

research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



The relationship between problem gambling severity and suicide attempts in young adults

What this research is about

Suicide is a leading cause of death among young adults, and research suggests that there is a relationship between gambling severity and suicidality. Suicidality includes suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and self-harm. There is currently a debate among scholars on whether gambling should be considered a risk factor for suicidal behaviours. It is unclear whether the relationship between gambling and suicidality is better explained by external factors (e.g., depression or impulsivity).

There is limited research examining the relationship between gambling and suicidality among young people. As young people are at a high risk of both suicidality and gambling, a focus on how they co-occur in this population is essential.

In this study, the researchers used data from an online longitudinal study in Britain. Their aim was to examine how changes in gambling severity might affect suicide attempts after one year.

What the researchers did

The researchers used data from the Emerging Adults Gambling Survey, a longitudinal study of people aged 16–24 living in Great Britain. Participants were drawn from an online panel of over 1 million people. They filled out surveys at two different time points: wave 1 (3549 participants; between June 25 – August 16, 2019) and wave 2 (2080 participants; between July 13 – October 8, 2020). The researchers analyzed data from 1941 participants who responded to both waves and answered the question on suicide attempts.

Participants completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), a validated tool for measuring

What you need to know

Suicide is a leading cause of death among young adults. Additionally, research suggests suicidality and gambling severity may be related. In this study, the researchers analyzed data from a large longitudinal study in the United Kingdom. Participants consisted of youths (aged 16–24) who had gambled within the past year. They responded to the survey at both time points in 2019 (wave 1) and 2020 (wave 2). The researchers examined how changes in gambling severity might affect suicide attempts. The results suggest that increases in gambling severity over time are associated with increased risk of suicide attempts. These findings highlight that repeated screening for gambling harms should be included within relevant health and public service settings.

gambling severity, at both waves. They were also asked “In the last 12 months, have you ever made an attempt to take your life, by taking an overdose of tablets or in some other way?” This question was used to capture suicide attempts. Measures of impulsivity, personal wellbeing, and risky alcohol consumption were also completed by the participants.

The researchers examined whether PGSI score changes between wave 1 and wave 2 were a risk factor for suicide attempts. As a supplementary analysis, they looked at whether PGSI score changes affected the risk of suicidal thoughts.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that PGSI scores remained fairly similar for most participants between waves 1 and 2 (78.9%). About 13.7% of participants had a

decrease of at least 1 point in their PGSI scores, and 7.5% had an increase of at least 1 point. The prevalence of suicide attempts also remained the same. About 3.7% of participants reported a suicide attempt in the past 12 months at wave 1, and 3.3% reported a suicide attempt at wave 2. Among individuals with PGSI scores that did not change across waves 1 and 2, the prevalence of suicide attempts also did not change.

An increase in PGSI scores over time, regardless of an individual's baseline PGSI score, was associated with a higher risk of suicide attempts at wave 2. In other words, young adults with more severe problem gambling over time were 3 times more likely to have suicide attempts, even after taking into account other risk factors (e.g., depression). These findings show that gambling behaviours are dynamic and change over time, and such changes can affect risk of suicide.

Changes in PGSI scores did not affect the risk of suicidal thoughts. However, participants with higher baseline PGSI scores were more likely to have suicidal thoughts at wave 2.

These results emphasize the severity of harms that may be associated with gambling and are evidence that gambling activities require a strong regulatory response.

How you can use this research

This research can be used to inform health services, researchers, policy makers, and regulators. These findings prompt regulators and policy makers to assess whether current approaches within the gambling industry are adequately screening for risk of suicide among people who gamble. Once high-risk customers are identified, gambling operators are usually required to intervene by regulators; however, the type of intervention is unclear. Regulators should evaluate the efficacy of the current prevention and intervention methods in place.

These findings also suggest that repeated screening for gambling harms should be included within relevant health and public service settings. This would allow for early intervention and prevention for suicidality. Routine monitoring of gambling severity is

essential among young adults to identify those whose gambling harms are increasing. It is important that health services are equipped with this information to provide the most comprehensive care for people suffering from gambling problems.

About the researchers

Heather Wardle and **Viktorija Kesaite** are affiliated with the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow in Glasgow, United Kingdom. Heather Wardle is also affiliated with the Faculty of Public Health and Policy at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in London, United Kingdom. **Sarah Tipping** is affiliated with Sarah Tipping Consultant in Lingfield, United Kingdom. **Sally McManus** is affiliated with the School of Health and Psychological Sciences at the University of London in London, United Kingdom. For more information about this study, please contact Heather Wardle at heather.wardle@glasgow.ac.uk.

Citation

Wardle, H., Kesaite, V., Tipping, S., & McManus, S. (2023). Changes in severity of problem gambling and subsequent suicide attempts: A longitudinal survey of young adults in Great Britain, 2018–20. *The Lancet Public Health*, 8(3), e217–e225. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(23\)00008-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(23)00008-7)

Study funding

This study is funded by Wellcome Trust.

About Greo

Greo has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. Greo is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization with almost two decades of international experience in generating, synthesizing, and mobilizing research into action across the health and wellbeing sectors. Greo helps organizations improve their strategies, policies, and practices by harnessing the power of evidence and stakeholder insight.

Learn more about Greo by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.

