

The WAGER, Vol. 30(5) - Gambling participation levels and future gambling-related harm

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Editor's note: Today's review is part of our month-long [Special Series on Education to Promote Lower-risk Drinking, Gambling, and Substance Use](#). Throughout May, The BASIS investigates the public's awareness of, perceptions toward, and adherence to low-risk guidelines for alcohol and substance use and gambling.

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[Lower-risk gambling guidelines](#) are recommended limits on gambling behaviors to help minimize gambling-related harm. The guidelines include participating in no more than two types of gambling, gambling no more than four times a month, and gambling less than 1% of one's household income. While gambling participation and [problem gambling](#) are linked, the extent to which low-risk gambling participation actually [predicts](#) future gambling-related harm is less clear, as both concepts are typically [measured at the same time](#). This week, as part of our Special Series on Education to Promote Lower-risk Drinking, Gambling, and Substance Use, The WAGER reviews a [study by Nolan Gooding and colleagues](#) that examined this relationship [longitudinally](#) among Canadian adults.

What was the research question?

What levels of gambling participation are associated with an increased risk of future gambling-related harm?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data from the Alberta Gambling Research Institute's National Project [online panel](#) survey. Participants were Canadian adults who had gambled at least once monthly during the past year. They completed a baseline and follow-up survey that assessed gambling participation (number of gambling types, number of gambling days per month, and percent of household income

spent gambling) and gambling-related harm (e.g., financial and emotional harm). The researchers calculated the [relative risk](#) of gambling-related harm, collected at follow-up, based on levels of gambling participation collected at baseline.¹

What did they find?

Participating in more types of gambling at baseline was associated with an increased relative risk of experiencing financial and emotional harm at follow-up (see Figure). For example, people who participated in at least five types of gambling were 8.54 times more likely to experience emotional harm compared to those who participated in one type of gambling. Similarly, as the number of days per month spent gambling increased, the relative risk of experiencing harm also increased. Finally, a higher percent of household income spent on gambling was associated with a greater relative risk of experiencing gambling-related harm.

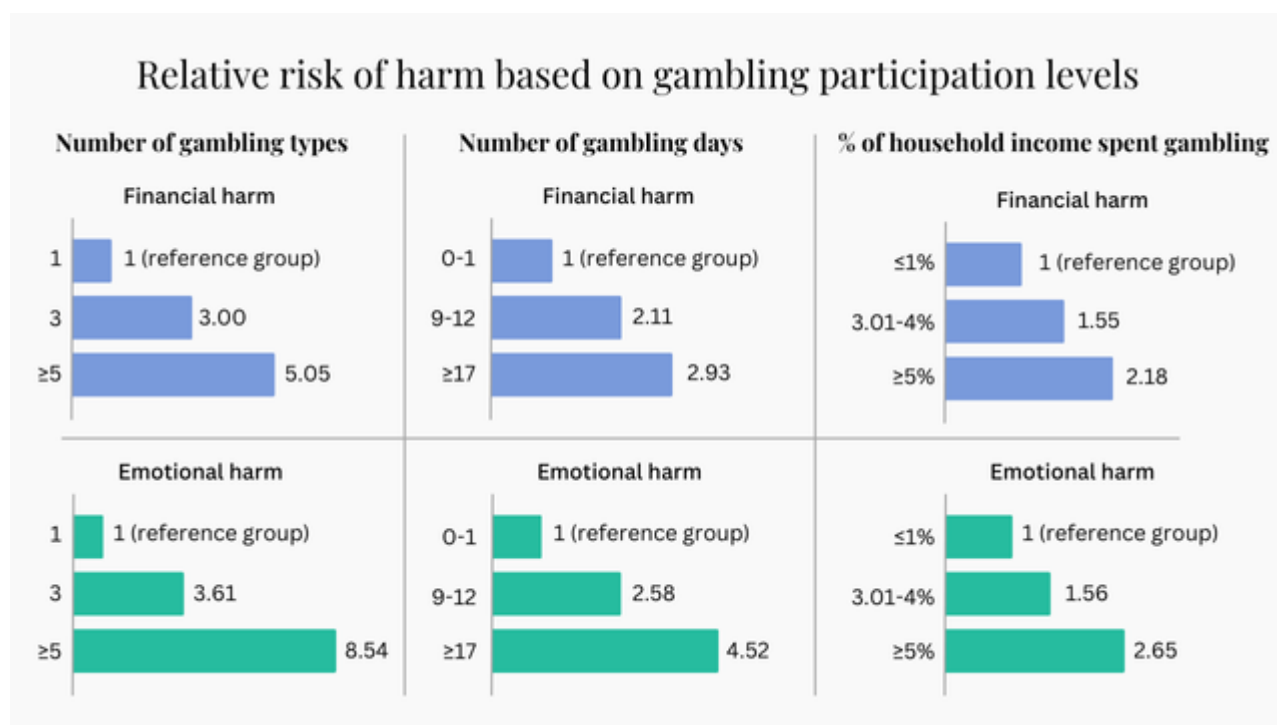


Figure. Relative risk of financial and emotional harm based on gambling participation levels. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Participating in more types of gambling, gambling more frequently, and spending more on gambling are associated with a greater risk of experiencing harm. These findings are mostly consistent with the [quantitative limits](#) established through the lower-risk gambling guidelines, which suggests that following the guidelines can help reduce the risk of gambling-related harm. To further support harm reduction, gambling interventions should focus on responsible gambling

strategies, such as using lower-risk gambling guidelines to set time and [money limits](#).

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?

This study used [self-report](#) measures, which are subject to [social desirability](#) and [recall bias](#). The sample only included Canadian adults, so the results might not [generalize](#) to other geographic areas with different gambling environments. Additionally, there was [attrition](#): around half of the baseline respondents completed the follow-up survey. This contributed to [non-random missing data](#) and likely affected the results.

For more information:

Individuals who are concerned about their gambling behaviors or simply want to know more about problem gambling may benefit from visiting the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) or [Gamblers Anonymous](#). Additional resources can be found at the BASIS [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Annette Siu

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1. The researchers also conducted [receiver operating characteristic](#) analyses to determine optimal low-risk limits for each measure of gambling participation. However, we are not covering those analyses in this review.
