

Older problem gamblers may face greater suicide risk than younger counterparts, study finds

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Compared to their younger counterparts, older problem gamblers who ask casinos to bar them from returning are three to four times more likely to do so because they fear they will kill themselves if they don't stop betting, according to a new study.

Researchers Lia Nower, JD, PhD, of the Rutgers University Center for Gambling Studies, and Alex Blaszczynski, Ph.D. of the University of Sydney, Australia, looked at 1,601 self-described problem gamblers who asked between 2001 and 2003 to be banned from Missouri casinos. The results of their study were published in the September issue of *Psychology and Aging*, published by the American Psychological Association.

Older adults – over age 55 in this study -- reported gambling an average of 17 years before "self-exclusion" – more than twice the length of time reported by younger adults. All participants were asked to cite the main reason or reasons why they sought to be barred from casinos. Younger, middle-aged and older adults all gave as the primary reasons gaining control, needing help and hitting rock bottom. However, nearly 14 percent of older adults surveyed – a higher proportion than any other group – indicated they sought help because they wanted to prevent themselves from committing suicide.

"This is particularly troubling because, irrespective of age, problem

gamblers have reported rates of suicidal ideation and/or attempts as high as six times those found in the general population," Nower says.

This study is the first to examine age differences in the demographic characteristics and gambling preferences of people who ask to be barred from casinos. Under these programs, gamblers who believe they have a problem can enter an agreement with a casino and/or state regulators authorizing casino staff to bar them. If they are found on the premises, they agree to be physically removed and possibly charged with trespass. Exclusion periods can range from six months to an irrevocable lifetime ban. In 1996, Missouri became the first state in the United States to implement an exclusion program. Similar programs now operate in Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi and New Jersey, as well as six Canadian provinces and a handful of other countries, according to the researchers.

Other key differences among demographic groups:

- Compared to younger adults, older adults were more likely to prefer non-strategic games such as slot machines, video poker and lottery tickets. The researchers noted that such preferences may accelerate the onset of gambling problems, particularly in light of the misperceptions of randomness and the probability of winning such games.

- In addition, the older adults in this sample began gambling at a significantly later age than the other two groups. "In particular, older women began gambling at about 49 but did not experience serious gambling problems until around the age of 60," the researchers wrote. "In contrast, men began gambling more than a decade earlier, at 37, and also self-excluded around age 60."

- Older adults are also less likely to receive mental health treatment, due to factors including inadequate Medicare coverage, under-diagnosis and

a lack of physician referrals. "This reluctance to access care, combined with the increased potential for suicidal ideation, could increase the risk for self-harm among older adult problem gamblers without targeted interventions to assist them in accessing services," the researchers wrote.

Source: American Psychological Association

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