

research snapshot

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Examining the unique characteristics of people who bet on sports

What this research is about

In recent years, sports betting has become an increasingly popular form of gambling. Sports betting accounts for the largest proportion of online gambling. It was estimated that the number of US citizens who bet on sports increased by 80% in 2021. It is likely that sports betting will become even more popular with recent changes in legislation (e.g., allowing single-event and online betting) in various jurisdictions.

Research suggests that people who bet on sports are more likely to be men, younger, single, employed, and highly educated. They are also more likely to experience psychological distress and to use substances compared to people who do not bet on sports. The purpose of this study was to extend on past research by identifying the demographic, clinical, and gambling-related characteristics of people who bet on sports. This study also examined predictors of problem gambling associated with sports betting.

What the researchers did

The data used in this study were baseline data collected for the Alberta Gambling Research Institute's National Project in 2018. This study consisted of 10,039 Canadian adults (aged 18+) who had gambled at least once a month in the past year.

Participants completed an online survey that asked about their demographics, gambling behaviours, and psychological characteristics. In terms of sports betting, participants were asked how often they bet on various types of sports betting in the past year. They were also asked about their gambling participation (e.g., frequency, money spent, and time spent), the context in which they gambled (e.g., alone,

What you need to know

Past research suggests that people who bet on sports are more likely to experience gambling-related problems and psychological difficulties compared to those who do not. In this study, the researchers examined the demographic, clinical, and gambling-related characteristics of people who bet on sports. The researchers analyzed data collected from 10,039 Canadian adults. Among these participants, 1,816 participants reported betting on sports within the past year. People who bet on sports were more likely to experience problem gambling and gambling harms. They were more likely to report a diverse range of clinical disorders and substance uses. They also had unique demographic and gambling characteristics. These findings suggest that people who bet on sports are a unique population, and that targeted prevention and intervention efforts are warranted.

with friends/family, and while using substances), and motivations for gambling (e.g., to socialize). Problem gambling was evaluated using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), and gambling-related harms were evaluated using the Harm/Problems subscale from the Problem and Pathological Gambling Measure. Gambling fallacies (i.e., erroneous gambling beliefs) were assessed using the 10-item Gambling Fallacies Measure (GFM). Participants were also asked about the presence of clinical disorders, substance uses, and negative life events in the past year.

What the researchers found

Among the 10,039 participants, 1,816 people had bet on sports within the past year. People who bet on

sports were more likely to be younger, male, European, and employed compared to those who did not bet on sports. They were also more likely to report their top reasons for gambling were for excitement, to compete or for a challenge, to socialize, and to develop skills. In contrast, people who did not bet on sports were more likely to report winning money and gambling to escape/relax as their motivations. People who bet on sports were more likely to agree that recreational gambling is important. Betting on professional sporting events was the most common type of sports betting, followed by sports pools/lotteries, fantasy sports, and virtual sports.

In terms of gambling patterns, people who bet on sports were more likely to gamble alone, engage in more forms of gambling, and experience gambling problems and harms compared to those who did not. They were also more likely to have other clinical disorders (e.g., anxiety, panic disorder, PTSD, and substance uses).

People who engaged in problematic sports betting were more likely to be younger, identify as gay or bisexual, be a person of colour, be single, and have higher levels of education compared to those who bet on sports non-problematically. They had a greater tendency to be impulsive. They were also more likely to report their top reasons for gambling were to win money, to compete or for a challenge, and to develop their skills. People who bet on sports problematically spent more time and money gambling and gambled on more forms of gambling compared to people who bet on sports non-problematically. They were also more likely to gamble alone and while using substances, as well as have other clinical disorders.

The researchers found significant differences between people who bet on sports, both problematically and non-problematically. These findings highlight that people who bet on sports have unique characteristics and may experience diverse harms compared to people who do not bet on sports.

How you can use this research

The findings can be used by gambling operators, policy makers, and researchers. This research can also

inform the development of prevention and intervention methods targeted to sports betting.

About the researchers

Lindsey A. Snaychuk, Angela M. Ashley, and Hyoun S. Kim are affiliated with the Department of Psychology at Toronto Metropolitan University in Ontario, Canada. Hyoun S. Kim is also with the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, and the University of Ottawa Institute of Mental Health Research at the Royal in Ontario, Canada. **Daniel S. McGrath** and **David C. Hodgins** are affiliated with the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. **Robert J. Williams** is affiliated with the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. For more information about this study, please contact Hyoun S. Kim at andrewh.kim@ucalgary.ca.

Citation

Snaychuk, L. A., Ashley, A. M., McGrath, D. S., Hodgins, D. C., Williams, R. J., & Kim, H. S. (2023). Demographic, gambling, and psychological characteristics of sports bettors in a stratified sample of adults who gamble regularly. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 37(8), 1089–1100. <https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000971>

Study funding

No funding source was declared for this study.

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