

research snapshot

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Illicit drug use and problem gambling: The evidence on these co-addictions

What is this research about?

Problem gambling and substance use disorders are serious public health concerns. The link between illicit drug use and problem gambling has not been well studied, and most of the information has been on individuals who received treatment. Research suggests stark differences between gamblers who seek treatment and those who don't. What's more, many problem gamblers and substance users have mental health problems that may keep them from seeking treatment. For these reasons, there is a need for more information about individuals who don't seek treatment.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers conducted a review of the literature to understand the relationship between problem gambling and substance use disorders. Their main focus was illicit drug use rather than misuse of legal substances. The review covers issues related to gambling as a hidden problem in the illicit drug use community, the prevalence of the two as linked conditions, problem gambling as an addiction similar to illicit drug use, risk factors and problems associated with comorbidity, and gender issues.

What you need to know:

Social marginalization is pervasive among individuals with co-occurring problem gambling and illicit drug use. These individuals have complex-needs that, when combined, lead to poverty, social exclusion, homelessness, violence, prostitution, and chronic illness. The risk factors associated with both problems include sexual abuse, depression, adolescent delinquency, and impulsivity.

What did the researchers find?

Individuals who experience both substance use and problem gambling are often marginalized. A high number of them also have complex-needs, including concurrent mental illness and personality disorders. The result is usually poverty, social exclusion, homelessness, violence, prostitution, and chronic illness. Risk factors that can lead to a co-occurrence of problem gambling and substance use include sexual abuse, depression, adolescent delinquency, and impulsivity.

It's been suggested that the classification of substance use disorders should include non-drug related addictions such as problem gambling. Others support bringing together

appetite-related activities such as drinking, gambling, sex, and eating. Less clear is the role of impulse control disorders, such as kleptomania and pyromania, but it has been suggested that these may be elements of one disorder.

Among psychiatric risk factors, impulsivity is the best predictor for co-occurring problem gambling and substance use.

In fact, it's highly possible that substance use disorders are a major indicator of impulsivity in many cases of problem gambling. Some have discussed the potential difficulty in identifying what someone may be addicted to, while others have suggested that impulsivity and other maladaptive behaviours may be at the root of the problem.

It's important to note that the majority of studies on problem gambling and substance use look at individuals who received treatment for these issues. Some studies suggest that there are important differences between those who seek treatment and those who don't, including gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Those who seek treatment may also differ in their experience with other disorders, and those with multiple problems might be more willing to enter treatment. How can you use this research?

How can you use this research

This literature review can be of use to anyone working with or developing initiatives for individuals with problem gambling and substance use disorders.

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Keywords

Problem gambling, substance use disorders, illicit drug use, co-morbidity, addiction, gender

This *Research Snapshot* is based on an article that has been critically appraised for quality and susceptibility to bias.

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