

Study suggests changes in gambling behavior linked to suicide risk in young adults

March 1 2023, by Shamim Quadir



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An increase in difficulties with gambling is linked to a heightened risk of suicide attempts among young adults, according to new research from the University of Glasgow and City, University of London.

Published in the journal, *The Lancet Public Health*, the study suggests

that over the course of a year, [young adults](#) (aged 16–24) who experienced an increase in severity of [gambling](#) harm were 2.74 times more likely to attempt [suicide](#) than those whose gambling was unchanged.

Gambling behavior is dynamic, and the study found that any escalation in the experience of gambling harm, regardless of someone's starting point, was linked to a heightened risk of suicidality.

Few studies have examined the relationship between gambling and suicidality, and fewer still have explored this relationship among young adults, despite there being concurrent heightened risk of both suicidality and gambling harm among those aged 16–24 years.

In the study, the responses of 1,941 young adults, surveyed twice over the course of a year (first between June–August 2019 and then between July–October 2020), were analyzed to track changes in their gambling and suicide-related behaviors.

Gambling harm was measured with the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) score, which is measured from 0 = non gambler up to a maximum 27 points. Over the year, an increase in PGSI score of only one point or more was associated with an increased risk of suicide attempt.

Young adults are likely to have a greater propensity for risk-taking behavior than [older adults](#), including impulsivity and engaging in sensation-seeking experimentation. Nevertheless, while impulsivity, loneliness, low well-being, and anxiousness were found to partially account for the link between suicidality and gambling found in the study, these factors do not explain it in full.

The study authors argue that their findings demonstrate the need to

quickly identify those who may be experiencing greater harm from gambling and to intervene. To do this could mean routine and repeated screening is embedded within [primary health care](#), [social care](#), and other relevant public service organizations to allow effective identification and suicide prevention activities among young adults at elevated risk.

There remain important questions about preferred methods for intervening with those deemed to be at risk. While government [regulatory bodies](#) require gambling operators to perform risk analyses of customer's data to identify those at increased risk of gambling harm, how this is subsequently carried out at a customer service level is unclear.

The study recommends that if regulators retain this requirement, all industry staff engaging in customer interactions could be required to have regular, independent, transparent, and robust suicide prevention and intervention training. As a mandatory condition of licensing, this could replicate the approach used in reforms to the financial services sector.

First author of the study, Dr. Heather Wardle, said, "Suicide is a leading cause of death among young adults, especially young men. When we speak to people who have experienced severe gambling harms, many describe feeling suicidal. And yet debate continues about whether gambling disorder is a risk factor for suicidality or if this might be better explained by other things, like poor well-being. Our study suggests not, finding that any increase in negative experiences due to gambling among young adults can mean a greater risk of suicidality.

"For anyone feeling like this, help is available—people can and do recover from gambling harms. But more support is needed. Our study adds to a growing evidence base strengthening the argument for gambling to be recognized as risk factor in suicide prevention plans. Gambling harms were referenced in Scotland's Suicide Prevention

Action Plan 2022–2025, but much more needs to happen for this to become embedded in national approaches and policies."

Co-author, Sally McManus, said, "Suicide is complex and many factors come in to play. This study, however, clearly shows that interventions that reduce gambling-related harm may also have real potential to reduce levels of suicidality in society. Gambling behavior is dynamic and needs to be monitored for signs of change. For many of the [young people](#) interviewed for this study their harmful gambling behaviors had decreased over time. This shows how recovery and improvement are achievable, especially with the right protections and measures in place. People who are struggling can reach out—day or night—to organizations like the Samaritans. They can be called for free on 116 123 or emailed at jo@samaritans.org."

Sir Louis Appleby is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Manchester and Chair of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group. He said, "This study adds to our understanding of the link between problem gambling and suicide, particularly in young people. We have seen warnings about gambling and tragic personal stories bravely told in public, but inevitably it takes longer to get the high quality evidence we need for prevention. Now that evidence is coming through. It is timely too—the Government has announced a new national suicide prevention strategy and problem gambling is certain to feature."

More information: Heather Wardle et al, Changes in severity of problem gambling and subsequent suicide attempts: a longitudinal survey of young adults in Great Britain, 2018–20, *The Lancet Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/S2468-2667\(23\)00008-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(23)00008-7)

Provided by City University London

Citation: Study suggests changes in gambling behavior linked to suicide risk in young adults (2023, March 1) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

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