

Have the Restrictions Imposed by COVID-19 Slowed the Expansion of Gambling and Pathological Gambling in Spain? Evolution of Gambling in the Spanish Population During the Pandemic

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Abstract

It is intended to study whether the restrictive measures imposed to contain the pandemic caused by COVID-19, can reduce the frequency of pathological gambling in the Spanish population during the validity of the state of alarm filed by Royal Decree Royal Decree 463/2020, of 14 of March. For this, the frequency of play between March 14 and May 30, 2020 is analyzed. In the results, a decrease in the frequency of players in general is observed, but an equal or greater continuity of problem and pathological players in their conduct.

Keywords: *Pathological Gamblers; Frequency; Trend; Isolation And Pandemic*

Definition, causes and models

The American Psychiatric Association defines pathological gambling as “a maladaptive and recurrent gambling behavior, characterized by an inability to control gambling coupled with psychosocial impairment with personal, family, financial, professional, and legal consequences” (1994).

Álvarez Pérez [1], in his review of pathological gambling, establishes that pathological players initiate and maintain their gambling behavior due to various factors. These are the following 1) the environment, understood as: education received, upbringing guidelines, attachment, the possibility of access to the game, the attitude towards it, trauma or adverse experiences of childhood, all of them, influence as factors of vulnerability or protection, 2) the behaviors and cognitions presented by the players, which include the reinforcement patterns, conditioning, cognitive brains or habits, as well as personality factors and executive functions such as impulsivity, decision-making, and skills in coping and loss of control, and finally, 3) emotions, such as the player’s ability to control his negative emotional state: stress, anxiety, depression, need to flee from boredom, dysphoria, among others. Therefore, emotions are highly related to the initiation and maintenance of behavior [1].

Prevalence and trend

The prevalence in the general population has remained stable from the 90s until the beginning of the century, around 0.4 - 2% in pathological gamblers and 1.3 - 2.3% in problem gamblers [2-6]. However, in recent years (2012 onwards), the number of players in the Spanish population has increased, as reflected by the Directorate for the Regulation of Gambling (2019) and the Spanish Observatory on Drugs and Addictions (2019). While the Directorate for the Regulation of Gambling (2019) reports an increase in online gambling turn-

over between 2012 and 2019, with an increase of 387% to over 13,000 million euros and highlighting a greater increase in young people. The Spanish Observatory on Drugs and Addictions (2019) reports that at least 60% of the Spanish population between 15 and 64 years of age has played online, face-to-face or both games with money. Establishing, in turn, an online and face-to-face player profile. While the former are usually young, mainly men (5.8% men vs. 1.2% women) and their main activity is sports betting (75.1%). The latter are usually middle-aged or older, establishing a positive correlation between age and face-to-face gambling, the older they are, the more tendency to face-to-face gambling, finding no differences between the sexes.

Therefore, there is an increase in trend and a change in the profile of players as they are younger and prefer online games than face-to-face games. All this, promoted through advertising campaigns, proliferation of casinos, sports betting, etc. This change in trend is consistent with the changes that occurred in the 70s and 80s, where the number of pathological gamblers and problem gamblers increased as the number of casinos and the availability of games of chance increased [7].

All this leads us to wonder if the impossibility/limitation of playing games of chance could affect its trend.

Conceptualization: Pandemic, Isolation and pathological gambling

Since with the onset of the global pandemic, caused by the SAR-CoV-2 virus, various measures have been decreed for its containment of greater or lesser importance, such as the prohibition of travel to certain countries, curfews, etc. It is analyzed whether these measures are going to affect the Spanish population of pathological players and problem players. The period analyzed is from March 14, 2020 to May 30, 2020.

In Spain, a state of alarm was decreed on March 14, 2020, establishing various prohibitions and restrictions on individual freedoms. Highlighting the most important: prohibition of circulating on public roads for all Spaniards except for those whose activity has been declared essential (bodies and state security forces, health, food stores, etc.), suspension of sporting events high level, prohibition of travel, family reunions and wakes, remaining until May 30, 2020 (RDL 463/2020, of March 14). In conclusion, all physical places where gamblers and problem gamblers could carry out this behavior were closed. Therefore, a decrease in the frequency of games of chance would be expected, as their ability to play is prevented/limited in normal players, but not in the gambling addicted population.

Results

If the data from the Spanish Observatory of Drugs and Addictions (2020) is analyzed, it can be observed that there has been a change in the frequency of gambling. A reduction in the total frequency of gambling is observed, together with a change in the type of gambling (See Figure 1). The number of players playing games like blackjack, poker and spending money on video games has increased. Reducing the number of players who have bet on horse races, pools, sports bets (see Figure 2).

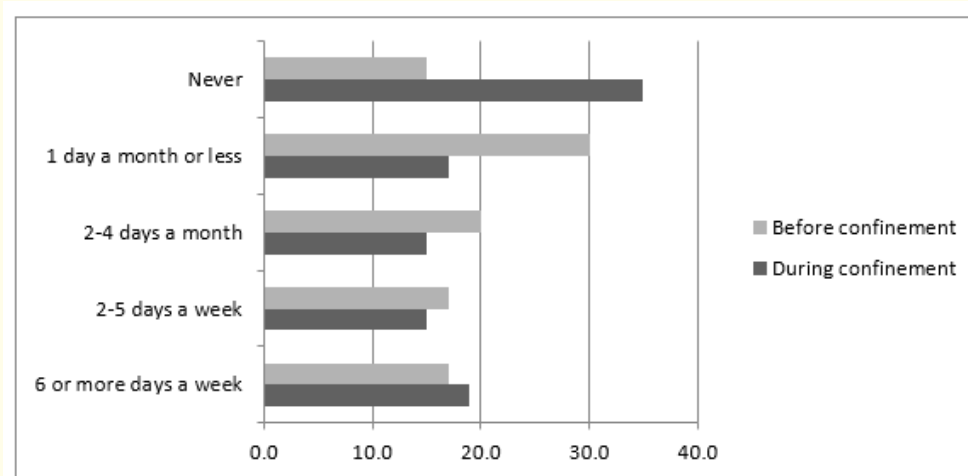


Figure 1: Evolution of Gambling during confinement (Spanish Observatory of Drugs and Addictions, 2020).

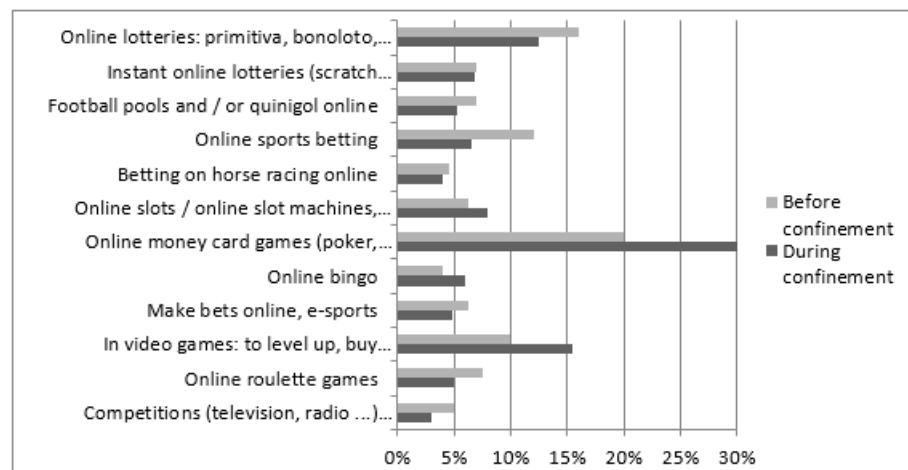


Figure 2: Types of money before and during confinement (Spanish Observatory of Drugs and Addictions, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusions

These data show a reduction in the trend in gambling, so it seems that the isolation and closure of gambling venues have reduced its frequency. However, isolation and restrictive measures due to the pandemic have increased emotional problems, mainly anxiety and depression [8,9], highly related to maintaining gambling [10]. Therefore, the pathological or problem players should have increased or maintained the behavior. So why the data reflected by the Spanish Observatory of Drugs and Addictions show a reduction in the trend. This frequency is due to various factors, these are:

In the first place, there is talk of a reduction in the frequency in both normal, problem and pathological players, since the frequency of play of players who played 6 or more days a week is the only one that has increased. Frequency in which problem and pathological players are found.

Second, based on the player profiles proposed by the Spanish Observatory on Drugs and Addictions (2019), face-to-face players are generally middle-aged or older than due to their limited or no technical knowledge in the use of electronic devices, It can lead them to be unable to continue gambling behavior; despite this, the number of players who play games such as Bingo and radio, television or press contests has increased. Regarding the group of online players, a reduction in sports bets has been observed. It must be understood that sporting events were also prohibited, thus making the conduct impossible. Now, the number of players who gambled on blackjack, poker and video games increased, so there seems to have been a change in the type of game rather than a decrease in frequency.

Finally, one can speak of a substitution of gambling behavior for another behavioral addiction such as video game addiction. According to the biopsychosocial model of Sharpe (2002), there are 2 types of players, those who play slot machines and similar games such as bingo who try to escape their high arousal level. While there are others, who play games such as blackjack, horse racing or sports betting, they do so to “escape boredom” since they present low levels of arousal and aim to increase it. If possible, these types of players have used video games as a “palliative” for their inability to play games of chance and therefore the increased frequency of video games and internet use (Spanish Observatory of Drugs and Addictions, 2020). Since there is a high comorbidity of video game addicts and various emotional problems [11].

Therefore, it can be concluded on the one hand that there has been a reduction in the frequency of gambling in normal players, but not in problem and pathological players. And on the other hand, it can be affirmed that the availability and accessibility of the game of chance defended by Lesieur and Rosenthal [12] and López Viets and Miller [7-18], among others, affects to a greater extent the beginning of the game, not as well as to the maintenance of it.

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