

Teens are gambling online at a significantly higher rate than previously reported

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Credit: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

Nearly 10 per cent of teens in three Canadian provinces said they had gambled online in the past three months, according to a new study by researchers from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and the University of Waterloo. It's the first Canadian-based study to find such high levels of online gambling among youth.

Of all adolescents surveyed, 42 per cent reported that they had gambled

money or something of value in offline (land-based) gambling or [online gambling](#). Popular gambling activities included: a dare or challenge (22 per cent), instant-win or scratch tickets (14 per cent), games of skill, such as pool or darts (12 per cent), offline sports pools (9 per cent), and cards, such as poker and black jack (9 per cent).

"A substantially high proportion of young people are gambling in general, and mostly in unregulated forms, like in a dare or a game of pool, which are accessible to youth," says Dr. Tara Elton-Marshall, Scientist in Social and Epidemiological Research at CAMH and first author of the study, which was published this month in *BMC Public Health*. "The high proportion of teens who are gambling in any form is concerning because there is research to suggest that the earlier people start to gamble, the more likely it is to be an issue later on."

The findings come from 10,035 students in grades 9 to 12 (aged 13 to 19) who completed the 2012-2013 Youth Gambling Survey in schools in Ontario, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Most adolescents participating in many forms of gambling, with the exception of gambling on lottery tickets and instant-win or scratch tickets, were not of legal age to gamble.

The growth of online gambling

Online gamblers were adolescents who reported gambling in online sports pools, Internet poker or Internet slot machines. While the study did not ask where teens were gambling online, venues could include unregulated offshore gambling websites or informal forums set up among friends and peers, says Dr. Elton-Marshall.

The higher rates of online gambling may partly be explained by the fact that adolescents were specifically asked about online sports pools, which

may not have been considered a form of gambling by teens responding to previous surveys about online gambling.

Reasons for concern

The study, the first to use a problem gambling scale created specifically for adolescents, showed potential reasons for concern, particularly related to adolescents who were gambling both online and offline.

Among these adolescents, 36 per cent had a score indicating a potential gambling problem on a scale measuring problem gambling, versus 8 per cent among offline-only gamblers. Problem gambling severity scores were calculated based on responses to nine questions, such as how often teens missed activities such as team sports or band due to gambling/betting.

"While we do not know why adolescents who also gamble online had higher problem gambling scores, we also found that adolescents who were also gambling online were more likely than offline-only gamblers to participate in multiple forms of gambling," says Dr. Elton-Marshall. "This suggests that young people who are also gambling online are individuals who are seeking out a range of gambling experiences, which could put them at greater risk for [problem gambling](#)."

Teens also participated in free simulated forms of gambling online, including free poker websites and gambling games on Facebook.

The rapidly changing world of gambling

"The gambling landscape is shifting so rapidly in terms of technology and the proliferation of gambling experiences," says Dr. Elton-Marshall.

Four provinces - Ontario, B.C., Manitoba and Quebec - have also legalized online gambling. This study provides a baseline of [adolescents'](#) online gambling behaviour before the January 2015 launch of Ontario's PlayOLG Website, which is strictly regulated to ensure participants are 18 years or older.

"Continuing to assess how the expanding and evolving gambling landscape is affecting [young people](#) is critical to help prevent [gambling](#) problems," says Dr. Elton-Marshall.

More information: Tara Elton-Marshall et al. An examination of internet and land-based gambling among adolescents in three Canadian provinces: results from the youth gambling survey (YGS), *BMC Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-016-2933-0](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-2933-0)

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