

Northwestern Ontario Wellness In 2020: Problem Gambling, Mental Health, Service Utilization, and Barriers

Serena Shukla¹, Sinan Shariff^{1, 2}, Janine Robinson³, Renee Linklater¹, & Lena C. Quilty^{1, 2}

¹Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, ²University of Toronto, ³Responsible Gambling Council

Background: Northwestern Ontario boasts a unique profile of social and economic strengths and challenges contributing to wellness and growth in the region. Public health efforts have an increasing focus on mental health and substance use challenges in the region, due to the elevated levels of unemployment and underemployment in the region, as well as of substance misuse, mental illness, and associated service utilization. The objective of the current study is to evaluate problem gambling and health outcomes as well as service use and barriers, during 2020 - a period of considerable stress in the region.

Methods: Participants included 351 adults from the Kenora and Rainy River Districts of Ontario. Participants completed measures of mental health, substance use, service use, and barriers between April and December 2020 as part of the Northwestern Ontario Wellness (NOW) Program, a longitudinal participatory research program associated with problem gambling prevention and health promotion and clinical service development.

Results: Overall, problem gambling was associated with alcohol and drug use difficulties, as well as anxiety, depression, and internalizing symptoms. Those with problem gambling generally utilized the following coping behaviours: substance use, self-blame, and religion. Over 80% reported that they experienced mental health challenges but did not seek help; a range of barriers to care were identified.

Conclusions: Results confirm the co-occurrence of problem gambling with substance use and mental health outcomes among this Northwestern Ontario sample. Results further implicate coping, mental health, and service accessibility as possible targets for health promotion and awareness initiatives in this area.



Background & Objectives

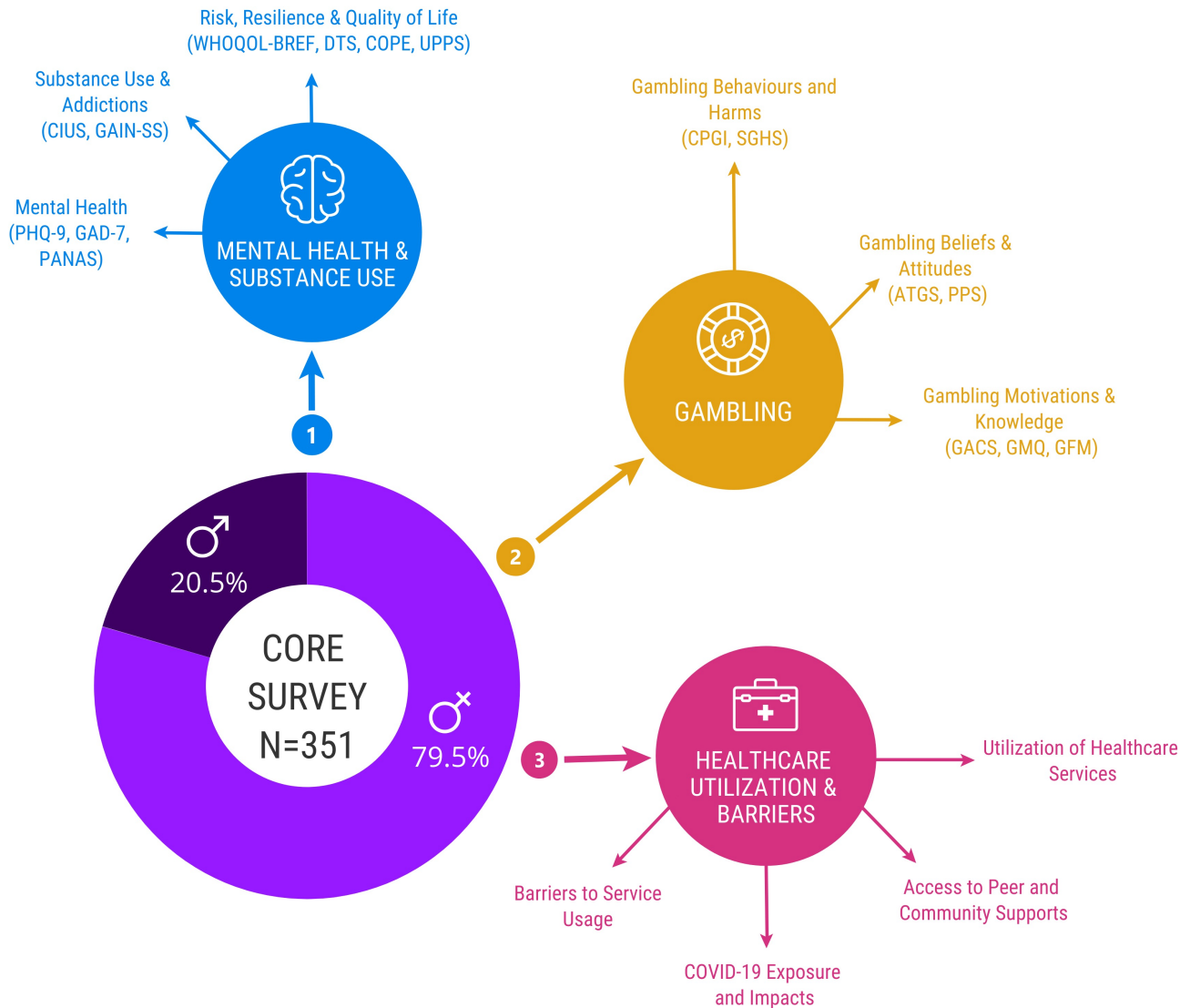
Background

- The Northwestern Ontario Wellness (NOW) Gambling Response Program was developed in 2016 in response to the future development of a novel casino in Northwestern Ontario
- The present study seeks to evaluate current problem gambling and health outcomes during the second wave of this longitudinal research program, which occurred in 2020 - a period of considerable stress in the region

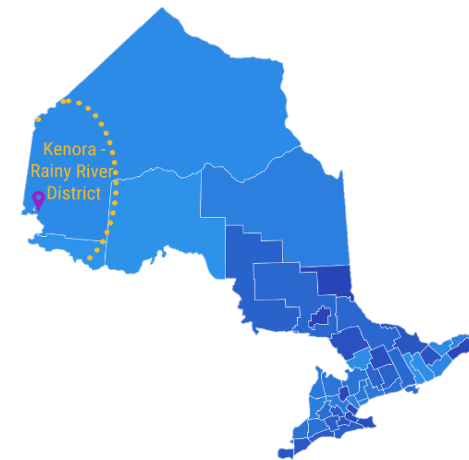
Objectives

- 1 To evaluate problem gambling and mental health and substance use outcomes
- 2 To evaluate services used and barriers to seeking care
- 3 To identify coping behaviours for those with gambling concerns

Methods



351 adults from the Kenora and Rainy River Districts completed an online survey as part of the NOW Program between April-December 2020.



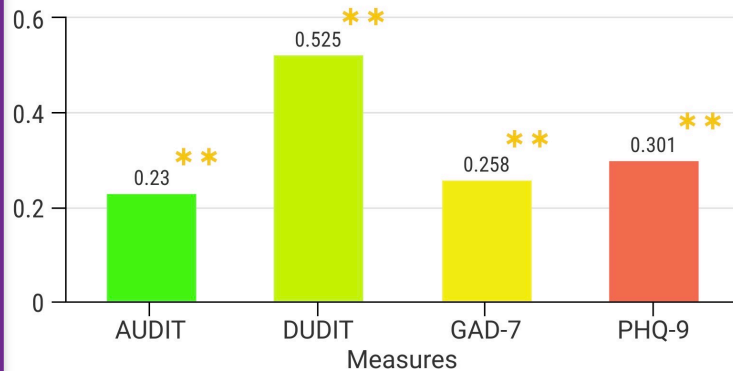
Demographics:

- Mean age 43.3 years ($SD=16.4$)
- 261 female, 67 male

Results

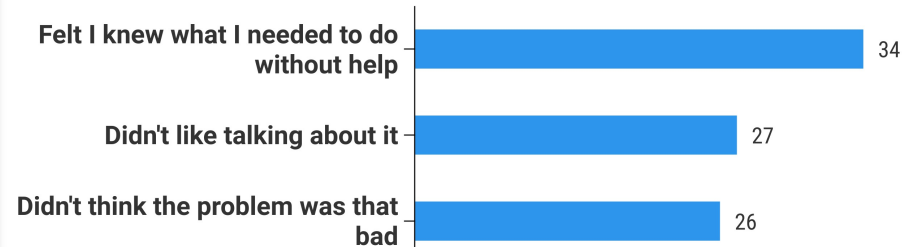
Problem gambling is linked to drug and alcohol use difficulties, depression, and anxiety.

** = $p < 0.01$.

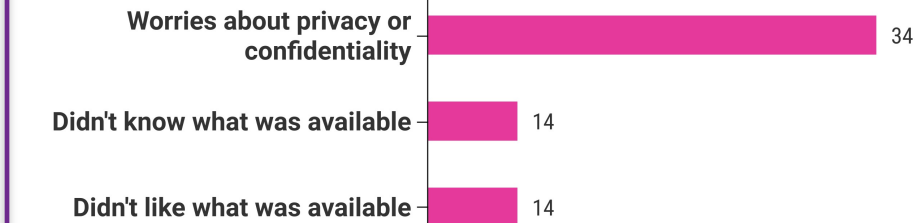


Top 3 Barriers to Seeking Care

Personal/Psychological Barriers



Service Availability Barriers



Service Access Barriers



Those with high PGSI scores generally utilized the following coping behaviours:

1. Substance use
2. Self-blame
3. Religion

Over 80% reported that they experienced mental health challenges but did not seek help.

Conclusion

Results highlight the **co-occurrence of problem gambling with substance use difficulties and mental health outcomes**

Further, **the majority reported experiencing mental health challenges, but did not seek help**

Several **barriers** to care were identified, **relating to service and healthcare changes due to COVID-19**

Lastly, common **coping behaviours** were identified

Overall, results implicate promoting adaptive **coping and mental health service perceptions** as potential targets for **health promotion initiatives** to mitigate possible public health risks for this community.

For more information on the NOW program:
<https://learn.problemgambling.ca/now>