

Longer Play Sessions May Not Equal Greater Gambling Problems: Insights from Regular EGM Players

Highlights

- Focal Research and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas International Gaming Institute (IGI) explored the relationship between risk of gambling-related harm and the length of EGM play sessions using real-world player data.
- Results showed no meaningful associations between player risk, session length, and break length for regular EGM players.
- Players at higher risk did not differ from players at lower risk in the amount of time they spent in the casino, playing EGMs, or taking breaks within an average visit.
- These findings held across datasets sourced from two different land-based casino operators.
- Relying solely on session length to identify players at high risk of gambling-related harm may not be effective at reducing risk or promoting safer gambling practices.

Research Goals

Gambling for long periods of time with fewer breaks is understood to be an indicator of harmful gambling. However, there have been few studies using real-world player data to test this relationship in land-based gambling venues.

In this study, we used objective behavioural data to look at how risk is related to the length of electronic gaming machine (EGM) sessions and the extent these sessions are continuous. Our key objective was to determine if session length could be a reliable indicator of a player's risk of gambling-related harm.

The Focal Research team and IGI established a collaborative workflow to independently analyze the data and validate each other's findings, ensuring adherence to IGI's research policy and commitment to rigorous, independent research. This collaboration enabled a robust examination of EGM play patterns and their relationship with problem gambling severity using high-quality player tracking data.

What We Did

We conducted a secondary analysis of de-identified player data provided by two land-based casino operators ("Casino A" and "Casino B"). Twelve months of carded EGM session data were linked to individual Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) scores for both samples of regular EGM loyalty members. Regular players were those who played EGMs six or more times in the past year using their casino loyalty card.

- Casino A included 1,332 members who played EGMs between March 2021 and February 2022 and completed the PGSI in March 2022.
- Casino B included 866 members who played EGMs between April 2023 and March 2024 and completed the PGSI in April 2024.

We used statistical tests to explore associations between player risk (according to PGSI scores), session length, break length, and continuous play. We hypothesized that players at greater risk of gambling harm would have significantly longer EGM sessions and spend more time at the casino compared to players at lower risk of gambling harm. We also expected that players at higher risk would take less break time and play more continuously within visits compared to those at lower risk.

What We Found

Contrary to our hypotheses, we found little to no evidence that session length, break length, or the extent to which sessions were continuous were related to player risk. Instead, players at higher risk of gambling harm spent a similar amount of time in venue, playing EGMs, and taking breaks within an average visit as players at lower risk of harm.

These results held when replicated across casino datasets. While we did find a slightly significant association between the time spent on a single EGM and problem gambling severity for Casino A, it was too weak to be practically useful. We found a similar association between break length and problem gambling severity for Casino B, but it was again too small to be meaningful.

Exploratory analyses revealed that in their single most extreme session, players at higher risk of harm on average spent longer in venue and on machine compared to those at lower risk. However, players engaged in a similar proportion of long and short EGM sessions regardless of their risk level, verifying that session length on its own is not a reliable indicator of a player's risk of gambling-related harm.

Implications

This research suggests that the length of time spent gambling on EGMs is not an efficient way to identify players at high risk of experiencing gambling-related harm. Harm reduction policies that primarily focus on players who engage in long sessions may need to be re-evaluated to ensure that the right resources are being directed to the right people.

Efforts to identify and support at-risk gamblers are recommended to be more holistic, integrating other known risky play behaviours that occur within longer gambling sessions. Future research should focus on identifying the specific risk behaviours that occur within continuous play sessions to develop more targeted and effective safer gambling policies and practices.

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