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Young Adults and Gambling during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario

Editor's note: *The following op-ed was prepared by Sasha Stark, PhD, Senior Researcher, Centre for the Advancement of Best Practices, Responsible Gambling Council. This op-ed is part of our [Special Series on Managing Addiction during COVID-19](#), which is generously sponsored by the [Greater Boston Council on Alcoholism](#).*



The extent and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic caught most of us off guard, in both our personal and professional lives. In those early days and weeks, we were all searching for information on and approaches for adapting to our changing realities. At the [Responsible Gambling Council \(RGC\)](#) – a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting safer gambling by influencing positive change and advancing responsible gambling standards in Canada and around the world – our programs team was in need of insights to inform adjustments to our community outreach and prevention initiatives. We needed to know what players were experiencing, feeling, and doing to enable us to share useful messages for informing their decisions around gambling and supporting safer play. To this end, RGC's research and programs teams worked nimbly to conduct an online survey of past-year gamblers in the province of Ontario at the end of April 2020.

As circumstances changed over the different phases of the pandemic, there was a continued need for knowledge to inform further program development and adjustment. There was also an opportunity to provide an empirical record of the impacts of COVID-19 over time on players, families, and communities. Working in collaboration with other members of the Ontario Gambling Research Society executive – Dr. Alex Price, RGC, Dr. Iris Balodis, McMaster University, and Drs. Michael Wohl and Nassim Tabri, Carleton University – follow up surveys on consistent and additional topics were conducted in early August 2020 (through a Carleton University COVID-19 Rapid Response Research Grant) and end of December 2020. We were able to survey over 2,000 past-year gamblers in each survey. While maintaining study engagement over time can be difficult, we succeeded in having over 600 people complete all three surveys.

A specific need emerged to consider how the pandemic was impacting young adults. We know from years of research that [young adults \(ages 18-24\) are at higher risk of harm](#) from their gambling than those over 24 years of age. We are also seeing numerous reports of young adults experiencing particularly significant impacts of the pandemic on their mental health, financial situations, and employment. These overlapping concerns led us to specifically consider how young adults' behaviors and wellbeing had evolved over the pandemic, in the 200 or so who completed each survey and the 42 who answered all three.

[We found](#) that young adults experienced concerning levels of financial and mental health impacts of the pandemic. In December, young adults reported significantly higher rates compared to adults over 24 of negative income impacts of COVID-19 (59.7% vs. 34.7%), difficulty meeting cost of living expenses (28.8% vs. 13.7%), and use of credit cards, loans, or financial services to support gambling (27.0% vs. 8.8%). At this time, young adults also reported higher rates of severe anxiety (14.2%) and depression (10.1%).

Online gambling increased over time. Among the young adults who answered all three surveys, roughly half gambled online in April 2020 (50.0%) and August 2020 (56.1%), with the number jumping to 85.7% in December 2020. Between March and August, young adults were more likely than those over 24 to have opened a new gambling account. Young adults were also more likely to think that upon reopening of land-based venues, they'd play both land-based and online, and that their gambling on each would increase.

We also saw that young adults played in ways that can be considered risky and experienced negative impacts from their play. They were more likely than older adults to have gambled while feeling anxious or depressed (almost) always in the past year (11.6%). Between August and December, young adults had more variable play. In line with their higher risk level, they were more likely to increase the money spent and their intoxicated gambling. Unexpectedly though, they were also more likely than those 25 and over to have decreased money spent and intoxicated gambling, as well as time spent. In terms of impacts, young adults were more likely to have missed school (14.2%), work (15.0%), family events (10.9%), plans with friends (12.1%), and religious events (8.9%) because of gambling. Between September and December, young adults had a higher level of gambling problems than older gamblers (25.1% vs. 7.2%).

Lastly, the results showed that young adults valued and used responsible gambling tools. They rated time and money management tools and self-ban/breaks as more highly important site features than older adults. During the pandemic, use of time and money limit setting did not vary over time, with roughly a third setting time limits and two thirds or more setting money limits. While setting and sticking to time limits and stopping if intoxicated did not vary by age, young adults were less likely to set and adhere to money limits.

Our findings on the impacts of the pandemic on young adult past-year gamblers illustrate the need for COVID-19 and young adult-specific approaches to gambling harm prevention. [COVID-19-specific approaches](#) should include more stringent player messaging, safeguards, tools, interactions, markers of harm, and supports – both during pandemic restrictions and upon land-based re-openings and online expansions – that are cognizant of changes in mental health, financial situations, and play behavior. It is also important for these bolstered programs to be tailored to young adults. To ensure approaches resonate, focus should be placed on key areas of risk and resilience, as well as the use of relevant channels, tones, and formats. For example, RGC in collaboration with the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario developed the [Gambling with Grunk social media campaign](#), which used a YouTube channel mimicking gambling instructional videos to increase awareness of the risks of gambling while intoxicated on alcohol or cannabis among young adults.

These results also support a focus on consistent monitoring and integration with existing prevention and support initiatives. Regular study of continued changes throughout the (post) pandemic phases is necessary for informing the further development and tailoring of programs. Lastly, integration of approaches and collaboration with stakeholders across financial, educational, substance use, and mental health fields can maximize resources and learnings as well as increase the reach and impact of our initiatives.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

Dr. Stark has no conflicts of interest to disclose of personal, financial, or other benefits that could be seen as influencing the content of this editorial.