



Supporting problem gamblers in criminal justice setting

Terveyden ja
hyvinvoinnin laitos

17.4.2024

Problem Gambling Among Criminal Sanctions Clients: Preventing Recidivism and Developing Support

- Funding 2/2023 – 3/2024: Research grant from Prison and Probation Service of Finland ([project website](#))
- Research group members:
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A Quantitative survey data from prisoners

Data: Survey data from the “The Health and Wellbeing of Finnish Prisoners 2023” study among Finnish prisoners (n=527)

Aim: To examine the prevalence of gambling problems (BBGS) among Finnish incarcerated individuals. The prevalence will be analyzed with respect to factors such as gender, age groups, and the frequency of incarceration. Subsequent analyses will further explore risk factors, protective factors, and their associations with comorbid disorders.

B Qualitative interviews with support program completers

Data: Interview data collected from clients (n=8) who have completed the 8-week Internet-based cognitive behavioral therapy program and employees assisting with the program (n=3)

Aim: To assess the experiences of participants in the treatment program among clients serving community sanctions. Additionally, to explore the connections between criminality and gambling, as well as the challenges related to gambling after sentencing. Furthermore, to inquire about the experiences of project employees regarding the provision of support and the effectiveness of the program.



Problem gambling

- Gambling severity is a continuum, where one can move from non-gambling or from at-risk gambling to problem gambling or vice versa (Korn & Shaffer, 1999; Shaffer & Korn, 2002; Cowlshaw et al. 2019).
- Gambling can cause harms in several domains, these harms include criminal behavior.
- Finland: 2.2% of gamblers account for around half of gambling profits (2023)



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11% of the population, gambled at a risk level

3% of the population had a gambling problem (2019)

What we know

- Gambling and criminal behavior can coexist without direct relationship: there is a link between gambling intensity, problem gambling and non-problem gambling-related crime (Adolphe et al. 2019; Mishra et al. 2011, Laursen et al., 2016, Binde et al. 2021).
- Several studies highlight a **high prevalence of gambling-related problems among prison inmates and criminal justice clients** (May-Chahal et al. 2017; Turner et al. 2017; Banks et al. 2020).
- Criminal behavior, including gambling-related crime, is **more common among individuals with problem gambling** (Rudd & Thomas 2015; Adolphe et al. 2019).
- Gambling-related offending is **more prevalent in prison populations** compared to other treatment-seeking groups (Adolphe et al. 2019).



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What we know



Problem gambling is often accompanied by **substance use problems and mental health issues** (Rudd & Thomas 2015; Manning et al. 2017).



Individuals with problem gambling may resort to crime as a means to **support their gambling habits or alleviate financial stress** (May-Chahal et al. 2015).



The heavy presence of **other addictions and mental health problems among** prisoners with problem gambling exacerbates criminal behavior (Widinghoff et al., 2017).



Problem gambling can be a risk factor for offending, particularly when coupled with **antisocial personality disorder and excessive debts** (Blaszczynski 1996; Pastwa-Wojciechowska, 2011; Blum et al., 2017).

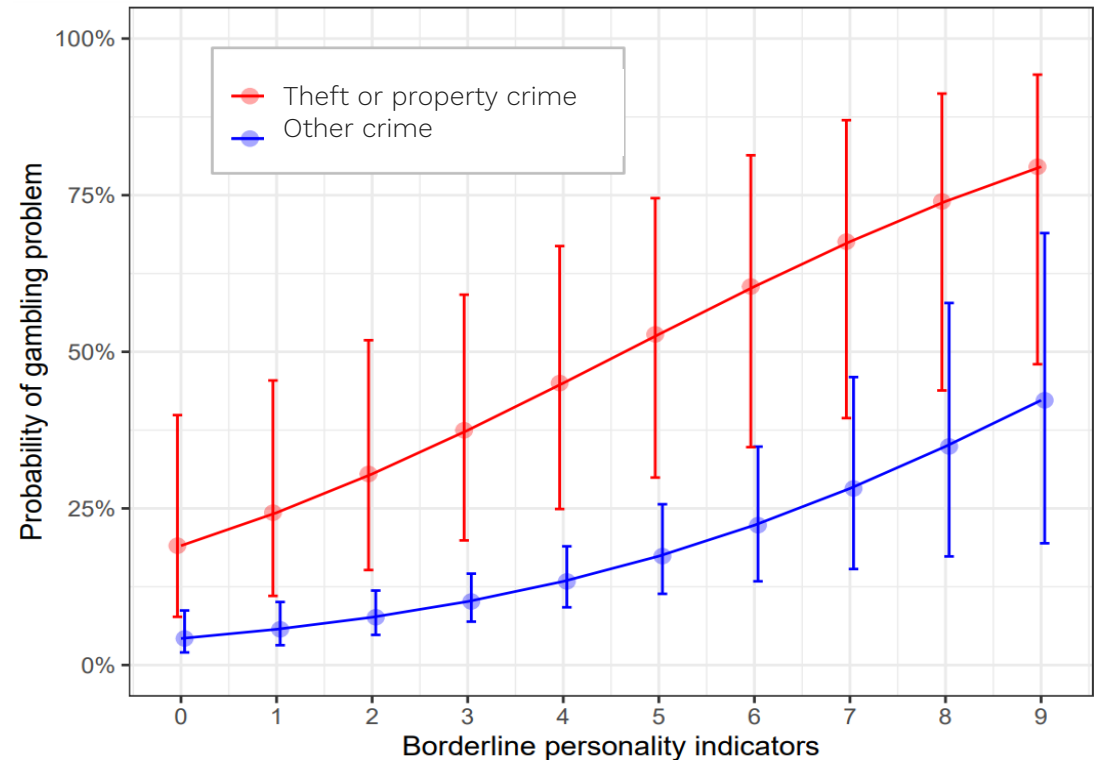


What we know

- **Income-generating crime** is common among problem gamblers, often escalating from heavy debts (Campbell & Marshall 2007; Banks et al. 2020).
- Problem gambling is **associated with various criminal behaviors**, including violent and sexual offenses (Widinghoff et al. 2019).
- Despite bans, **gambling in prisons persists**, often involving non-monetary stakes (Smith et al. 2022).

Predictors for PG and substance use disorders among prisoners

- Of Finnish prisoners: 13% probable problem gamblers: linked to crime type and borderline personality disorder (Lind et al. 2023)



What we know

- Pilot programs and interventions, such as OffGam in the UK and specialty courts in North America, **show promise** (Nixon et al. 2006; Turner et al. 2018; May-Chahal et al. 2015).
- Comprehensive assessment and treatment programs are needed in criminal justice settings **to reduce reoffending and the harmful impacts of problem gambling** (Turner et al. 2017).
- Challenges include **a lack of awareness, denial, and stigma** among offenders, as well as inadequate training among prison staff (Smith et al. 2023; Castrén et al. 2020).





Working in online support program for problem gamblers in criminal justice setting

Project worker: Kirsi-Marja Salohalla

RETS -Life without crime

RISERaPeli-project (2021-2024)

- Recognition, prevention and rehabilitation of gambling problems among criminal justice clientele
- Funded by the Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA)
- Provides service nationwide in Finland
- In co-operation with:



Focus groups

- Community service supervisors in probation offices.
- Criminal sanctions officials of Vilppula Prison that make preparations for probationary liberty.
- Clients that serve community sanctions in freedom.
- General public and politicians.

The aim of the project

Main object: The service entity for problem gamblers to become part of the community sanctions nationally.

ADVOCACY

- The problem gambling and risk factors of criminal sanctions clientele are recognised and brought to awareness.
- The knowledge about distinctive features of problem gambling criminal sanctions clients increases.

DEVELOPMENT

- The model for addressing and recognising problem gambling for the criminal sanction officials.
- The development of the rehabilitation program and referral system to its most effective form.
- The development of the national peer support system especially designed for criminal sanctions clientele.

REHABILITATION

- The online rehabilitation program Pelipysäkki to become part of the service entity.
- The rehabilitation of the problem gamblers that are serving sanctions in freedom(30-50 a year).
- The prevention of the social exclusion and recidivism after prison.

Fields of action

- The educational matter: The project educates the criminal sanctions officials to recognise and initiate discussion on problem gambling within criminal justice clientele.
- Development work: The project aims to develop the online support programme Pelipysäkki further to best serve the target group.
- Support for clients and professionals: The project workers support both the client and the professionals during the implementation of the Pelipysäkki-rehabilitation program.
- Peer Support: The project aims to establish new ways to enable peer support for criminal sanctions clientele.

Gambling Stop-rehabilitation program

- Gambling Stop-programme (Pelipysäkki) is an internet based rehabilitation program for problem gamblers in criminal justice setting
- Duration 10 weeks/28h
- Includes 8 parts + screening & follow-up
- Weekly self-studies online(2h) + phonecall with professional(1h), which adds up to 3hours/week
- Professional supervises the self-studies via Internet when Gambling Stop is part of the clients community service.

For who?

- Gambling at a problematic level
- Desire to learn to control ones gambling or stop gambling altogether
- Access to Internet and computer/smart phone
- Suffiecient skills in reading, writing, Finnish language and ability to operate in digital environment.
- Email address, phonenumber and smartphone(that works!)

Gambling Stop



[Home](#) [My Therapist](#) [Messages](#) [Overview](#) [Forum](#) [My information](#) [About the programme](#) [Log out](#)

Welcome!

This is an online self-help treatment programme for people who experience problems with their gambling. Just by being here you have taken an important step towards changing your gambling habits. All the best in completing it!

[GAMCARE TEST SITE]



Module 1

About gambling problems and why you gamble

0%

Get started



Module 2

About your gambling costs and triggers

0%

Get started



Module 3

How is gambling affecting your social life?

0%

Get started



Module 4

Acceptance and important decisions to make about change

0%

Get started



Module 5

About chance and poor judgement

0%

Get started



Module 6

About high risk situations

0%

Get started

SEND FEEDBACK

Developing a program as a response to technical and substantive challenges, and for creating ways of sustaining change

- The development work on the Gambling Stop program aims to meet the needs of this particular client group during the program and after
 - The development of after care services is included such as peer support and support phonecalls
- The development work has been carried out by a team of professionals and experts by experience. Also the client feedback has been utilized.
- Effort has been made to make the content less abstract and more appealing to the client group.

What we did

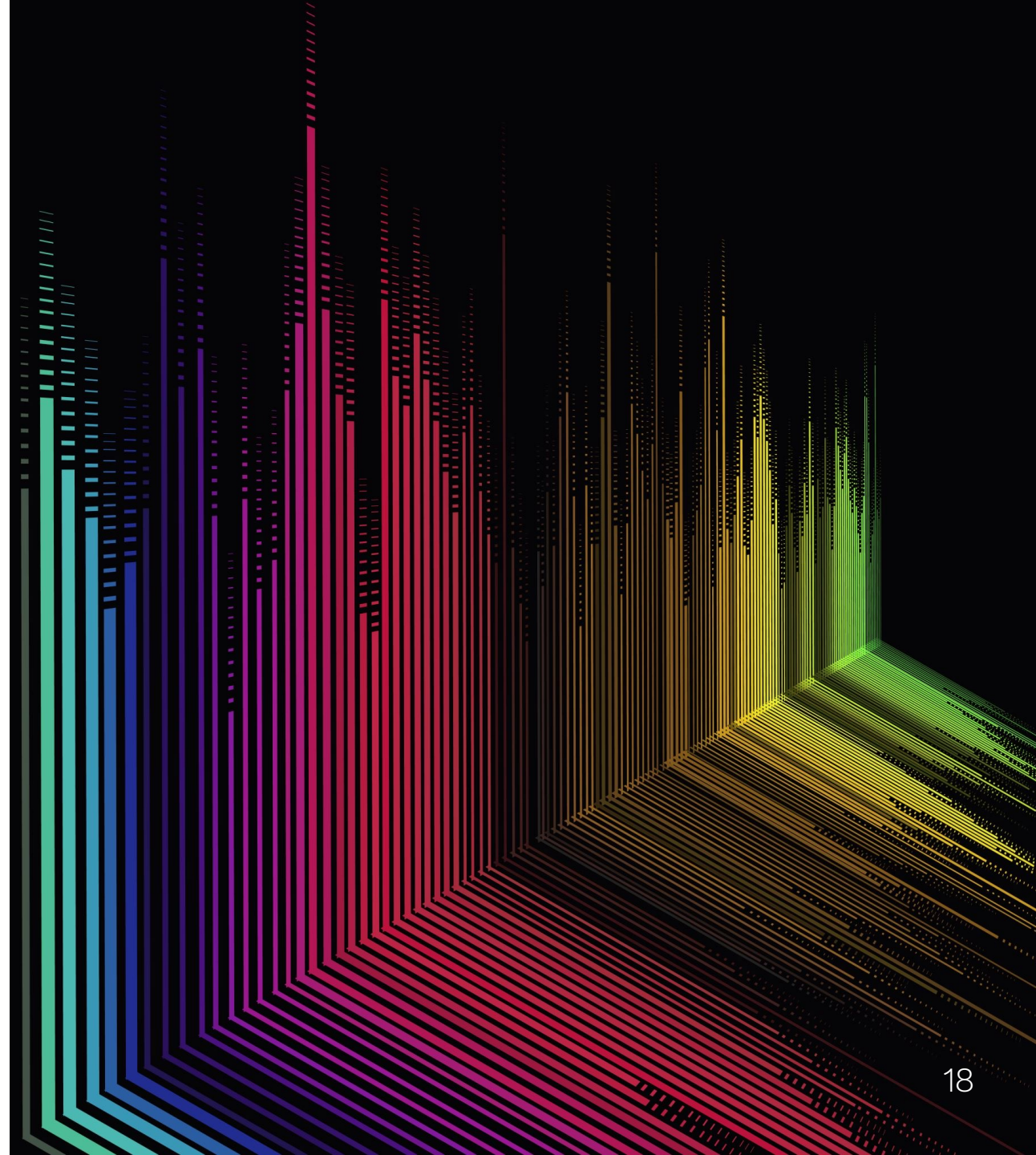
Study aims to describe narratives of problem gambling, crime, and treatment emerging from client interviews.

- To explore presence of actants in stories and their relationships.
- To examine program as an actant and its relation to other actants.
- To discover experiences from the program participants and professionals: what works, what needs are met, what not?

Study focused on exposing perceptions of program users rather than assessing efficacy!



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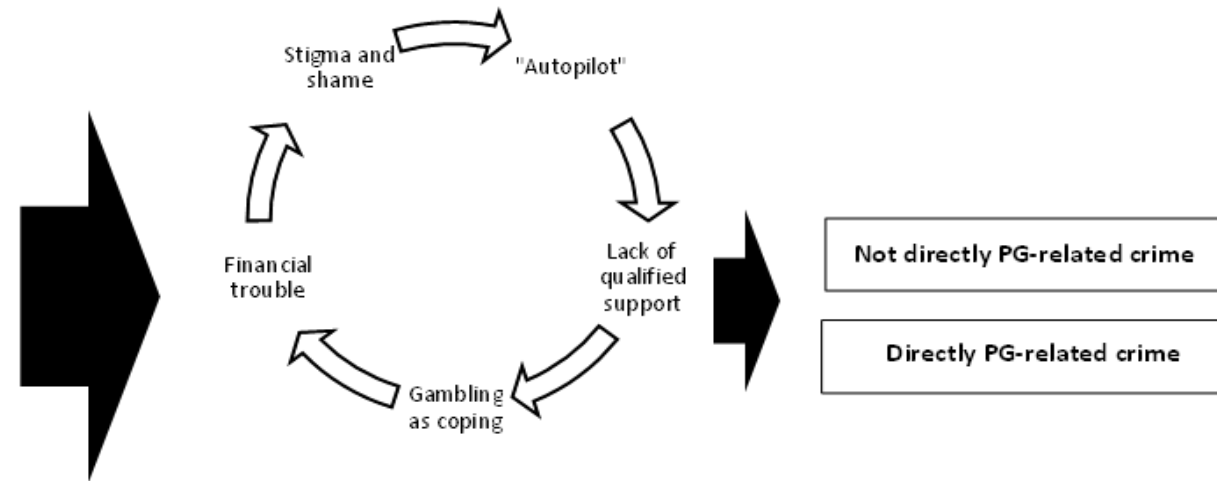


What we did

- Data collected through **semi-structured individual interviews**.
- Two sets of interviews conducted:
 - **Client participants** (n=8) who completed the Gambling Stop program.
 - **Professional participants** (n=3) who assisted clients through the program.
- Interviews conducted from March to October 2023.

Results: paths to the program

Path 1: Antisocial-impulsivist + emotionally vulnerable + behaviorally conditioned, early (n=2)
Early gambling starting age, adverse life events, comorbid mental health problems, substance use, criminal behavior.
Path 2: Emotionally vulnerable + behaviorally conditioned, early (n=2)
Early gambling starting age, adverse life events, comorbid mental health problems.
Path 3: Behaviorally conditioned, late (n=2)
Late gambling starting age
Path 4: Behaviorally conditioned, early (n=2)
Early gambling starting age



Results: paths to the program

“I’ve had a mental health treatment contact since I was 16 years of age, so there I’ve talked to psychiatric nurses, psychologists and psychiatrists, and to doctors too, about how gambling controls me way too much, and how that is a real problem, but never once it has been intervened. I was never directed anywhere; I never got a phone number to call to and the directions given to me were usually like ‘just don’t gamble’. So it [gambling problem] was never really acknowledged or recognized.” M2534C



Results: the program



Building motivation and trust

Establishing reciprocity and relaxed interaction during calls with professionals is crucial for building trust and fostering motivation among clients participating in the program.



Client-centered flexibility and holistic discussions

Tailoring program approaches to individual client needs and engaging in discussions beyond gambling issues foster a holistic understanding of clients' challenges, enhancing motivation and facilitating positive outcomes.



Psychoeducation and practical tools gaining control

Providing psychoeducation and practical tools within the program empowers clients to gain control over their gambling behaviors, reducing guilt and stigma while promoting awareness and personal growth.



Relapses

Relapsing participants cited lack of post-program support and returning to old habits, yet acknowledged program benefits in raising awareness and improving communication.



Technical feasibility and ergonomics

Program feedback revealed translation issues, mixed feelings towards answer options and discomfort with certain exercises.



Discussion

- Screening, intervention, and awareness efforts are crucial among incarcerated and ex-offender populations to prevent problem gambling leading to criminal behavior.
- Access to equal health services and treatment for prisoners is advocated over punishment by scholars.
- Problem gambling increases suicidality, particularly when combined with heavy losses and criminal activity.
- Judicial bodies should consider problem gambling when making referrals for treatment to reduce reoffending.
- Social innovations and cognitive-behavioral interventions can help reduce financial distress, a major risk factor for offending.
- Inclusion of a problem gambling screen in a nationwide prisoner health survey in Finland provides valuable insights for evidence-based interventions.


Discussion

- Recovery from crime, desistance, addiction, and recovery are complex processes influenced by various factors: **heterogeneity of clients**
- Tailored support is recommended, considering comorbidities and criminal history, to facilitate recovery.
- Individualized support is essential for individuals with both problem gambling and a criminal history, considering the unique challenges they face.
- Efforts towards social rehabilitation and access to debt restructuring for individuals with diagnosed gambling disorders and criminal involvement are crucial for recovery.
- Programs should thoroughly map situations and orient social environments towards **non-stigmatizing visibility of the problem**, directing clients to appropriate treatment.



Comments from the field

- The client profile is very heterogeneous. Some clients have various different types of support needs, and some have most of their problems intertwined with problem gambling. *Who are we thinking of when developing services?*
- Clients mostly take part in Gambling Stop as part of their **community service**, but it is possible to partake during other forms of criminal sanctions or voluntarily.
 - External motivation can help the clients commitment to complete the program and sometimes it can transform in to internal motivation.
- Many clients suffer from a strong sense of shame and stigma. These emotions can rise from both problem gambling as well as criminal sanctions etc.
- Many clients benefit from contemplating issues that are related to their personal outlook on money, values and identity. Also understanding the economical recovery from a wider perspective can be helpful.



“As someone with ADHD, staying at home was a relief—I didn’t have to meticulously plan outings or deal with time-consuming tasks. I could simply open my laptop and start working on the program, even during the support phone calls I could go for a walk.”

Client feedback after Gambling Stop

Thank you!

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