Association between gambling and self-harm: A scoping review

Self-harm ranges from thoughts and behaviors about hurting oneself to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Understanding the relationship between gambling, gambling-related problems, and self-harm will help protect gamblers.

The Study

Reviewed 190 studies of gambling and self-harm to understand the available research. Categorized studies according to their findings about the association between gambling and self-harm.

**Positive Association:** When self-harm is high, gambling is high
**Negative Association:** When self-harm is high, gambling is low
**No Association:** Self-harm and gambling are unrelated
**Mixed:** Some positive and some negative associations

Most studies (89.5%) included people seeking mental health treatment. A quarter gathered representative samples (communities/schools).

All studies were observational, not experimental.

Most studies (89.5%) measured gambling and self-harm once, rather than over time.

**Most common self-harm concepts measured**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Percent of studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suicide attempt n = 116</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide ideation n = 97</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Completed suicide n = 23</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suicide plan n = 16</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
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</tbody>
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Key Findings

Did not test association between gambling & self-harm; just observed trends

Tested association between gambling & self-harm without testing if it is explainable by other factors

Tested association between gambling & self-harm and tested if it is explainable by other factors

17.4% of all studies found a positive association between gambling & self-harm that is not explainable by other factors, like mental health, age, or financial trouble.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>43.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.5%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- 56.9% Positive Association
- 24.1% Negative or No Association
- 19.0% Mixed

Key Takeaways

Many studies (17.4%) found a positive association between gambling and self-harm, even when considering the possible role of other factors. This tells us that the positive association is not just explainable by other factors, like mental health.

Because of this risk, gambling operators should be prepared to guide their subscribers to appropriate resources for self-harm concerns.

Because most studies (89.5%) did not look at gambling and self-harm over time, they do not specifically examine whether gambling causes self-harm.

Higher-quality studies are needed to clarify how gambling and self-harm emerge over time, independently and together, with and without complicating factors.


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