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SCHOOL HEALTH
RESEARCH NETWORK

Gambling behaviours and socio-emotional harm among 11-16 year olds in Wales

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Although commercial gambling in the UK is legal only for those aged 18 or over, national lottery products can be purchased from age 16 and some games machines, including fruit machines, have no age restrictions. Young people are additionally gaining access to gambling via the internet. But how popular is gambling among young people in Wales and is it having an impact on their wellbeing?

What we already know...

Problem gambling, defined as frequent gambling behaviours that often lead to distress, is rare among adolescents in the UK. Where it does occur, however, it is more common among males, older adolescents, those from minority ethnic backgrounds, and among those who feel less connected to school and whose parents have fewer educational qualifications.

Problem gambling has been linked to lower levels of self-esteem, poor school performance and an increased risk of other addictions.

Those who initiate gambling in adolescence are more likely to become problem gamblers in adulthood.



What we did...

- We used data from 37,363 students in Years 7 to 11 who completed the 2017 Student Health and Wellbeing Survey to explore how many gambled and the types of gambling activities they took part in.
- We analysed how gambling behaviours varied by socio-demographic characteristics and school connectedness and investigated whether gambling behaviours were linked to socio-emotional harms.
- The socio-demographic characteristics we measured included gender, family affluence, ethnicity and age. School connectedness was measured by asking students whether they felt they belonged at their school.
- We measured gambling behaviours in the past week using a list of 15 gambling activities, for example, placing bets, scratch cards, fruit machines, bingo and online gambling sites.
- Students were also asked if they had gambled in the past 12 months and whether this resulted in them feeling bad.

In a nutshell

- **Nearly 2 in 5 students had gambled in the past year, of whom 16% had experienced negative feelings as a result of this.**
- **Boys, students from non-White British backgrounds, students from more affluent households and students who felt less connected to their school reported higher counts of gambling in the past 7 days.**
- **Feeling bad about gambling was more likely to be reported by students who felt least connected to their school.**



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What we found...

Gambling behaviours

- Around two fifths (41%) of students had gambled in the past year.
- The most popular gambling activity was fruit machines and 5% of students had used these in the last 7 days.
- The next most popular activities were playing cards for money with friends, placing a private bet for money and buying scratch cards.

Patterning of gambling behaviours

- Boys reported taking part in significantly more gambling activities in the past 7 days than girls and there was an increase in gambling with age in boys that was not seen in girls.
- Students from backgrounds other than White British and those from the most affluent households reported more gambling activities in the past 7 days.

- Students who strongly disagreed that they belonged at their school reported taking part in three times as many gambling activities in the last 7 days than those who strongly agreed that they belonged at their school.

Socioemotional Harms

- Of the students who had gambled in the past 12 months, 16% said they felt bad as a result.
- Increasing age was linked to increased likelihood of reporting harm, particularly among boys.
- Feeling bad as a result of their gambling was also more likely among students from more affluent households and those who felt disconnected to their school.



Issues to consider

This is the largest analysis of gambling behaviours among young people in the UK.

All of our data was collected at one time point (a cross-sectional survey) so we cannot be sure the link between school connectedness and gambling is causal.

The question on gambling in the past 12 months did not define 'gambling' and this may have affected students' responses, if there was variation in what students counted as gambling.

Approximately a fifth of students did not respond to the questions about gambling behaviours and socio-emotional harms.

What does this mean for my school?

- **Gambling is a common activity among adolescents in Wales and given that people who gamble earlier in life are more likely to become problem gamblers in adulthood, a greater focus is needed on raising awareness on gambling harms among students and their parents.**
- **Holistic interventions that aim to strengthen students' commitment to their school community may prevent gambling behaviours.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<https://academic.oup.com/eurpub/advance-article/doi/10.1093/eurpub/ckz176/5580543>

Melendez-Torres G.J. et al (2019) Prevalence of gambling behaviours and their associations with socioemotional harm among 11–16 year olds in Wales: findings from the School Health Research Network survey. *European Journal of Public Health* DOI: 10.1093/eurpub/ckz176