

New study reveals scale of problem gambling among homeless population

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Credit: Gavin Mills/The Connection at St Martin's

Homeless people are ten times more likely to be problem gamblers than the UK population as a whole, researchers at Cambridge have found.

The study – one of the largest surveys of [gambling](#) and homelessness ever undertaken in the UK – provides new insight into a rarely studied problem and suggests [homeless](#) services should offer clients more support to identify and tackle [problem gambling](#).

Although homelessness and problem gambling are two public health concerns, they are rarely considered together. This new study –

published in the *Journal of Gambling Studies* – interviewed 450 people at homeless hostels and shelters in the London Borough of Westminster.

According to lead author Steve Sharman from the Department of Psychology: "Many issues face the homeless population, including drug and alcohol use. In terms of addiction research, most focus has been on drugs, alcohol and smoking, but the gambling field is relatively small in comparison. And while it is possible to spot physiological indicators of drug and alcohol addiction, problem gambling is much harder to identify."

Finding out more about gambling addiction is important at a time when gambling opportunities are wider than ever. "Gambling has exploded in popularity over the past 20 years, partly due to changes in legislation but also because of new technology," said Sharman.

"Where previous generations were limited to betting shops and football pools, today there's everything from online slots to in-play betting. That means people can gamble 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and the more people who gamble, the more people there will be who do so problematically."

Together with researchers at Kings College London, the National Problem Gambling Clinic, The Connection @ St Martins and other centres in Westminster, Sharman spoke to over 450 homeless people in London.

He assessed levels of problem gambling using a standard clinical diagnostic tool called the Problem Gambling Severity Index. He then compared the results with data from the British gambling Prevalence Survey.

Compared with the UK population as a whole, where problem gambling

affects 0.7% of people, the level of problem gambling among [homeless people](#) was 11.6%. "We found that the rate of problem or pathological gambling is significantly higher in the homeless population than the general population," he said.

In identifying the significant scale of the problem, the study could pave the way to developing new services for the homeless.

"The results are useful because some homeless services don't ask about gambling in their initial assessments. By showing that this population is vulnerable to gambling addiction, the study should encourage homeless services to include questions about gambling in their assessments. If they can understand the full range of behavioural problems their clients face – not only substance abuse – then they will be able to provide more comprehensive services," said Sharman.

The next stage of the project will be to unpick the direction of the link between gambling and homelessness – whether gambling is a cause or consequence of homelessness – the links between gambling and alcohol and drug use, and look at so-called negative life events.

"By giving us an indication of life events that precede homelessness and came afterwards, we will get a better understanding of the causes, and whether people start gambling after becoming homeless or became homeless as a result of gambling," he said.

"Regardless of whether gambling is a cause or a consequence, recognising and addressing this problem will hopefully give affected individuals a better chance of getting off – and more importantly staying off – the streets."

More information: "Rates of Problematic Gambling in a British Homeless Sample: A Preliminary Study." Steve Sharman, Jenny Dreyer,

Mike Aitken, Luke Clark, Henrietta Bowden-Jones. *Journal of Gambling Studies*. January 2014, [link.springer.com/article/10.1 ... 7/s10899-014-9444-7#](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10899-014-9444-7)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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