

# research snapshot

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## Risk factors of problem gambling among UK university students

### What this research is about

Gambling disorder is a behavioural addiction and a growing public health concern. Gambling can result in long-lasting harms that impact many life domains, such as financial, personal, health, employment, and relationships. University students may be vulnerable to gambling-related issues. There is also evidence that students are affected by a unique set of risk factors.

Young people's tendency for risk behaviours and their experience of stressful life events may predispose them to problem gambling. Potential stressors for young people include lifestyle and accommodation changes, academic and peer pressure, and social conflict. These are all commonly experienced by students during their university education journey. Moreover, anxiety and depression are linked with higher levels of gambling in both the general and student populations.

The goal of this study was to survey UK university students about past-year problem gambling. The researchers determined if problem gambling might be linked to demographics, student status, and general wellbeing.

### What the researchers did

The researchers recruited students from a university in South Wales, UK, to complete an online survey. The online survey included questions about demographics, student status, and the following measures:

- The General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12). This questionnaire measures wellbeing on a 4-point scale, with the total score ranging from 0 to 36. Higher scores mean more psychological difficulties experienced by the participants.

### What you need to know

University students may have higher risks of having gambling-related issues. The current study investigated problem gambling and its association with student status, demographics, and general wellbeing. Participants were 402 domestic and international students attending university in the United Kingdom. The results show that about 44% of students experienced at-risk gambling and 6% of students experienced problem gambling. The researchers identified being male, accessing university funds for financial hardship, and being in the final year of study as important risk factors for problem gambling.

- Engaging in 10 different gambling activities in the past year (lottery tickets, sports betting, online casino, etc.). Participants who reported gambling completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). This scale measures gambling behaviours and consequences. The researchers categorized scores of 1 to 2 as 'low-risk gambling', scores of 3 to 7 as 'at-risk gambling', and scores of 8 and higher as 'problem gambling'.
- Participants who reported gambling were also asked what their motivations for gambling were; if they were currently or had ever been in debt because of gambling; if they had ever missed classes because of gambling; and where they spent most of their time gambling (e.g., casinos, betting shops, bingo halls, and online betting).

### What the researchers found

A total of 402 students completed the survey. The average age of participants was 20.7 years old. About

53.7% identified as women, 45.5% as men, and 0.75% as 'other'. Most participants (84.4%) identified as White in terms of ethnicity.

Of the 402 participants, 50% scored 0 on the PGSI and were categorized as 'non-problem gambling'. In this group, participants were two times more likely to be women than men. About 44% of the participants scored 1–7 and were categorized as 'at-risk gambling'. In this group, 56.8% of the participants identified as men. Finally, 6% of the participants met the criteria for problem gambling (scores 8 or higher on the PGSI). Of these participants, 10.38% identified as men. Participants with at-risk or problem gambling did not report lower mental health than participants with non-problem gambling.

The researchers found three factors that predicted non-problem gambling: (1) living at home with a parent or guardian, (2) studying management, and (3) identifying as women. Students living at home were twice as likely to report non-problem gambling. Male students were three times more likely to show problem gambling than females. Men were also twice as likely to show at-risk gambling than women.

The researchers also found that having accessed university-based funds for financial hardship predicted problem gambling. Students who applied and accessed university-based funds for financial hardship were five times more likely to experience problem gambling. Year of study was another risk factor. Students in their final year of study were twice as likely to experience problem gambling than students in lower years.

The researchers also found that students' motivations to gamble were associated with gambling severity. Motivations to gamble included to escape, to make money, for a big win, to socialize, and for fun and enjoyment. Gambling for fun and enjoyment was the most common motivation. But more students with problem gambling endorsed gambling to escape. Students with at-risk gambling were more likely to gamble to make money or for a big win, to socialize, and for fun or enjoyment.

#### How you can use this research

This research can be used to better understand student gambling and its association with wellbeing. The researchers recommended screening for problem gambling among university students to provide appropriate support and treatment.

#### About the researchers

**Morgan B. Zolkwer** is affiliated with the School of Psychology at the University of Sussex in the UK. **Glen Dighton** is affiliated with King's Centre for Military Health Research at King's College London in the UK. **Bryan F. Singer** is affiliated with the School of Psychology and the Sussex Addiction Research and Intervention Centre at the University of Sussex in the UK. **Simon Dymond** is affiliated with the School of Psychology at Swansea University in the UK, and the Department of Psychology at Reykjavík University in Iceland. For more information about this study, please contact Simon Dymond at [s.o.dymond@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:s.o.dymond@swansea.ac.uk).

#### Citation

Zolkwer, M. B., Dighton, G., Singer, B. F., & Dymond, S. (2022). Gambling problems among students attending university in the United Kingdom: Associations with gender, financial hardship and year of study. *Journal of Gambling Issues*.

<https://doi.org/10.4309/FYPO3349>

#### Study funding

No funding was received for this study.

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