

Problem gambling 'cause for concern' in U.S. youth

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By Anne Harding

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - The most representative national study to-date of gambling and young people has found that 2.1 percent of Americans age 14 to 21 are problem gamblers.

"The amount of problem gambling among young people, while it's not extremely high, is high enough that it's a cause for concern," Dr. John W. Welte of the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions, the study's principal investigator, told Reuters Health.

Given the rise in legal gambling across the U.S., and on the Internet, young people have more access to gambling than ever before, Welte noted in an interview. Past studies have found a higher rate of gambling among teens and adolescents compared to adults, he added, but many of these studies were conducted in U.S. regions where gambling was considered to be a problem.

To obtain a national perspective, Welte and his team surveyed 2,274 subjects 14- to 21-year-old randomly contacted by telephone, they report in the *Journal of Gambling Studies*. They defined problem gambling as answering "yes" to four or more questions on a standard screening test for problem gambling modified for adolescents. Questions included whether a participant had gambled more than they had planned to in the past 12 months, felt bad about the amount of money they had bet, or been told they had a gambling problem.

Sixty-eight percent of the study participants said they had gambled in the past year, and 11 percent had done so more than twice a week. Overall, 2.1 percent were problem gamblers, while 6.5 percent answered yes to two or more questions from the screening test, putting them at risk for problem gambling.

Males were much more likely than females to be involved in gambling and problem gambling, with 4.2 percent meeting criteria for problem gambling, compared to 0.1 percent of females. While the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) individuals were the least likely to gamble, if they did gamble, they were more likely than higher SES people to be problem gamblers.

A past study by Welte and his team with adults found that 4.2 percent of men and 2.9 percent of women were problem gamblers. Even though it's been assumed that teens are more likely to have gambling troubles than adults, given that they tend to have higher rates of other problems like drinking behavior and drug use, gambling likely emerges later in life, especially for women, Welte said.

Parents who are concerned about their children developing a gambling problem should first of all set a good example, Welte said. This doesn't mean lecturing a child every day about the evils of betting, he added, but avoiding gambling themselves and also not sending the message that they approve of gambling.

SOURCE: *Journal of Gambling Studies*, June 2008.

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