

## CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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# A Systematic Review of the Relationship Between Problem Gambling and the Criminal Justice System

*Rates of problem gambling (PG) are approximately 20 times higher in correctional settings, relative to the general population; a better understanding of gambling-offending interconnections is crucial to influence the cycle of gambling, debt and crime.*

## Why we did this study

Individuals with problem gambling (PG) experience a range of symptoms that impair their daily functioning and interpersonal relationships. Incarcerated individuals comprise those with the highest PG rates found in any population. The objective of this review was to synthesise the existing literature on PG and the criminal justice system and provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research. This review further evaluates and appraises various research methodologies and approaches, identifying discrepant findings and areas where research is needed.

## What we did

We conducted a systematic literature search of multiple databases, yielding 90 peer-reviewed studies focusing on PG and criminal behaviours. Studies were organised into four themes: (1) types of illegal acts; (2) traits, behaviours and characteristics relating to PG; (3) initial arrestee and community populations; and (4) incarcerated populations. One third (30) of the studies included in our review focused on PG behaviours and/or criminal activities relating to gambling among individuals with PG in correctional settings.

## What we found

Individuals with PG are overrepresented within the criminal justice system. Regardless of the PG screening instrument used, incarcerated populations demonstrated the highest PG rates among any population. This review identified PG prevalence estimate rates of over 30%, which is substantially greater than the estimated 2-5% PG prevalence observed in the general population. Moreover, elevated levels of risk-taking, antisocial, and impulsive behaviours exist among those with PG. Such behaviours are observed to a greater extent among individuals endorsing gambling-related illegal behaviours.

Greater PG severity among incarcerated individuals is associated with more frequent endorsement of income-generating crimes, as opposed to violent crimes. In addition to criminal behaviour, harms associated with PG include unstable employment, poor health and heightened levels of suicide, far exceeding rates observed among individuals with substance use disorders.

Studies examining initial arrestee populations, demonstrate the importance of implementing gambling screenings during the early stages of criminal justice system intake. Findings in juvenile offenders show that PG serves as an early marker of criminality.

Given that most criminal cases do not go through all of the correctional system stages (i.e. a general decrease in cases moving from initial arrest to actual convictions and prison sentences), indicators of specific gambling activities can provide additional information. Altogether, initial arrestee data can more directly highlight gambling-related crimes through the 'funnel effect' – crimes that otherwise may not be detected when only examining a prison population. Initial PG screening at the intake stage would have implications for diversion and intervention mechanisms, similar to those observed with substance use disorders. These early interventions have the potential to reduce gambling and engagement in criminal acts.

Finally, despite 34 of the studies included in this review exploring PG in treatment populations, few studies report on treatment outcomes and how various treatments impact PG behaviours and severity. Studies examining re-offending show that disordered gambling during incarceration and past-year gambling severity are linked with recidivism risk, even after accounting for past criminal history, impulse control traits and substance misuse.

## What it means

Beyond prevalence estimates, little research exists on why the offender populations demonstrate such high PG rates. The correlational findings across studies suggest interrelated problems between PG, substance misuse and crime. Given findings that PG status predicts reoffending, mandating treatment during incarceration has potential to reduce recidivism and overall lower burden on the criminal justice system through enormous costs associated with judicial procedures, arrests and incarceration.

## For more information

Barkovich, L., Froude, A.M., Massey, M., Eskandarian, S., MacKillop, J., & Balodis, I.M. (2025). *A Systematic Review of the Relationship Between Problem Gambling and the Criminal Justice System* (Research Report R-481). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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