



PROGRAM-A (Preventing Gambling Related Harm in Adolescents): a pilot cluster randomised control trial to prevent gambling-related harm in young people



SUMMARY REPORT

Introduction

Gambling among adolescents is an increasing public health concern. A 2024 UK study reported that 27% of 11–17-year-olds had gambled with their own money in the past year, exceeding rates of vaping (15%), smoking (8%), and illegal drug use (7%), with only alcohol use being higher at 37%ⁱ. Early exposure to gambling can contribute to mental health difficulties, financial problems, and poor academic performanceⁱⁱ. Unlike tobacco or alcohol, there are currently very few independent school-based programmes aimed at preventing gambling-related harm. PROGRAM-A (Preventing Gambling-Related Harm in Adolescents) was developed to address this gap through a peer-led, school-based, social network intervention.

Programme Overview

PROGRAM-A, is a novel school-based programme designed to raise awareness of the risks associated with gambling and to support young people to avoid gambling-related harm. The programme employs a peer-led approach, encouraging students to share information with their peers through everyday conversations rather than formal classroom instruction. This approach is based on the successful ASSISTⁱⁱⁱ anti-smoking programme, which demonstrates the effectiveness of peer influence in preventing harmful behaviours.

Methodology

In 2023-2024, a pilot study was conducted across six secondary schools in Scotland. Four schools tested delivery of PROGRAM-A, while two schools served as control groups and did not receive the intervention. Students were invited to nominate other students in their school year who they respected and looked up to. Those receiving the most nominations were invited to become a Peer Supporter. Peer Supporters received two days of training and subsequently engaged in informal conversations over ten weeks with friends and family about gambling harm, the influence of gambling marketing, and the connections between gambling and gaming.

The aim of the pilot study was to evaluate whether we should apply for a bigger and longer study to see if PROGRAM-A can prevent young people from gambling and therefore, prevent gambling harm. The objectives of the pilot study were to assess the feasibility and acceptability of the programme within school settings, evaluate student engagement, and gather feedback from participants and school staff through surveys, interviews, and group discussions.

Results

The pilot study demonstrated that PRoGRAM-A is both feasible and acceptable. All six participating schools remained engaged throughout the study period, and sufficient numbers of students completed both baseline and follow-up questionnaires. The programme was delivered in line with the official implementation guidance, and feedback from students and staff was extremely positive.

Peer Supporters played a key role in disseminating information, with 146 students participating across the four intervention schools. Collectively, these Peer Supporters conducted over 1,500 informal conversations. 80% spoke to at least five people, over half spoke to ten or more, and 12% reached twenty or more individuals. These findings indicate that the programme has the potential to reach a wide audience through peer influence.

Conclusions

PRoGRAM-A represents a feasible, acceptable, and promising intervention for the prevention of gambling-related harm among adolescents. The pilot study demonstrates strong engagement from both students and school staff and highlights the potential effectiveness of peer-led strategies in disseminating knowledge about gambling risks. The programme addresses a notable gap in school-based preventive initiatives and offers a scalable model for future implementation.

Next Steps

The PRoGRAM-A team is preparing a grant application to secure funding for a full-scale UK-wide trial. Future research will assess the programme's effectiveness in reducing gambling-related harm and inform national strategies for adolescent gambling prevention.

ⁱ Ipsos Mori. *Young People and Gambling 2024: Official statistics*. [online] Gambling Commission. Available at: [Young People and Gambling 2024: Official statistics - Summary](#)

ⁱⁱ Riley BJ, Oster C, Rahamathulla M and Lawn S. Attitudes, risk factors, and behaviours of gambling among adolescents and young people: A literature review and gap analysis. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 2021; 18: 984.

ⁱⁱⁱ Campbell R, Starkey F, Holliday J, Audrey S, Bloor M, Parry-Langdon N, et al. An informal school-based peer-led intervention for smoking prevention in adolescence (ASSIST): a cluster randomised trial. *The Lancet*. 2008;371(9624):1595-602.