The WAGER, Vol. 29(11) – Gambling helpline calls and the types of gambling that motivate these calls in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden

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Despite the growing popularity of gambling, most consumers, operators, and regulators recognize that this activity carries the potential for harm. Research indicates that some types of gambling appear to be more harmful than other types. To reduce harms from gambling, it is important to identify the gambling forms that are most often associated with harm. From there, researchers can work to identify the specific mechanisms that could make these forms more harmful than others and introduce factors to mitigate this risk. This week, The WAGER reviews a study by Virve Marionneau and colleagues that identified the forms of gambling most often referenced by callers of gambling support helplines in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden during the period 2019–2022.

What were the research questions?

(1) Which forms of gambling are most often referenced in calls to gambling support helplines in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden during 2019–2022? (2) Are these rates changing over time?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers collected data from four years of calls and chats to three different gambling support helplines from Denmark, Finland, and Sweden. All three helplines collect data on the types of gambling that clients have engaged in or identify as having led to harm. The researchers coded products into one of nine forms of gambling: (1) land-based sports betting, (2) online sports betting, (3) horse games (online and land-based), (4) land-based casino, (5) online casino, (6) poker, (7) land-based EGMs outside casinos, (8) lotteries, and (9) other. Then they performed linear regression to examine whether these longitudinal trends changed over time during the study period.

What did they find?

Online gambling, and online casinos in particular, constituted the main concerns among callers to all three helplines. Furthermore, the share of calls that referenced online casinos grew in all three nations, while calls focusing on land-based forms decreased. For example, in Denmark, the percentage of calls referencing online casinos rose from 35.7% in 2019 to 46.8% in 2022. At the same time, the percentage of calls focused on land-based sports betting decreased from 23.0% in 2019 to a mere 4.8% in 2022. Interestingly, however, the rate of change in calls relating to land-based sports betting in Finland and Sweden failed to reach statistical significance (see table).

Differences in gambling forms referenced to gambling helplines by year and nation of origin

Game	Country	2019	2020	2021	2022
Online Casino	Denmark* Finland* Sweden*	35.7 (204) 55.3 (344) 62.8 (6666)	47.4 (189) 61.4 (303) 66.0 (5261)	44.8 (177) 70.5 (251) 68.6 (5491	46.8 (214) 69.8 (523) 70.2 (2870)
Online sports betting	Denmark Finland* Sweden	48.6 (284) 4.6 (28) 22.6 (2362)	38.5 (163) 8.4 (41) 19.3 (1540)	47.7 (189) 12.1 (40) 21.5 (1730)	47.8 (228) 16.9 (126) 20.9 (855)
Land-based sports betting	Denmark* Finland Sweden	23.0 (132) 1.1 (7) 9.4 (985)	17.4 (73) 2.2 (10) 8.5 (673)	13.3 (52) 1.3 (5) 8.8 (710)	4.8 (20) 2.3 (17) 8.8 (359)
Land based EGMS outside a casino	Denmark Finland* Sweden	14.1 (80) 44.4 (281) 15.9 (1666)	11.6 (55) 24.2 (139) 15.2 (1201)	6.4 (25) 11.6 (37) 13.8 (1106)	13 (60) 10.3 (77) 16 (657)
Poker	Denmark Finland[1] Sweden	12.7 (74) 0.4 (3) 16.9 (1720)	12.7 (53) 0.5 (2) 16.4 (1302)	10.0 (39) 0.2 (1) 14.4 (1153)	12.3 (57) 6.7 (50) 15.3 (629)
Land-based casinos	Denmark* Finland Sweden	5.8 (31) 0.4 (3) 7.6 (780)	3.9 (19) 0.5 (3) 7.2 (572)	3.5 (14) 0.6 (2) 7.5 (601)	3.8 (18) 1.9 (14) 7.9 (321)
Other	Denmark[1] Finland[1] Sweden*	1.5 (8) 0.5 (3) 12.0 (1161)	5.7 (21) 0.6 (3) 13.1 (1041)	5.0 (19) 1.5 (5) 13.9 (1121)	2.7 (12) 0.6 (4) 14.3 (585)

Table: The percentage and total number of helpline calls that referenced selected forms of gambling, by nation of origin and year. The * symbol indicates that the nation experienced a statistically significant change in the percentage of calls referencing that specific form of gambling during the window of observation. The [1] symbol indicates that the relationship was not tested due to violations in the assumptions for linear regression.

Why do these findings matter?

These findings provide insights into which forms of gambling are the most strongly related to harms as reported in helpline calls and can inform both public policy and research priorities. For example, because the authors found that online gambling was most strongly associated with harms, regulators may consider requiring that responsible gambling tools, such as voluntary self-limiting

programs, be available on these platforms. Researchers may seek to prioritize studies on online gambling over other forms due to the increased risk of harm and could also consider studying self-reported harm across different types of gambling.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?
This study tells us which gambling activities were mentioned in helpline calls, and presumably callers mentioned the games that caused them the most harm; however, the researchers did not measure the severity of callers' problems. Although online gambling was the most commonly cited form of gambling by callers, it is unclear whether it is associated with a higher magnitude of harm compared to alternative forms of gambling. Furthermore, people who experience problem gambling rarely seek help due to stigma and other factors, so it is unclear how generalizable the findings are to gamblers who do not call the helpline.

For more information:
Individuals who are struggling with problem gambling may find support through Gam-Anon. Others who wish to know more about problem gambling and its impact may benefit from visiting the National Council on Problem Gambling's website. Additional resources can be found at the BASIS Addiction Resources page.

— John Slabczynski
