Sports betting is a form of gambling where players wager money on various sporting events. In Australia, close to half of people who participate in sports betting regularly suffer from gambling problems. Many studies identify characteristics that increase players’ risk or likelihood of gambling problems from gambling in general. There is a lack of research investigating if players develop gambling problems because of sports betting specifically.

There are many demographic, behavioural, and psychological characteristics that increase the risk of gambling problems. Young adult males are more likely to develop gambling problems from gambling overall and from sports betting than other groups. Sports bettors usually play other forms of gambling in addition to sports betting. It is not known to what extent sports betting promotes gambling problems compared to other games. Research suggests that gamblers who bet using credit are more likely to develop gambling problems. It is important to determine whether this is also true for sports bettors.

People who gamble for emotional reasons may be more likely to have gambling problems. Emotional reasons for gambling include gambling for excitement and to be accepted in a social group. It is unclear whether there are specific emotional reasons that increase the risk among sports bettors. Gamblers who have false beliefs about gambling, gambling urges, and alcohol problems, are more likely to have gambling problems. It is possible that sports bettors who also have these psychological problems are at a higher risk of gambling problems. In this study, the researchers identified demographic, behavioural, and psychological characteristics that specifically increase sports bettors’ risk of developing gambling problems.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants from online research panels to complete an online survey. Participants were 1,147 Australian adults who bet on sports at least once a month. They completed a modified version of the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) that was specific to sports betting. Some psychological factors were found to be particularly important. These included gambling to make money, gambling urges, false gambling beliefs, lower self-control, and alcohol problems.

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers identified demographic, behavioural, and psychological characteristics that might increase the risk of developing gambling problems from sports betting. Participants were 1,147 Australian adults who bet on sports at least once a month. They completed a modified version of the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) that was specific to sports betting. Some psychological factors were found to be particularly important. These included gambling to make money, gambling urges, false gambling beliefs, lower self-control, and alcohol problems.
self-control. They completed the Gambling Outcomes Expectancies Scale (GOES), which assessed their motivation for gambling. They completed the Gambling Urge Scale (GUS), which assessed their gambling urges. Participants completed the Gambler’s Beliefs Questionnaire (GBQ), which assessed whether they had false beliefs about gambling. They completed the CAGE questionnaire, which assessed whether they had alcohol problems.

What the researchers found

There were demographic, behavioural, and psychological characteristics that were associated with gambling problems amongst sports bettors. With regards to demographic characteristics, sports bettors were at higher risk of gambling problems if they were younger in age and had higher personal income. Those who speak a language other than English at home were also at higher risk.

With regards to behavioural characteristics, sports bettors were at higher risk if they bet on sports often, spent more money on betting, placed more bets over the telephone, and used a variety of different methods to pay for bets. They were less likely to watch the sports events that they bet on.

With regards to psychological characteristics, sports bettors were at higher risk if they had lower self-control, gambled for various reasons, had stronger gambling urges, had more false beliefs about gambling outcomes, and had alcohol problems.

In general, the proximal factors had greater effects than the distal factors. A proximal factor is a factor that is more directly related. For example, gambling urges and false gambling beliefs. A distal factor is an underlying vulnerability that may place a person at risk in the future. For example, demographic characteristics. A distal factor that was found to be particularly important was lower self-control. Lower self-control increased the risk of problem gambling even after accounting for other proximal factors.

How you can use this research

Treatment service providers could use this research to inform their treatment programs. For example, they could use cognitive behavioural therapy or exposure therapy to treat patients’ gambling urges and false beliefs about gambling. Policy makers could use this research to regulate betting products and promotions to prevent gamblers from betting carelessly.

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.

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