

# research snapshot

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## The two-way relationship between gambling and family

### What this research is about

Past research has found that families play an important role in gambling. Past research has also reported that individuals, including children, are affected by the gambling problems of other family members. However, few studies have examined the role that families play in the development of gambling problems from the perspective of the gambler. There is also limited research on the role that families play in seeking help for gambling problems.

The current study explored the role that families play in starting gambling, continuing gambling, getting help, and the harm caused to families by gambling. It explored these issues through in-depth interviews with older adult gamblers in Singapore.

### What the researchers did

Participants were 25 older adults, aged 60 years and older, who were current or past regular gamblers (i.e., those who gambled at least weekly). All participants lived in Singapore. Participants completed a screening questionnaire that assessed their gambling behaviours and consequences from gambling. They also reported their age, the age they started gambling, gender, ethnicity, etc.

A researcher interviewed each participant. During the interview, participants were asked to describe their experience of gambling, starting from the very first time they gambled to its progression over time. The researcher also asked about the harm from gambling across participants' lifespan. The researcher also asked participants about seeking help for gambling problems and barriers that stopped them from getting help.

### What you need to know

The current study explored the role that families play in starting gambling, continuing gambling, seeking help for gambling problems, and the harm caused to families by gambling. The researchers interviewed regular older adult gamblers in Singapore. The results emphasized the role of Asian families in both starting and continuing gambling. Families also played a significant role in the decision to seek help for gambling problems. Therefore, the researchers recommend that families must be involved in problem gambling prevention and outreach programs.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The researchers read and re-read all of the interviews. They analyzed the interviews for common themes. Themes were then organized into a network, with four organizing themes under the global theme of "family and gambling."

### What the researchers found

The four themes that emerged from the interviews were: role of family in gambling initiation; role of family in maintenance of gambling; role of family in gambling-related harm; and role of family in help-seeking for gambling problems.

**Gambling initiation:** Older adult gamblers said they started gambling with their family as children. Some participants grew up in families where gambling was a family event organized by a parent or a relative. For Chinese participants, playing during Chinese New Year was described as a family event with cultural significance. Other participants described how they

watched their parents or other relatives play, and learned how to gamble.

**Maintenance of gambling:** Some older adult gamblers described gambling as a way to socialize and as a way to connect with family members. Chinese older adult gamblers continued gambling because they viewed it as part of a special occasion like Chinese New Year. Women gamblers also talked about gambling as a way to escape from a difficult relationship, to deal with the loss of a loved one, and to cope with loneliness.

**Gambling-related harm:** Most of the older adult gamblers experienced financial problems, which either directly or indirectly affected their families. These problems varied from short-term problems to more serious ones. Some gamblers mentioned not having enough money to pay rent or other expenses due to gambling, and having to borrow money from their family members. Some had to sell their homes due to gambling losses and relocate their families to smaller houses. Some even stole money from family members to finance their gambling. Many older adult gamblers reported having problems in their relationships with family because of financial losses. Some participants got into fights with their families because they had lied about the time and money spent gambling, or when family members tried to convince them to limit or stop their gambling.

**Help-seeking for gambling problems:** Some older adult gamblers reported that family members had encouraged or threatened them into seeking help. Some older adults talked about how no one knew about their gambling problems. Others tried not to let their families find out about the extent of their gambling or the problems they had. Older adult gamblers felt a sense of shame and were afraid of the consequences if their families found out about their gambling problems.

#### How you can use this research

This study recommends that public health initiatives could educate the families of older adult gamblers about gambling problems so that they can encourage help-seeking. Treatment providers could include interventions for reducing stress and improving

copied among family members. Family members of older adult gamblers could be encouraged to attend support groups, financial counseling, and marital therapy as necessary.

#### About the researchers

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#### Keywords

Family, gambling initiation, help-seeking, gambling-related harm

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#### Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (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.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

