The WAGER, Vol. 21(11) – Links to the past: Childhood maltreatment and Gambling Disorder

October 12, 2016

Many of those suffering from gambling disorder also suffer from other issues such as anxiety, depression, and impulsivity. Similarly, people who experience maltreatment during childhood are at risk for a wide range of mental health disorders. This week, as part of our Special Series on Addiction and Domestic Violence, The WAGER reviews work by Samuel K. Shultz and his colleagues that studied past childhood maltreatment among those suffering from gambling disorder.

What is the research question?

Are people suffering from gambling disorder (GD) more likely to have suffered from childhood maltreatment?

What did the researchers do?

Shultz and his colleagues recruited participants with gambling disorder[1] ("GD group", n = 94) and matched controls[2] ("control group", n = 91) who did not suffer from gambling disorder from their local community in northern Iowa. They interviewed participants in person and asked them about any history of childhood maltreatment in the following five categories: neglect, emotional abuse, verbal abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse. They used chi-square tests to compare the childhood maltreatment rates of those suffering and not suffering from gambling disorder.

What did they find?

For each of the five categories of childhood maltreatment, the GD group reported statistically significantly higher rates of maltreatment than the control group.

	Emotional Abuse		Neglect		Physical Abuse		Verbal Abuse		Sexual Abuse	
	GD	Control	GD	Control	GD	Control	GD	Control	GD	Control
Experienced	38 40.4%	11 12.1%	14 14.9%	6 6.6%	24 25.5%	12 13.2%	45 47.9%	17 18.7%	22 23.4%	6 6.6%

Did not experience	56 59.6%	80 87.9%	80 85.1%	85 93.4%	70 74.5%	79 86.8%	49 52.1%	74 81.3%	72 76.6%	85 93.4%
Total	94	91	94	91	94	91	94	91	94	91

Figure. Numbers and percentages of participants in the GD and control groups reporting and not reporting past childhood maltreatment. Adapted from Shultz et al. (2016).

Why do these findings matter?
Through both academic research and lay media, people have heard about the importance of childhood experiences. On one hand, positive experiences, such as strong parental involvement and early education, can help set the tone for a long and productive life. On the other hand, negative experiences, such as emotional and physical abuse, can become obstacles to health and success that lead to further issues. It should be noted that this study showed an association between childhood maltreatment and gambling disorder, and did not imply any sort of causation. It could have been that those suffering from maltreatment were also more likely to have been unsupervised or more likely to have been exposed to gambling or substances at an early age. Future studies should explore possible mechanisms and life experiences that link childhood maltreatment to gambling disorder.

Every study has limitations. What about this one?
In the sample Shultz and his colleagues obtained, minority participation was low, reducing the generalizability of the results. Also, childhood maltreatment was self-reported from past experience. Although the methods the researchers used to obtain responses are considered reliable and valid, misreporting and misclassification still was possible.

For more information:
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a website with information on child abuse. Your First Step to Change is a website for those who believe that gambling is adversely affecting their lives and wish to do something about it.

— Matthew Tom

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

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[1] Participants were deemed to suffer from gambling disorder if they had a South Oaks Gambling (SOGS) score of at least 5, a NORC DSM Screen (NODS) score of greater than 5, and met the lifetime DSM-IV criteria for gambling disorder.

[2] Controls were matched based on age, gender, and educational level.