuse may explain the links between gambling and traumatic life events. The aim of this study was to explore the relationships between gambling problems, traumatic and stressful life events in both childhood and adulthood. It involved a large group of 3025 men, aged 18 to 64 years, who were residing in the UK.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the 'Men's Health and Modern Lifestyles Survey' collected in 2009. The participants were 3025 men, aged 18 to 64 years, who were living in England, Wales and Scotland. The participants were selected to be representative of the male population of the UK.

The survey assessed how severe the participants' gambling was, their experience of trauma before the age of 18, and trauma and life stressors after the age of 18. Traumatic events before the age of 18 included seeing parents or caregivers fighting, physical or sexual abuse, and serious injury. Traumatic events and life stressors after the age of 18 included injury

What you need to know

This study explored the links between gambling, trauma and stressful life events in childhood and adulthood. The participants were 3025 men, aged 18 to 64 years, who were living in UK. A small percentage of the men reported problem or probable pathological gambling. These gamblers had high rates of drug and alcohol dependence, and were more likely to have experienced trauma and stressful life events. In particular, problem and pathological gamblers were more likely to have experienced abuse and violence in the home as a child. As an adult, they were more likely to have experienced relationship breakdown, violence in the home or workplace, job loss, homelessness, money problems and criminal convictions.

More research is needed to determine if traumatic and stressful life events cause or are caused by gambling problems. Gambling treatment services should routinely screen gamblers for drug and alcohol use, and past or present traumatic or stressful life events.

from a physical attack, violence in the home, relationship breakdown, job loss, homelessness, money problems, or criminal convictions. The survey also collected sociodemographic data and assessed for alcohol and drug misuse. Sociodemographic data included age, ethnicity, marital status, education, income, and employment status.

The researchers grouped the participants into four groups: 1) non-gamblers/non-problem gamblers; 2) borderline problem gamblers; 3) problem gamblers; and 4) probable pathological gamblers.

What the researchers found

Of the 3025 men, a very small percentage was problem gamblers or probable pathological gamblers. These men were more likely to have drug and alcohol dependence compared to non-gamblers/non-problem gamblers. Problem and pathological gamblers were more likely to have witnessed violence in the home as a child. Pathological gamblers, in particular, were more likely to have experienced physical abuse or a serious life threatening injury as a child. Borderline problem gamblers were also more likely to have experienced physical abuse and injury as a child compared to non-gamblers/non-problem gamblers. Overall, problem and pathological gamblers were at greatest risk to have experienced trauma in childhood.

Pathological gambling was associated with an increased risk for stressful life events in adulthood. These included relationship breakdown, job loss, homelessness, money problems and criminal convictions. Problem gambling shared the same risk except for job loss. Borderline problem gambling was associated with an increased risk for relationship problems, crimes, and money problems. The associations of gambling with trauma and life stressors were weakened after adjusting for alcohol and drug dependence.

How you can use this research

The findings support previous research by establishing a link between gambling problems and traumatic and stressful life events. More research is needed to determine whether trauma and stressful life events trigger or result from gambling problems.

Gambling treatment programs should routinely screen for alcohol and drugs use, as well as trauma and life stressors. Programs should target treatment to the gamblers' specific needs and past history. Mental health and addiction services should also screen for gambling problems.

About the researchers

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Citation

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Gambling, problem gambling, trauma, life events, comorbidity, substance abuse, men

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