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The impacts of gambling on concerned significant others vary depending on relationship type and closeness

What this research is about

Excessive time and money spent on gambling can harm both the person who gambles and others who are close to them. In Australia, about 6% of concerned significant others (CSOs) report being harmed by another person's gambling. CSOs include partners, parents, children, other family members, friends, colleagues, and others. This study aims to better understand the ways in which relationship type and closeness may influence the impacts of gambling on CSOs. Closeness was measured across four domains: finances, emotional relationship, shared responsibilities, and day-to-day contact.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited adults aged 18 and above who identified as being close to someone with a gambling problem. Participants had to be living in New South Wales, Australia. The researchers measured the following using an online survey:

- Potential participants were asked if they had been close to someone with gambling problems in the past 12 months. Those who answered “yes” were asked how many people they were close to had gambling problems and the type of relationship.
- **Significant Other Closeness Scale.** Participants answered questions about their level of closeness with the person whose gambling problems had most affected them. This scale measured four aspects of the relationship, including emotional closeness, financial closeness, shared responsibilities, and time spent together.
- **Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI).** This scale was used to ask participants to rate the other person's harmful gambling behaviours.

What you need to know

Concerned significant others (CSOs) are people who experience harm due to another person's gambling. This harm can vary depending on the type of relationship and closeness to the person who gambles. The researchers surveyed CSOs living in New South Wales, Australia. CSOs in relationships with shared finances and shared responsibilities were more likely to experience harm. This was especially true for partners and family members. This harm was associated with higher levels of distress and negative emotions. This, in turn, impacted the CSOs' ability to function at work or perform other responsibilities.

- **Gambling Harms Scale for Affected Others (GHS-20-AO).** This scale was used to measure gambling harms to CSOs in the past 12 months.
- **Objective health states.** The researchers used the SF-12v2 to measure functional health and wellbeing. They also used the Kessler-6 to measure psychological distress.
- **Positive and negative affect.** The researchers used the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule-Short Form to measure positive and negative emotions and feelings.
- **Subjective wellbeing.** The researchers used the Personal Wellbeing Index and a question on life satisfaction to assess participants' views about their wellbeing.

The researchers also asked about participants' age, gender, psychological problems, and own gambling problems (measured via the Lie/Bet Questionnaire).

What the researchers found

In total, 1,131 participants completed the survey. The participants were between the ages of 18 to 85. The average age was 37.5 years old. About 50.8% of the participants were female. Most participants were friends (32.3%), followed by current partners (17.3%). About 87.9% reported that the person close to them engaged in problem gambling (score 8+ on the PGSI). Ex-partners gave the highest PGSI scores and non-family members gave the lowest scores. For current partners, male CSOs reported higher PGSI scores for their partner than female CSOs.

Current partners reported the closest financial connections. This was followed by ex-partners, family members, and then non-family members. As for shared day-to-day responsibilities, current partners reported the highest level of closeness. This was followed by ex-partners, family members, and then non-family members. Current partners also reported the highest levels of emotional closeness, followed by family members and ex-partners, and then non-family members. Finally, current partners also reported highest time shared together.

About 92.5% of the participants reported experiencing one or more harms from another person's gambling. About 70% reported more than 4 harms. Ex-partners reported the highest harm scores, followed by current partners, family members, and then non-family members. For family members, male CSOs reported higher harm scores than female CSOs.

The strongest predictor of harm to CSOs was the severity of the gambling problem. In terms of closeness, having a close financial relationship was the strongest predictor of harm, followed by shared responsibilities. Having a close emotional relationship did not seem to uniquely predict harm to CSOs. In terms of relationship type, ex-partners were more likely to report harm than current partners and family members, whereas non-family members were less likely. Both current and ex-partners reported higher levels of psychological distress and negative affect than the other groups.

How you can use this research

This research can be used to improve support and treatment services for CSOs.

About the researchers

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