

**Gambling during the COVID-19 crisis - A cause for concern?**

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### **Brief abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to worsen mental health problems in the general population, including increasing engagement in addictive behaviors. Here, we describe observations suggesting that the current crisis and its sequelae may worsen problem gambling. The current pandemic may impact financial and psychological well-being due to social isolation during spatial distancing, and these stressors in conjunction with substantial changes in gambling markets (land-based, online) during the pandemic may significantly influence gambling behaviors. This situation calls for rapid research initiatives in this area and preventive and regulatory measures by multiple stakeholders.

### **Manuscript**

Fear of disease, lost lives of close relatives and friends, or confinement and other restraints related to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis (the spread and consequences of the SARS-CoV-2 virus) have changed the daily lives of many people worldwide and may present a health hazard beyond the acute infectious disease. Researchers have called for attention to mental health consequences of the pandemic.<sup>1-3</sup> This may include addictive behaviors; changes in gaming and pornography-viewing behaviors have been reported during the pandemic.<sup>4,5</sup>

While gambling may be impacted in many ways during COVID-19 (closing of casinos and cessation of sports may limit certain forms of gambling), internet gambling remains available, and COVID-19-related stress may increase engagement in gambling. Problem gambling may potentially be among the health hazards affected by the ongoing crisis and its aftermath. Public prevention efforts and systematic research data collection are warranted.

Problem gambling<sup>6</sup> impacts many individuals worldwide and is linked to financial and mental health concerns.<sup>7</sup> Prior national or international financial crises have influenced gambling behaviors and exacerbated gambling problems.<sup>8</sup> For example, a prior financial crisis in Greece increased problem gambling, especially among women.<sup>9</sup> After a financial crisis in Iceland, gambling participation and problem gambling increased, particularly problematic online gambling among men.<sup>10</sup> While currently speculative, financial hardships may promote gambling as individuals may be motivated to gamble to try to win money. Although presently limited, existing data suggest that COVID-19-related financial concerns may increase gambling-related harms, and this possibility merits systematic research.

The characteristics of the gambling market should be considered. Online gambling has been increasing rapidly worldwide. Properties of online gambling may constitute a particular health hazard when many people are confined to their homes and have had rapid changes in working conditions, psychosocial stress, anxiety and depression, as has been described in China.<sup>11</sup> Online gambling may be particularly concerning due to its availability and velocity; online non-sports gambling has been associated with higher debt levels,<sup>12</sup> and in a recent study of online gambling in Sweden, recent online casino gambling was associated with higher rates of problem gambling and indebtedness, compared to recent online sports betting and other online gambling,<sup>13</sup> suggesting that online casino gambling may represent a particular health hazard. Typical reasons for gambling online include ease and availability, although relief from boredom and escapism are also cited.<sup>14</sup> These factors may be particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another particular feature of the pandemic involves changes to sports, which could theoretically increase non-sports online gambling. Most sporting events upon which people typically gamble (e.g., soccer) are currently cancelled due to COVID-19. It is unknown whether this will decrease overall gambling, as the extent to which individuals may switch from sports gambling to other forms is not known. Here, more research is promptly needed,

especially given that non-sports online gambling has been strongly associated with indebtedness.<sup>13</sup> The potential changes of the gambling market due to the cancellation of sports events and land-based gambling are not well understood and may be substantial. For example, Swedish media have reported that in the absence of professional sporting events, extreme sums of money have been gambled on teenage soccer games or amateur low-tier friendship games.<sup>15</sup>

There is a need for timely, systematic research of potential changes in gambling worldwide. Informing the general public about the addictive potential of gambling is important, as is the need for responsible gambling measures to be undertaken by multiple stakeholders including gambling operators. Regulation by legislators and policy-makers is also important presently, particularly when stress and confinement overlap, in order to mitigate against excessive gambling among vulnerable people.

Advice and recommendations to the general public and professionals are needed. National or local links to information about treatment and support options are important, including ones that may be done remotely. Advice may also include information about: limiting the extent of gambling; not gambling to regulate negative emotions; not gambling in order to try to solve financial problems or financial concerns; not gambling under the influence of alcohol or drugs; carefully monitoring gambling-related time and financial expenditures; maintaining and establishing daily routines involving activities other than gambling; minding gambling-related attitudes and behaviors in the presence of minors; and not starting to gamble due to stressors. Advice may also address voluntary self-exclusion in case of gambling problems that may emerge or re-emerge during the crisis.

In a pilot study at the Gambling Disorder and other Behavioral Addictions Unit of the Department of Psychiatry at the University Hospital of Bellvitge (Barcelona, Spain), a survey monitored the impact of the initial four weeks of COVID-19-related confinement. All patients who accepted participating in the survey were asked to provide signed informed consent at the beginning of their treatment in the unit. Due to the lockdown, individual sessions were performed by telephone instead face-to-face. It was during the course of these therapy sessions when they were asked if they wanted to answer a brief questionnaire about the impact of confinement on their emotional state and gambling symptoms. All patients who were asked accepted. They had signed the informed consent after the first visit and before the start of their treatment. Therefore, all of them were under the approval of the Ethics Committee of University Hospital of Bellvitge (Barcelona, Spain) (Ref: PR329/19). There was no financial or other compensation for being included as part of the sample in this work. All the information was collected by psychologists with extensive experience in behavioral addictions and who are conducting individual cognitive-behavioral treatments with these

patients. Twenty-six patients, mostly male (n=22), with a mean age of 44.9 years (range 21-73) voluntarily receiving treatment for gambling problems completed a telephone survey. Most presented worries about increased uncertainties, such as the negative impact on their work, risk of COVID-19 infection of themselves or their loved ones and their treatment. After two weeks of confinement, 12% (n=3) reported worsening gambling, 19% were completely abstinent (n=5), 46% showed anxiety symptoms and 27% showed depressive symptoms.

In summary, when facing an unforeseen situation with confinement, fear of disease and financial uncertainty for the future, problem gambling may be an important health hazard to monitor and prevent during and following the COVID-19 crisis, especially given current online gambling availability. To date, research data are limited, and rapid action should be taken by researchers and stakeholders worldwide.

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