

SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Lifetime experiences of surviving trauma are related to increased risks of problem gambling behaviors. Problem gambling behaviors are highly comorbid with individual reports of trauma¹ and a greater clinical prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder.²



Traumatic experiences in adulthood (e.g., victimization of domestic or interpersonal partner violence) and childhood (i.e., various types of abuse) are strong predictors of problem gambling behaviors later on.^{1, 2}



In a sample of community individuals who recreationally gamble and veterans who were seeking treatment for gambling, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms were shown to predict gambling in response to: negative affect, social pressure, and need for excitement, even after controlling for substance use and impulsivity.³



A study in the U.K. found that individuals who engage in problem gambling are more likely to have survived childhood trauma and life stressors in adulthood.⁴



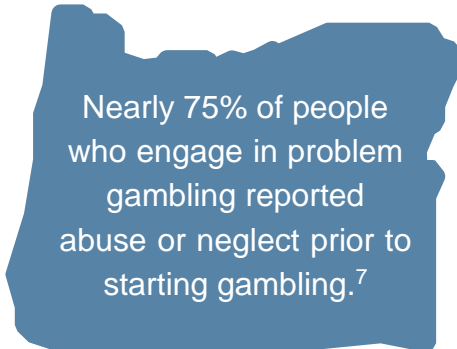
In a sample of U.S. Veterans, higher levels of trauma burden have been associated with both recreational and at risk/problem gambling.⁵

Up to 34% of people with gambling problems also have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).⁶

1. Goghari, V. M., Shakeel, M. K., Swan, J. L., Kim, H. S., Sharif-Razi, M., & Hodgins, D. C. (2020). A family study of trauma and coping strategies in gambling disorder. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 36, 767-782.
2. Moore, L. H. & Grubbs, J. B. (2021). Gambling disorder and comorbid PTSD: A systematic review of empirical research. *Addictive Behaviors*, 114, 106713.
3. Grubbs, J. B. & Chapman, H. (2019). Predicting gambling situations: The roles of impulsivity, substance use, and post-traumatic stress. *Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment*, 13, 1-13.
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SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA AND PROBLEM GAMBLING IN OREGON

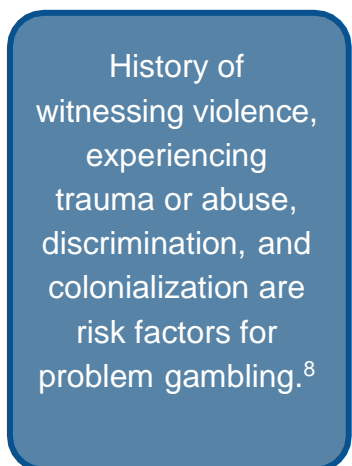
- From a sample of 75 adult Oregonians diagnosed with gambling disorder, of those who endorsed trauma stemming from abuse or neglect, 93% reported the existence of mental illness, substance misuse, or pathological gambling in their biological family.⁷
- Emotional abuse was most frequently indicated (57.3%) followed by physical abuse (57.3%), sexual abuse (33.3%), and neglect (22.7%).⁷
- Females were significantly more likely (84.2%) to report abuse or neglect than males (62.2%). Of those reporting abuse and neglect, 67.3% indicated the onset of mental health and substance misuse problems prior to the onset of pathological gambling.⁷



Nearly 75% of people who engage in problem gambling reported abuse or neglect prior to starting gambling.⁷

RISK FACTORS OF TRAUMA AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

- Having a history of trauma, living in an abusive home environment, having a violent partner, lower self-esteem, poor coping skills, witnessing someone badly experiencing emotional, physical, and/or sexual trauma in childhood, and/or experiencing social trauma such as discrimination and colonization are considered risk factors for gambling disorder.⁸



History of witnessing violence, experiencing trauma or abuse, discrimination, and colonialization are risk factors for problem gambling.⁸

- Indigenous and historically marginalized populations are more vulnerable to traumatic experiences, putting them at greater risk for problematic gambling.⁸
- Among indigenous peoples, sexual abuse and residential schooling have been associated with pathological gambling.⁹
- Among individuals who exhibit problem gambling behaviors, reported PTSD histories are more common in women, people with a lifetime substance use disorder, lifetime depression, and lifetime anxiety disorder.¹⁰

7. Moore, T., Jados, T. (2002). The etiology of pathological gambling: a study to enhance understanding of causal pathways as a step towards improving prevention and treatment. Wilsonville, OR: Oregon Gambling Addiction Treatment Foundation.

8. Sharman, S., Butler, K., & Roberts, A. (2019). Psychosocial risk factors in disordered gambling: A descriptive systematic overview of vulnerable populations. Addictive Behaviors, 99, 106071. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2019.106071>

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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND PROBLEM GAMBLING

Childhood trauma, broadly, is a risk factor for developing problem gambling behaviors.¹ A U.K. study found that individuals who engage in problem gambling are more likely to have survived childhood trauma (e.g., witnessing violence in the home, experiencing physical abuse and life-threatening injury in childhood).⁴

- A study conducted in South Africa found that childhood trauma predicts a diagnosis of gambling disorder and physical neglect was found to be the only trauma subtype to increase the odds of a gambling disorder in adulthood.¹¹
- In an Italian study, gambling severity is associated with childhood trauma and pathological dissociation, such that the more severe the childhood trauma, the greater pathological dissociation, the greater the gambling severity.¹²
- Severity of childhood trauma is found to be higher in individuals who have gambling disorder compared to individuals without gambling problems.^{2, 14}
- Even after controlling for alcohol and drug use, family environment, psychological distress, and symptoms of antisocial personality disorder, childhood maltreatment predicts severity of gambling problems and frequency of gambling.¹⁴
- The severity of trauma experienced in childhood is related to greater severity of problem gambling,² which is thought to be mediated by emotional vulnerability.¹⁵
 - Individuals who engage in problem gambling and are characterized by emotional vulnerability tend to report higher levels of childhood trauma, gambling to cope with negative emotions, gambling-related suicidal ideation, and a family history of problem gambling compared to other subtypes of problem gambling.¹⁵
 - Individuals engaging in problem gambling who are characterized by antisocial-impulsive behavior are also more likely to have experienced childhood trauma than other subtypes.¹⁵

4 out of 5 pathological gamblers report surviving one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACE).¹³

1. Goghari, V. M., Shakeel, M. K., Swan, J. L., Kim, H. S., Sharif-Razi, M., & Hodgins, D. C. (2020). A family study of trauma and coping strategies in gambling disorder. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 36, 767-782.

2. Moore, L. H. & Grubbs, J. B. (2021). Gambling disorder and comorbid PTSD: A systematic review of empirical research. *Addictive Behaviors*, 114, 106713.

4. Roberts, A., Sharman, S., Coid, J., Murphy, R., Bowden-Jones, H., Cowlishaw, S., & Landon, J. (2017). Gambling and negative life events in a nationally representative sample of UK men. *Addictive Behaviors*, 75, 95-102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2017.07.002>

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INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION OF PROBLEM GAMBLING

- Trauma-focused therapy is recommended to be incorporated into treatment plans for individuals who engage in problem gambling and are characterized by emotional vulnerability or antisocial-impulsivity, due to a greater prevalence of childhood trauma among these populations.¹⁵
- Gambling to cope with negative or unwanted emotions is common among individuals with co-morbid problem gambling and trauma histories.^{10,15} Finding more adaptive ways of coping with negative affect, particularly experiences of shame – which are common among trauma survivors^{–16} is highly recommended as coping with shameful experiences significantly contributes to gambling severity.¹⁷

- Clinicians or other mental health workers should consider screening individuals who report trauma histories for problematic gambling behaviors.
- Given the high prevalence of childhood trauma and its relationship to gambling severity, prevention measures are indicated. Broadly, more needs to be done to support a safe and healthy family, social, and school environment. Further, prevention education could include developing and implementing a school-aged curriculum to teach children healthy coping strategies, before they develop maladaptive coping strategies (such as gambling) in response to their traumas.

Key Findings

- Surviving trauma in both childhood and adulthood are strong predictors of problem gambling.^{1,2}
- Emotional abuse was most frequently indicated (57.3%) followed by physical abuse (57.3%), sexual abuse (33.3%), and neglect (22.7%) among individuals engaging in problem gambling.⁷
- Having a history of witnessing violence, experiencing trauma, abuse, discrimination, and colonialization are risk factors for problem gambling. Historically marginalized groups are at a greater risk of experiencing these risk factors, putting them at a higher risk of problem gambling behaviors.⁸

1. Goghari, V. M., Shakeel, M. K., Swan, J. L., Kim, H. S., Sharif-Razi, M., & Hodgins, D. C. (2020). A family study of trauma and coping strategies in gambling disorder. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 36, 767-782.

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