

# New study suggests link between problem gambling and suicidality in young adults in Great Britain

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Results from a cross-sectional online survey of young adults between the ages of 16-24 suggests that both men and women are at increased risk of suicidality if they engage in problem gambling.

Suicide is a leading cause of death of [young adults](#) worldwide. Research also suggests that the [suicide](#) rate has increased for young adults in recent years, despite the prevalence of factors such as alcohol and drug misuse decreasing.

Explanations suggested for the increase in suicide rate in this age group include the role of social media, online bullying, exam and lifestyle stress, and increasing insecurity among young people. However, other factors are probably also involved, and might be further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Problem gambling

Gambling has been neglected as a public health issue. Online gambling is the largest growth sector in Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland) and

now accounts for more than one third of the total gambling market. Online betting and gambling are also known to have one of the highest levels of association with problem gambling. Considering the shifts in risk-taking behaviors among young adults, there has been an urgent need to examine recent data on gambling and suicidality.

This need prompted the undertaking of a new study from academics from City, University of London and University of Glasgow, published in the journal, *Lancet Public Health*. It investigated whether problem gambling is related to suicidality in young adults aged 16-24, and also looked for any differences between men and women.

In the study, data from the Emerging Adults Gambling Survey (a cross-sectional, online survey of young adults, who were selected from a YouGov online panel) was analyzed.

The researchers looked for associations between problem gambling (defined as a score of eight or higher on the "Problem Gambling Severity Index' [PGSI]) and [suicidal thoughts](#) and [suicide attempts](#) in the year before survey completion. This was investigated through a series of statistical models, with and without adjustment for sociodemographic factors, alcohol use, video gaming, anxiety, loneliness, and impulsivity.

The study found that 37% of male respondents (24 out of 62 men) who had attempted suicide in the previous year, had survey scores which were indicative of problem gambling. The comparable figure for those men who had not attempted suicide or had thoughts of suicide in the previous year was 3.6% (38 out of 1,077 men).

In female respondents who had attempted suicide in the previous year, 14.5% (13 out of 85 women)

had survey scores indicative of a gambling problem. Provided by City University London  
For those female respondents who had not attempted suicide or had thoughts of suicide, the figure was 2% (25 out of 1184 women).

These findings suggest that problem gambling is associated with suicide attempts in both young men and young women. This association persisted after adjusting for alcohol use, video gaming, anxiety, impulsivity, loneliness, [life satisfaction](#), and other factors, which suggests that other mechanisms, such as the severity and multiplicity of harms experienced, or gambling to cope with life stressors, might underpin this relationship.

As such the authors of the study suggest that young people with problem-gambling behaviors should be considered at risk for suicide attempts, and that more research must be undertaken to more fully understand the association in the rapidly changing gambling environment.

The UK gambling regulator has described COVID-19 as accelerating the growth of [online gambling](#). It is against this backdrop that the current study was published in a gambling-focused issue of *The Lancet Public Health*, launching a new *The Lancet Public Health* commission on gambling. Over the coming year, the Commission will be investigating ways to reduce gambling-related harms around the world, and welcomes research submissions aiming to prevent [gambling](#) harms.

Commenting on the study, Sally McManus, co-author and Senior Lecturer in Health at the School of Health Sciences, City, University of London said, "This study highlights the importance of gender disaggregating analysis. Gambling research has tended to focus on men, however women with [problem gambling](#) behaviors should also be recognized as at higher risk of suicidality."

**More information:** Heather Wardle et al. Suicidality and gambling among young adults in Great Britain: results from a cross-sectional online survey, *The Lancet Public Health* (2021). DOI: [10.1016/S2468-2667\(20\)30232-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30232-2)

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