What this research is about

Even though gambling is illegal for children and youth in most countries, some young people still gamble. Increases in gambling marketing expose young people to gambling early in life and makes gambling seem like a normal, common activity.

The age at which young people start gambling may impact the development of gambling problems, and related issues. This is especially important in Great Britain, where there is no legal minimum age for some forms of low stakes gambling. Past research found that gamblers who began gambling at a younger age were more likely to have mood and substance use disorders. However, no research has studied differences in age of gambling onset between children, teenagers, and young adults/adults.

This study explored the relationship between age of gambling onset and the characteristics and behaviours that are known to be linked to gambling disorder.

What the researchers did

Participants were 768 male gamblers, aged 18 years and older, who applied for residential treatment for gambling disorder in the UK. Upon entering treatment, participants completed a range of measures as part of their intake.

The researchers grouped participants according to the age that they started gambling: ‘12 and under’ (children), ‘13-15’ (teenagers), and ‘16+’ (young adults/adults). Gambling severity was measured with the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS). Participants were also assessed for a range of characteristics and behaviours thought to be important to gambling disorder. These were grouped into six domains:

1) self-destructive behaviour (attempted suicide and committing a crime); 2) substance use (drug use, alcohol use, smoking); 3) childhood experience (growing up with a family member with gambling and/or alcohol problems, negative family environment, bullying, sexual abuse, and witnessing violence); 4) mental health (co-existing mental health disorder and treatment for a mental health disorder); 5) gambling behaviour (types of gambling, feeling a need to bet with more money, and number of gambling activities); and 6) adult experience (education, housing, and relationship problems).

The researchers analyzed differences in age of gambling onset and gambling severity. They also assessed any links between age of gambling onset and the six domains.

What you need to know

This study found that the severity of gambling problems, negative childhood events, and anti-social behaviours differed depending on the age a person started gambling. Compared to gamblers who started gambling later in adolescence, those who started gambling at a younger age had more severe gambling problems and were more likely to have abused drugs. They were also more likely to have committed an unreported crime, be verbally aggressive, and have violent outbursts. They were less likely to report a positive family environment during childhood and more likely to have a parent with a gambling problem. Age of gambling onset did not impact treatment.
What the researchers found

Participants who started gambling at age 12 or younger had more severe gambling problems than those who started gambling at a later age.

Compared to those who started gambling at age 16 or older, those who started gambling at a younger age were more likely to report a negative family environment and to have a parent with a gambling problem. Those who started gambling at aged 12 or younger were also more likely to have a parent with an alcohol problem, to have witnessed violence during childhood, and to have experienced parental divorce or separation.

Compared to those who started gambling at age 16 and older, those who started gambling at a younger age were more likely to display anti-social behaviours, including committing an unreported crime, being verbally aggressive, and having violent outbursts. Those who started gambling at age 12 or younger were also more likely to have abused drugs.

There were no differences between age of gambling onset and relapses or dropout during treatment.

How you can use this research

Teachers, parents, social workers, and care providers could screen for gambling among children and youth who display anti-social behaviours, such as committing crimes or abusing substances. This might help in detecting gambling problems early. Treatment providers could ensure that they provide support for negative life events and childhood experiences, rather than just addressing current gambling behaviour. Policy makers could restrict gambling marketing and ensure all forms of gambling have age restrictions to reduce exposure to gambling among young people.

Future research could study the sequence of events to find out whether gambling onset leads to other mental health and anti-social behaviours (substance abuse, violence, etc.), or vice versa. Future research could also further explore the relationship between childhood experience and later gambling behaviour.

About the researchers

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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 responsible 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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