

research snapshot

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Changes in online gambling and other addictive behaviours during COVID-19

What this research is about

Most American land-based gambling venues closed in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People who wished to gamble were consequently limited to online gambling. The restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic could cause many people to feel bored and isolated. Boredom and social isolation might motivate people to gamble. The restrictions also had many economic consequences. Many people lost their jobs and their sources of income. Some research has found that economic hardship increases gambling behaviours in some people.

The authors of this study aimed to examine the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on people who gamble. They were interested in whether people who gamble substituted their land-based gambling for online gambling or other addictive behaviours, such as alcohol use. Substitution refers to switching to a different activity (e.g., online gambling) when the activity (e.g., land-based gambling) is not available.

What the researchers did

The researchers compiled an online survey containing several questions. This survey was posted to Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in April 2020. MTurk is a website where people can complete surveys posted by researchers in exchange for money. People who reported that they had gambled in a land-based gambling venue in the past three months were considered eligible. They also needed to be an American citizen over the age of 18.

The survey had several questions. Participants were asked if they had gambled online before land-based gambling venues were closed. If they had not, they were asked if they had started to gamble online after

What you need to know

Land-based gambling venues were closed in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If someone wanted to gamble, they had to gamble online. The pandemic brought with it many challenges, including boredom, isolation, and financial hardship. All of these factors may motivate people to gamble or to engage in other addictive behaviours, such as alcohol use. This study examined the patterns of online gambling, substance use, and other technology use (e.g., video gaming) after land-based gambling venues were closed in the U.S. The researchers found that online gambling decreased but other addictive behaviours increased. People with more problem gambling symptoms increased their online gambling or started to gamble online during this time. They also increased their use of alcohol, tobacco, pornography, and online casino gaming.

these closures. They were also asked if their online gambling had increased, stayed the same, or decreased since these closures.

Participants completed questions regarding their use of alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis. They were also asked about video gaming, social casino gaming, and use of pornography. The questions asked whether their engagement in these activities had increased, stayed the same, or decreased since the closure of land-based gambling venues.

Lastly, participants completed the Readiness to Change ladder and the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The Readiness to Change ladder assesses the level of readiness to change one's gambling

behaviours. The PGSI assesses problem gambling symptoms. Higher scores indicate more symptoms associated with problem gambling.

What the researchers found

424 participants completed the survey. About 8% of the participants started to gamble online after land-based gambling venues closed. The researchers found that as online gambling increased, so did PGSI scores, alcohol use, tobacco use, pornography use, social casino gaming, and readiness to change.

Since the closure of land-based gambling venues, online gambling decreased among the participants. There were significant increases in alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, video gaming, pornography, and social casino gaming. Most participants (~57%) responded that these activities increased because they were bored and/or had more free time. A smaller portion (~11%) reported that these activities increased because they were stressed or anxious. Only 1% of participants reported that it was because they could not access land-based gambling.

People who started gambling online after land-based gambling venues closed had the highest PGSI scores. This group reported the lowest household income. They also increased their pornography use and social casino gaming since land-based gambling closed.

How you can use this research

This research may be useful for policy makers and public health officials. People vulnerable to problem gambling were shown to migrate from land-based to online gambling in this study. It may be advisable to increase responsible gambling tools in online environments during land-based gambling venue closures. Limits to online gambling should also be considered during this time. This research would also be useful for treatment providers. They can use this research to better understand the impact of land-based gambling closures on people who gamble.

About the researchers

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About 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 safer 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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