

# **The causes and effects of problematic gambling on individuals and their families in the Pollog region**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to provide a summary of the effects that problematic gambling has on individuals and their families in the Pollog region, as well as provide some data on problematic gambling in North Macedonia, in order to add to the admittedly quite limited body of work in this area, as well as to raise awareness of the issue and possibly open up discussion regarding the suppression of gambling institutions, as this is an issue whose ramifications are felt by all in our country, whether they are aware of it or not.

We began our research with the presupposition that gambling has mostly negative, if not entirely negative ramifications on the individual, and that problematic gambling by extension possesses even more negative effects on the individual. Over the course of our research, although we ran into some slightly unexpected results, we were ultimately not swayed from our original opinion on problematic gambling's ramifications on the individual. To reach our conclusion we primarily used interviews as our qualitative data gathering technique, and by using it we found that due to its addictive nature, problematic gambling often affects the financial, psychological and social well being of not just the gambler, but those connected to them as well, which may induce an overall increase in hostility and violence.

**Keywords:** Problematic gambling, poverty, addiction, domestic violence

## Introduction

Many people enjoy the thrill that comes from gambling. For most, gambling is just another occasional pastime, something done when out with friends you haven't seen in a while for instance, while for others it is a gateway to a set of extremely destructive behaviors. Problematic gambling or ludomania, is gambling behavior that continues to occur repeatedly, despite the harm it causes and its negative consequences. Due to problematic gambling being a very complex issue involving a plethora of interconnected factors (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Hodgins et al., 2011; Sharpe, 2002), we must break it down into smaller, more manageable parts, and tackle only its most important factors.

In this paper we have decided to take a closer look at one likely cause of problematic gambling, as well as the most common problems that arise from said problematic gambling, such as strained familial bonds, harm to the gambler themselves, as well as an increase to the rate of criminal and violent acts committed in the Pollog region. According to those who have been interviewed by the researchers, when it comes to the reason why an individual starts gambling we have seen a roughly even split between 3 primary factors: The excitement they feel during the act, the entertainment they obtain when doing it together with others and in some instances alone, as well as the possibility of winning and increasing their wealth substantially.

## Methods

The data for this research paper was obtained via the use of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 6 active and former gamblers between the ages of 18 - 60 of Albanian, Macedonian and Turkish descent, mostly concentrated around the cities of Tetovo and Gostivar for our primary research data, while for our secondary research data, several scholarly articles and prior research papers whose goals were in the same field as ours were used.

The initial representative sample of interviewees were obtained via the admittedly quite limited social connections of the researchers, however later interviewees were obtained via the use of Snowball Sampling, wherein those currently being interviewed or those already interviewed will assist in increasing the research sample size by contacting friends, family, etc.

The rough questions used to conduct the face-to-face interviews were as follows:

1. What was the main reason you started gambling?
2. To what degree has gambling affected your financial situation?
3. Can you tell us more about the effect gambling has had on you?
4. How has gambling impacted your relationship with your family members?
5. What do you think about the following statement: “Gambling leads to increased hostility and eventually violence”?
6. What do you think the solution to problematic gambling is?

# **The causes and effects of problematic gambling**

## **Poverty as a potential cause of problematic gambling in the Pollog region**

There are many factors that contribute to an individual's likelihood of developing an addiction to gambling that will eventually spiral into problematic gambling. The factor of note for this research paper is the individual's Socio-Economic Status (SES), due to it being one of the most frequently cited indicative factors of problematic gambling behavior during our analysis of our secondary research data, and due to its high comorbidity with other such addictive behaviors, such as alcoholism and drug dependency (Petruselka et al., 2020).

Due to the stress directly or indirectly caused by low SES, many of those living in poor communities have a tendency to see gambling as one of their few opportunities to escape their unfavorable circumstances, especially impoverished youths (SCHISSEL, 2001). This inevitably leads to an overall increase in gambling within a poor community and even more dangerously, potentially fosters a gambling culture among the youth, leading to an ever worsening vicious cycle of addiction (Adenugba et al., 2018).

The difficulties that low SES individuals experience in their attempts to elevate themselves out of their situation is quite the important factor, as it reduces the amount of 'Role Model' figures in the community who have achieved success via their own merits, and elevates the number of role models who somehow overcame the statistically abysmal odds and succeed via gambling, reinforcing the cycle of gambling even further (Barnes et al., 2013).

Of course, all of this is not to say that only those of lower SES suffer from a lack of ability or motivation to halt their unhealthy behaviors, in fact, some studies show that those of

middle to upper-middle SES also engage in problematic gambling at considerable rates (Volberg et al., 2017), though if we take into account all other factors, low SES individuals make up a larger portion of problematic gamblers (Welte et al., 2004).

During our own interviews with local active and former gamblers in the Pollog region, former gamblers unanimously reported that their financial situation has suffered as a result of their gambling habits during their active period, whereas those individuals still actively engaging in gambling behaviors, as of the time this paper was written, reported that their financial situation has not been impacted to a considerable extent and one interviewee had surprisingly even stated that they have won more than they have lost. We recommend that further cross-sectional studies be done on whether or not this response was due to the individual simply not being aware of the impact to their financial situation, or due to them being in denial of it.

## **The strain on familial bonds caused by problematic gambling in the Pollog region**

Continuing to gamble, despite accruing substantial losses, can lead to serious financial issues that inevitably lead to debt, and in the worst case scenario bankruptcy. The negative ramifications of these financial problems will most certainly be felt by the other members of the problematic gambler's family, causing potentially negative changes to the family dynamic (Subramaniam et al., 2017). During our interviews, our expectations were to find that the impact gamblers have on their families is entirely negative, but what we did not expect was that a large portion of those interviewed have chosen to simply hide their gambling habits from their families, causing us to be unable to verify our suspicions. Roughly half of those interviewed reported no effect as a result of them hiding their gambling habits, whereas those that stopped gambling reported that there was some negative impact on their family, though not to the extent we expected. The gamblers felt stressed, anxious or angry due to their gambling habits and while their families wouldn't know the exact reasons why they felt this way, these feelings would subconsciously affect the way they interact with each-other, culminating in increased tensions between family members.

An important thing to note here is that every problematic gambler tended to affect their familial bonds in different ways. Some in terms of the overall functioning of the family unit, some in terms of the intimacy of their relationships, some in terms of finances and in some cases even in terms of intrafamilial hostility, leading to violence (Dowling, 2014). According to a study carried out by *The Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, there exists no significant correlation between the CSO's (Concerned Significant Other) overall well-being and whether or not the CSOs reside in the same household as the problematic gambler.

If these findings are factually correct, then there are many implications regarding the influence problematic gamblers have on their social circles, most important of which is the fact that their influence extends substantially further than just the corners of their own home.

Although both types of CSO groups (household and non-household) are reported to have similar PWIs (personal well-being indices), there exists a differentiating factor, namely how the CSOs were affected. While household CSOs were mostly affected financially, non-household CSOs were mostly affected emotionally and as a result reported higher levels of stress (Tulloch et al., 2021).



## **Problematic gambling, its induction of other addictions and the harm it causes to the individual's well-being in the Pollog region**

What is less known about problematic gambling is the specifics of how it causes harm to the individual's physical and mental health. Problematic gambling often times has a tendency to lead to other similar addictive behaviors, and the damage done to the individual's psyche that results from partaking in such activities might in extreme cases even lead to suicidal tendencies (Karlsson & Håkansson, 2018).

Many studies have come to the conclusion that there exists a strong correlation between problematic gambling behavior and substance abuse (Black & Moyer, 1998). This most likely stems from the gambler's desire to avoid the consequences that arise from their problematic gambling behaviors, however the consumption of alcohol and other dependency-forming substances further impairs the gamblers ability to think through their decisions in a rational, thought out manner, which causes a further increase in the aforementioned problematic gambling behaviors.

The damage that ensues from problematic gambling comes in numerous forms (Browne et al., 2016). In most cases the harm caused to the problem gambler's health manifests by way of increased levels of anxiety and stress which comes as a direct result of physical changes to their biology, that have similar symptoms to high levels of exposure to stressful and arousing stimuli (Browne et al., 2016). All of this takes a toll on the psychological health of the individual, leading to increased feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness and vulnerability towards other addictions, which has the potential to create extreme distress.

In light of this, we expected that during our interviews we would find overwhelmingly negative opinions regarding overall resultant mood as a consequence of gambling, or at least a somewhat negative mood even amongst those still actively gambling. This however was not the case, as we found that those still actively gambling reported that they feel generally more entertained and happier, despite their ever-increasing financial burdens, whereas those that have stopped gambling gave a more expected response, reporting that gambling has had an overall negative impact on their financial, psychological and social well being, one such former gambler stating that their gambling addiction “is like a hobby or disease that cannot be cured, and being [sic] even worse than narcotics”.

On the topic of narcotics, with the gambler’s ever-increasing abuse of possibly illicit psychoactive substances, and their ever-declining mental health, the gambler will eventually find themselves at the point of physical and mental degradation where they begin to contemplate frequently on the act of committing suicide (Wardle et al., 2020).

## **Problematic gambling as one of the causes of criminality in the Pollog region**

As stated before, gambling typically starts as a simple leisure activity, however, as they keep on indulging in it with the hopes of winning and experiencing the excitement and rush of adrenaline, they unwittingly become a victim of an addiction that often initiates a cycle of committing illegal activities such as burglary, loan sharking, drug dealing, shoplifting, fraud, abusive behaviors and so forth (Adolphe et al., 2018). The root cause of gamblers turning to crime is shown to be an insufficient amount of legal income to support their gambling activity and pay off their debts (Blaszczynski & McConaghy, 1994). Gamblers in this situation are liable to lose their rational sense of thinking as their desperation rises to the extent where they would be willing to commit any act that has the potential to grant them access to further gambling funds, which can lead them to perform various criminal acts and destructive/abusive behaviors (Adolphe et al., 2018). Other than criminal acts, gamblers are overall more prone to aggressive behavior (Räsänen et al., 2015).

When those interviewed were prompted with the statement “Gambling leads to increased hostility and eventually violence”, most responded that while this statement doesn’t hold completely true for every gambler, they agree that in most cases gambling can lead to an increase in overall hostility and violent tendencies.

In order to keep up with their gambling expenditures despite the struggling state of their finances, not only are problem gamblers likely to commit aggravated robbery, but they are also likely to escalate the situation further and possibly even commit murder due to the pressure and stress caused by their almost insatiable urge to gamble. This is due to the urge’s exacerbatory

effect on several pre-existing mental conditions such as anxiety, depression, borderline personality disorder etc. This, along with worsening anger management ability, leads to increasingly violent behavior, such as domestic, physical and emotional abuse.

## Conclusion

As a result of the socio-economic situation in the Pollog region, in addition to other factors we have discussed in the sections above, we have concluded that poverty is a very likely factor that may lead to problematic gambling. We are of the firm belief that there is nothing beneficial about problematic gambling, and that the effect problematic gamblers have on their families, friends and communities, without a shadow of doubt, is entirely and incontestably negative. Besides being harmful towards the communities found in the Pollog region, problematic gambling also has an adverse effect on the physical and psychological well-being of the gambler themselves. This manifests itself in the form of elevated levels of stress, anxiety and hostility, which together have the potential to develop into criminal and violent behavior.

When the interviewees were prompted to provide their own solution to the issue of problematic gambling, the main solution provided by the vast majority of those interviewed is preventative in nature: To never start gambling in the first place, otherwise the only way to escape this addiction and to live a relatively normal life is to enter rehabilitation, and even then the addicted individual is in a state of sustained remission, meaning that at any point due to any significant stressor, they could relapse back into their former addicted selves. Another alternative solution proposed by some of the interviewees was to discourage the further construction of casinos in densely populated districts in order to reduce the likelihood of being exposed to gambling at all.

As a parting note, we recommend to the wider scientific community that further studies be done on the specifics that were only partially covered in the sections above.

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