

knowledge snapshot



The relationship between gambling and homelessness

What this article is about

Gambling is an activity that many people choose to engage in without it leading to any problems. However, gambling can sometimes lead to a multitude of negative consequences. These can range from poorer mental health to homelessness. Although many different factors can contribute to becoming homeless, such as relationship breakup, addiction, and being asked to leave a family home, it is still not clear how gambling may contribute to homelessness. It is also unclear whether gambling leads to homelessness or whether homelessness predicts gambling.

To add to the confusion, the relationship between gambling and homelessness can either be direct or indirect (more subtle). This means that sometimes gambling may lead to homelessness as a result of a direct eviction for not being able to pay rent. Other times, it may be indirect, such as through a conflict with one's family or with a significant other. This article sought to review the evidence that pertains to gambling and homelessness. It examined previous studies that explored the prevalence and pathways of gambling in homeless people.

What was done?

The author reviewed previous studies that explored gambling in homeless populations. The author also discussed the limitations of current research and future directions for research and practice.

What you need to know

There are a limited number of studies on the prevalence of gambling among homeless people. Most of the research studies came from the UK and

Why is this article important?

This review looks at the relationship between gambling and homelessness. Gambling in the homeless population is quite prevalent. The relationship is bi-directional. This means that homelessness can be a risk factor for gambling or a consequence of gambling. In many cases, poverty seems to increase the likelihood of gambling, because for people with low socio-economic status backgrounds, even a small win may change their life for the better. Knowing this, services could identify gambling issues in homeless populations and provide appropriate support.

North America. In all these studies, there is consistent evidence that the homeless population has more people with gambling problems than the general population. Furthermore, a UK study found different patterns of gambling between the homeless and general populations. Among the general population, there is a downward stepwise pattern. This means that as risks increase, prevalence decreases, so that there are more people with low-risk gambling and less people with higher risk. An opposite pattern is seen among homeless people, with more people having higher risk and less people having low risk.

Results show inconsistent findings as to what comes first, gambling or homelessness. Some of the research studies suggest that gambling may be the contributing factor for homelessness. Other studies show that homelessness is a risk factor for gambling problems. The relationship between gambling and homelessness is likely bidirectional. Gambling can contribute to

homelessness, but it can also develop as a result of being homeless.

Few studies have examined the relationship between gambling and substance use in homeless people. Some studies have reported that homeless people suffer from substance abuse, in addition to gambling problems. This may reflect some underlying characteristics that make people more vulnerable to these disorders (e.g., being impulsive and risk-taking). On the other hand, environmental factors can also be influential, such as access to drugs and gambling.

Poverty is known to be a strong predictor of homelessness and gambling. Some forms of gambling are clustered in poorer neighbourhoods, particularly electronic gaming machines. Evidence shows that gambling is more appealing to people with low socio-economic backgrounds. For them, it may be more worth risking their money on gambling, because of the possibility of altering their life and escaping poverty. An interview study with homeless people in the UK found that they viewed gambling as a legitimate way to earn income and as an opportunity to change their life.

This review also shows that unfortunately, support services for homelessness do not usually identify gambling problems. Other mental and physical health problems often have more priorities. Also, homeless people may not seek help for their gambling problems due to embarrassment, shame, and fear of stigma. They may also have concerns over the potential consequence on their benefit claims if they disclose gambling problems.

In the UK, there have been some efforts to reduce the impact of gambling on the cycle of homelessness. A recent study had consulted with both homeless gamblers and practitioners. A range of tools had been developed as a result. This includes a screening tool and an information sheet for practitioners about gambling, signs that someone has a gambling problem, and barriers to talking about gambling. A resource sheet was also developed for gamblers offering advice on what can be done reduce harm from gambling and where to seek help.

Who is it intended for?

This review could be used by homeless support service and program workers and researchers. Service providers or support workers who work with people who are homeless could add gambling into their routine screening, check-ups, and support programs. Future research could examine the relationship between substance use and gambling in the homeless population. More studies are needed to understand gambling in the homeless female population.

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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