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# Gambling in Southern Switzerland

## A regional analysis of gambling habits

### Abstract

The aim of this survey was to carry out a scientific investigation of the phenomenon of gambling in the region of Southern Switzerland, quantifying the gambling habits and the presence of people with gambling problems among the population and in the casinos. In addition, we wanted to analyse the evolution of the phenomenon by comparing the results with those of a similar survey conducted in 1998.

The survey of the population has shown that the vast majority of the adult population in Southern Switzerland (89.6%) have gambled for money at least once in their lifetime, while 60% of them had gambled for money in the 12 months preceding the survey. The games played are mostly number lotteries (Swiss Lotto, Euromillions, ...), followed by scratch cards and bingo; the regular gamblers (9.6% of respondents), those who gamble at least once a week, devote themselves especially to number lotteries and scratch cards, games which are played mainly in their traditional places (kiosks, bars or service stations), but the post office is also mentioned quite often, while bingo is very often associated with events (rural festivals, carnivals, ...). 3.3% of the adult population of Southern Switzerland gambled for money on the internet or on television during the 12 months preceding the survey, the vast majority of these people having played number lotteries. The amounts of money gambled are generally low, especially for those who play only number lotteries. The comparison with the survey of 1998 showed an increase in the proportion of people who had played for money at least once during the 12 months prior to the survey (from 49% to 60%) and an increase in people playing scratch cards (from 16% to 29%). However, at the same time the frequency of play has generally decreased, while favourite game types and the amounts allocated to gambling have remained constant.

28% of the people interviewed in the casinos (Casinò Locarno, Casinò Lugano and Casinò Mendrisio) go there at least once a week and are therefore regular patrons, while two out of three patrons frequent the gaming rooms at least once a month, with the remaining one-third of the clientele frequenting the casino only occasionally, that is, less than once a month. 16.1% of respondents spend at most half an hour in the casino, 62.3% spend between 30 minutes and two hours, while 21.6% stay for more than two hours. The most enjoyed and most often played games are roulette (mainly in the casinos of Lugano and Mendrisio) and slot machines (mainly in Locarno). Slightly less than half of the patrons who play (i.e. less than half of the 91.4% of respondents who play, while 8.6% go to the casino without playing) say they spend less than 100 francs per month for gambling, while 44.2% say they spend between 101 and 1,000 francs per month and 9.8% indicate monthly spending exceeding 1,000 francs. A comparison with the survey of 1998 shows a very similar situation to the current one.

The presence of gambling-related problems among the adult population of Southern Switzerland and among casino patrons was investigated by the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS), a tool often used in this area of interest. 99% of the adult population of Southern Switzerland show no problem with gambling, while 0.5% is classified as problem gamblers and the remaining 0.5% as probable pathological gamblers. Therefore, the phenomenon in question seems to affect approximately 2,800 adults in Southern Switzerland. 77.5% of patrons

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surveyed in the casinos do not have gambling problems, 16.2% are classified as problem gamblers and the remaining 6.3% as probable pathological gamblers. The results obtained in 2012 are very similar to those of the survey conducted in 1998, which means that the parameters regarding gambling problems have remained substantially unchanged.

Compared to the adult population of Southern Switzerland, the clientele of the casinos shows much higher proportions of men, young people, people of Italian nationality and singles, as well as a slightly lower overall level of education and a greater presence of employed people or people in job training than housewives, retirees and pensioners. A very similar profile distinguishes people with gambling problems from those without gambling problems (comparison made by combining the data of the population with those of the casinos); however, in this case two further criteria of differentiation were identified, that is, the greater proportions of regular smokers and regular consumers of alcohol (at least three times per week) among people with gambling problems. Inside the casinos, patrons with gambling problems differ from other patrons, especially in their gambling behaviour; in fact, patrons with gambling problems go to the casino more frequently and remain there longer, spend, win and (especially) lose much more than other patrons, go to the casino alone more often and account for their attendance of gaming rooms mostly as the chance to escape from everyday problems. The profiles presented are very similar to those found in the survey of 1998.

The survey has allowed us to obtain important information which may be useful for the implementation of preventive strategies and for the development of research in this area. The results of the survey and their comparison with that of 1998 have shown that the parameters regarding problem and pathological gambling have remained largely constant over the 14 years between the two surveys; this indicates that, in all likelihood, we are confronted with a “natural rate” of people with gambling problems, an observation reinforced by the fact that during these 14 years gambling availability in Southern Switzerland has undergone several changes (abolition of slot machines from public places, dissemination of scratch cards, a great increase in gambling opportunities on the internet, ...). The analysis of the socio-demographic and family profiles has shown that people at risk of developing gambling problems generally tend to frequent the casinos, as confirmed by the enormous difference between the percentage of people with gambling problems in the casinos (22.5%) and the percentage of those with gambling problems in the general population (1%); therefore, the job of monitoring and prevention should be carried out mostly within the casinos. Moreover, analysis and comparisons within the literature have shown that young age is a well-established risk factor; on a preventive level, it could be useful to establish a programme to raise awareness of the risks of gambling addiction at the level of middle school or high school/vocational training, in order to inform young people before they are able to gain access to gambling rooms. Finally, there are two recommendations concerning the development of research activities in this field: the first is to try to focus investigation on the segments of the population considered most at risk (young people, dependent on the welfare state, casino patrons, ...), while the second is to conduct longitudinal studies in order to examine the dynamic aspect of the phenomenon by monitoring the changes in gambling behaviour and gambling-related problems.