

research snapshot

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A lack of awareness and treatment for problem gambling in the criminal justice system

What this research is about

Problem gambling (PG) is defined as continuous gambling behavior that results in negative consequences, such as financial issues and distress. Multiple studies have reported much higher rates of problem gambling among people who are arrested compared to the general population. Problem gamblers are often caught in a cycle of gambling, debt, and crime. Unfortunately, most correctional facilities do not offer PG treatment programs. If programs are offered, most are not documented or evaluated. The aim of this study was to find out what PG treatment programs are being offered to people in correctional facilities, how they are structured, and if they have been evaluated. The researchers did a literature review and interviewed 16 experts. Their focus was on programs in Ontario, Canada. The researchers provided a series of case studies of the programs. They organized the information based on the stages of before, during, or after incarceration.

What the researcher did

The researchers did a literature review. Their search found 2 studies that described interventions for people in the correctional facilities. One study described the evaluation of a brief treatment program. The other described a program for people in prison that taught them about gambling. They also found several government reports and a presentation. The researchers also interviewed 16 experts between March 2012 and 2013. The experts had experience with PG in correctional facilities or PG treatment programs. During each interview, the researchers asked about the pros and cons of various treatment programs, barriers to setting up the program, and what would be the best approach to deal with PG in correctional facilities.

What you need to know

The researchers investigated treatment programs for problem gambling (PG) that have been offered to people in correctional facilities. They identified only 10 programs being offered to people in correctional facilities in North America. These programs are offered before, during or after a prison sentence. The structure of the programs varies, although most include some form of group cognitive behavioral therapy. They are usually offered by people from treatment services outside of the correctional facilities. Overall, there is a lack of awareness about PG in the criminal justice system among judges, lawyers, facility staff and parole officers. There is also a lack of program evaluation. Raising awareness about problem gambling and evaluation of existing programs are important and needed.

What the researcher found

Most research and evaluation on PG treatment have focused on community-based programs. There is little information on programs for people in prison. However, the researchers did find information on 10 treatment programs. The majority of programs were offered by people from treatment services outside of the correctional facilities. The types of programs included diversion to problem solving courts, mutual aid fellowships, psychoeducational treatment while in prison, and post release programs.

Diversion to problem solving courts allows offenders to go to mandatory treatment instead of prison. Currently, two places in the United States offer gambling treatment courts (GTCs). Key experts mentioned many barriers to setting up a GTC. These include difficulty identifying candidates for GTC because criminal activity is usually a secondary

consequence of gambling. If the crime is too severe, prison time may be mandatory. There is also little awareness of gambling problems within correctional facilities, and these facilities rarely communicate with treatment services. Lastly, an expert noted a lack of resources, such as staff and time, to set up such a program in the Canadian justice system.

Mutual aid fellowships, such as Gamblers Anonymous (GA), are run by people who face addiction problems and volunteer to help each other to abstain. These programs differ from formal treatment programs in that they offer peer support instead of professional service. However, no GA groups are currently being offered in Ontario prisons. An expert who has been involved with GA in the United States mentioned several barriers. These include a lack of awareness and offenders being in denial of their problem. He noted that gambling may be more stigmatized than other addictions in prison. Also, commitment from a GA member outside of the correctional facility is needed to sustain a group.

Psychoeducational treatment programs while in prison offer information and support to understand and cope with addiction. These programs often focus on substance use rather than gambling. Only a small number of prisons offer PG specific programs and few have been formally evaluated for their efficacy to stop gambling. The most rigorously evaluated program was offered at a prison in Alberta, Canada. The program offered six sessions to raise awareness of gambling problems, reduce false beliefs and change attitudes about gambling. It was reported to have successfully changed inmates' attitudes about gambling. A staff from another program in Kingston, Ontario, stated that a key factor to success is to develop good relationships with all staff in the facility and inmates.

Post release programs are offered to people on conditional release (e.g. parole) or probation. They include brief psychoeducational treatment and more intensive, full treatment. In Ontario, two full treatment programs are offered. One program offers weekly group sessions, cognitive behavioral therapy, and up to six months of aftercare. The other is a 21-day in-patient program that includes individual and group therapy. It focuses on understanding anger, stress reduction, meditation, communication styles, exercise and relapse prevention. Barriers include a lack of awareness about problem gambling in the justice system. Gambling problems are also not part of the

standard reporting on parole documents. Finally, there have been reports of parole and probation officers limiting the number of clients referred to treatment service for fear of overuse.

How you can use this research

This study identified many gaps in the correctional system's ability to provide PG treatment. Due to high rates of PG among people in prison, screening programs should be implemented. Also, there is a lack of program evaluation so it is still not known at which stage of imprisonment (before, during, after) that treatment is most effective. Other recommendations include educating people in the justice system about problem gambling, establishing good relationships with staff and inmates, and creating PG programs within correctional facilities.

About the Researcher

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