

Adolescent gambling prevention in times of pandemics: Findings from the first and second edition of the PRIZE [Prevention of gambling risks among adolescents] project in Italy

Maria Anna Donati

In the field of adolescent gambling prevention, there is a lack of intervention studies based on robust evidence-based explanation and intervention models. Moreover, there are not publications about prevention studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemics, a critical period for adolescents. Indeed, due to the lockdown and stay-at-home messages, they were particularly vulnerable to the risks of social distance and Internet excessive use.

By presenting two studies, my contribution will be focused on the dissemination of a prevention model for adolescents previously developed and verified by the research team of the Laboratory of Psychometrics at the University of Florence, in Italy (Donati et al., 2014; Donati et al., 2018). The program, called PRIZE [Prevention of gambling risks among adolescents], was funded by Tuscany Region through ANCI TOSCANA (Association of Tuscan Municipalities).

The first study will report the findings obtained inside the first edition of PRIZE, that was realized in the school year 2019-2020, with the final steps of the project that occurred under the COVID-19 pandemics lockdown. The purpose of PRIZE was to assess the short- and long-term effects of the intervention itself, aimed at modifying both cognitive protective factors that risk affective factors. The intervention was implemented with 1894 students attending the second year of high school (61% males; $M_{age} = 15.68$ years) and it was conducted by trained intervention providers. In the short term, we found a significant increase of adolescents' correct gambling knowledge, random events knowledge, and probabilistic reasoning ability, and a significant decrease of superstitious thinking, monetary positive outcome expectation, and gambling-related erroneous thoughts and fallacious behavioral choices. In the long-term, a significant decrease of gambling frequency, gambling versatility, and gambling problem severity was obtained.

In Study 2, the findings obtained in the second edition of PRIZE, realized in the school years 2021-2022, will be presented. Due to the maintenance of the virus circulation and the lack of vaccination coverage, this school year was characterized by the widespread adoption of distance learning and quarantines for the Italian students. For this edition, we updated the contents and the procedures of the project. In particular, we aimed at involving students regardless of the school year attended, and we were interested in finding a reduction of gambling distortions also in the long-term, as well as a decrement of gambling craving in the long-term. Indeed, the desire to gamble and the anticipation of their expected consequences is the most proximal and strongest predictor of actual gambling behavior. Focusing the attention on this variable – rather than on gambling frequency or severity – allowed us to consider all the adolescents, despite their own gambling behavior. The intervention was conducted with 2505 high school students (59% males; $M_{age} = 16.40$ years). In the short term, we found a significant increase of correct gambling knowledge, random events knowledge, and probabilistic reasoning ability, and a significant decrease of monetary positive outcome expectation, and gambling-related erroneous thoughts. In the long-term, a significant decrease of gambling and self-reported erroneous thoughts and fallacious behavioral choices was obtained. Moreover, gambling craving resulted to be reduced. As the pandemics implied that very frequently participants attended the project online, in synchronization with the class, we verified if the above-reported results were achieved regardless of the delivery of the training activities (in school class or online). Overall, this work offers empirical evidence about the possibility of doing prevention against gambling even in periods of pandemics.