

Impulsivity in first grade predicts problem gambling in late teen years for urban boys

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Results of a new study by researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health indicate that a developmental pattern of impulsiveness in young males is linked with gambling problems in late adolescence. Respondents considered to be in the high impulsivity track as early as first grade doubled the odds of meeting criteria for at-risk/problem gambling, and tripled the odds of meeting criteria for problem gambling. The study is the first to link a developmental pattern of impulsivity—defined as a tendency to make rush decisions without carefully considering potential negative consequences—and late-adolescent gambling. Findings appear online in the journal [Addiction](#).

The researchers studied 310 predominately African American (87%) and low socioeconomic (70%) males from first grade to late adolescence in an urban community in Baltimore, Maryland. Ratings of [classroom behavior](#) were based on a Teacher Report of Classroom Behavior Checklist and included items such as waits for turn, interrupts, and blurts out answers. Annual assessments were made from ages 11 through 15. Students fell into two distinct trajectories: 41% of the sample had a high impulse trajectory and 59% a lower impulse trajectory. While impulsivity tended to decline as the boys matured, those with high level of impulsivity in first grade were far more likely to remain among the 41% at adolescence.

Gambling behavior was assessed through interviews with students at ages 17, 19, and 20. Self-reported gambling behavior was assessed using the South Oaks Gambling Screen-Revised for [Adolescents](#). The investigators

found that boys in the high impulse trajectory group were twice as likely to meet the criteria for "at-risk" gambling behavior and three times the risk for the risk for [problem gambling](#).

Over all, two-thirds of the boys in the study (67%) reported they engaged in some gambling, 20% met criteria for at-risk gambling, and 9% met the criteria as problem gamblers.

"Our findings reveal that there is a considerable link between youth impulsivity in the younger years and gambling issues as older teens," says Silvia Martins, MD, PhD, assistant professor of Epidemiology at Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health. "This has important implications and provides clear research support for targeting impulsivity to prevent youth problem gambling."

While other research has shown a connection between impulsiveness and gambling, those studies measured impulsivity at a single point-in-time and gambling either concurrently or at a later point-in-time, rather than linking gambling in the late teens to traits of impulsiveness as early as first grade. The earlier studies also based their findings on a predominantly white population sample. What further sets the current research apart is that it specifically considers socioeconomic status of urban minority youth, a population that is disproportionately more likely to exhibit both impulsivity and problem gambling. "We see this as a study strength, given the small amount of research there is on the impulsivity-[gambling](#) association among urban minority populations. However, generalizations to the larger population should be made with caution," warns Dr. Martins, principal investigator on the research.

"We also chose to base our study on males only because females tend to exhibit lower levels of impulsivity and show different patterns of development compared to males," observed Dr. Martins.

Noteworthy, too, is the fact that the Columbia researchers used teacher-reported assessments rather than participants' self-reported measures of impulsivity as was the case in earlier works. "Teacher ratings of youth impulsivity tend to be more consistent and reliable for predicting future psychiatric disorder diagnoses compared to adolescent self-reports," says Dr. Martins.

"From our findings we see that teaching impulse control early in elementary school may have a long term benefit in decreasing the likelihood of youth following an elevated [trajectory](#) of impulsivity."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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