

Prevalence of gambling disorder among prisoners: a systematic review

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knowledge snapshot



Problem and pathological gambling rates are high among prison populations

What this article is about

People with gambling problems may have financial difficulties from their gambling behaviours. They may commit crimes to finance their gambling and to pay off their gambling debts. Crimes related to gambling may include theft, fraud, robbery, selling drugs, and violent acts. There is a strong link between gambling disorder and crime. Gambling-related crime is the reason that between 4% to 90% of inmates are in prison.

Understanding the extent of gambling disorder among prison inmates could help inform public health interventions in prison. Treating gambling problems among prison inmates may reduce their chances of re-offending. This article is a review of previous research that explored the rates of problem and pathological gambling among prison inmates. Pathological gambling is a more severe form of problem gambling. It is the term used in the 4th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV).

What was done?

The authors carried out a systematic review that followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.

The authors searched several databases, including MEDLINE, ProQuest, PsycINFO, PubMed, Science Direct, and Scopus, for research related to gambling and prisoners. They used search terms like gambling OR problem gambling OR pathological gambling AND prisoner OR inmate OR offender OR felon. They also searched for studies in the reference lists of the studies included in the review.

Why is this article important?

This review found high rates of problem and pathological gambling among prison inmates in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The rates among prison inmates are higher than the rates recorded among the general population. These findings suggest that prisons are an important setting to screen, support, and treat individuals with gambling problems.

Included studies must report on original research examining the rates of gambling disorder among prisoners. The studies had to be peer-reviewed and written in English. They must assess gambling disorder with a valid screening tool.

Two authors screened the titles and abstracts to make sure the studies were relevant to the current review. They removed duplicate studies. They then read through the full text of the remaining studies to further ensure they were relevant to the review.

The authors reviewed each eligible study and extracted the year of the study, the location of the study, the prison population surveyed, the number of participants in the study, the characteristics of the participants, and the screening tool used in the study. They also gathered information about rates of problem and pathological gambling, gambling-related offences, co-existing mental health issues, and gambling in prison.

What you need to know

The authors found and reviewed 12 studies reporting on problem and pathological gambling among prison inmates. These studies took place in five countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Most of the studies came from the United Kingdom and the United States. In total, the studies included 3,892 prison inmates. About 84% of the inmates were male.

The rates of problem and pathological gambling among the prison inmates ranged from 5.9% to 73%. The widespread rates are likely due to the studies using different screening tools over different time frames to assess problem gambling. For instance, most studies used the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS), but some used the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) or the Early Intervention Gambling Health Test Screen. Few studies reported on female inmates. Even though these limitations existed, the rates of problem and pathological gambling among the prison inmates reported in these studies were much higher than those in the general population. For example, in the United Kingdom, the rates of problem gambling among prison inmates were between 12 and 24 times greater than those recorded in general population surveys.

The reviewed studies also found that a large number of prison inmates were either currently serving, or had previously served, a prison sentence for a gambling-related offence. The most common gambling-related crimes were theft, fraud, and robbery. Drug offences were also quite common, but violent crimes were much less common. Prison inmates also suffered a range of co-existing conditions, including mental health problems, drug, and alcohol misuse.

Only four studies examined gambling while in prison. Few prisoners reported gambling while in prison. However, this might be because gambling is banned in most prisons. Being in prison could increase or decrease gambling behaviours. While some prisoners reported fewer gambling problems while in prison, others might start gambling or develop a gambling problem.

Who is it intended for?

The findings of this review are intended for criminal justice policy makers, administrators, and practitioners. They could consider developing gambling disorder interventions at each stage of the criminal justice system. For instance, this may include screening offenders upon arrival at police custody, and treating inmates with gambling problems while in prison. Judges could ensure that prisoners are advised or required to take part in gambling treatment as part of their prison-based rehabilitation.

About the researchers

James Banks, Jaime Waters, Catrin Andersson, and Victoria Olive are affiliated with Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. For more information about this study, please contact James Banks at j.banks@shu.ac.uk.

Citation

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