

Problem Gambling

Problem Gambling in Australia

The Productivity Commission estimated in 1999 that problem gambling was highest in NSW and Victoria. It has also been suggested that problem gamblers tend to gamble in areas close to their home or workplace. Although problem gamblers make up only a very small percentage of gamblers (1.5 to 3.7%), their expenditures constitute at least 1/3 to as high as 40% of all money spent on gambling. Although most capital cities and some regional areas have casinos, most problem gambling in Australia is centre on Electronic Gambling Machines (EGMs) (Wheeler, Round, Sarre and O'Neil, 2007). A smaller proportion will be TAB and casino.

Local Victorian examples of expenditure on gambling include:

- Moonee Valley where it is \$862 per adult compared to \$688 for Melbourne and there are a higher number of machines at 8.37 per 1000 adults compared to 6.81.
- The City of Monash continues to have the highest expenditure on EGMs and 1.9 EGMS per 1,000 adult populations above the State average. To check your local government gambling expenditure see www.vcgr.vic.gov.au

Is there a connection between gambling and crime?

While it has been established that excessive gambling can lead to considerable social problems, research has not been completed to confirm a relationship between gambling and criminal activity. Gambling crime as we know it can be divided into 4 categories: illegal gambling, crimes committed to support a gambling habit, crimes that occur around the gambling locations, and family abuse.

In order to support expenditure on gambling, problem gamblers generally seek alternative sources of income. At first they are likely to

borrow money from family, friend and colleagues, often without paying it back. Some may then sell their assets, including personal belongings to pawn brokers, or they may borrow money, often at high interest rates. Once debts have accumulated beyond their means, problem gamblers may seek out illegal sources of money (Sakurai and Smith, 2003).

"In the most desperate phase of their gambling they will do anything to gamble. They start to steal money from their spouses, family...they'll get money anyhow, anywhere. They'll do forgeries, embezzlements, thefts. It's mainly white collar crime." (Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand, 2006)

How does the Criminal Justice system respond?

Criminal activity that is related to problem gambling often goes unreported because it has involved theft from family, friends or long term employers. Research from Canada has highlighted that "among problem gamblers in treatment and members of Gamblers Anonymous, 50% admit to having engaged in criminal behaviour to continue gambling, but only 20% said that they were convicted of a gambling related crime". (Alberta Gaming Research Institute, 2003)

Crofts (2002) states:

So far the legal system has not responded to the findings of medical and psychological studies, as well as those from organisations such as Gamblers Anonymous, which suggest that problem gamblers may commit crimes to support their habit.

Courts have an explicit focus on alcohol and drug addiction involving focussing on addictive behaviours, ordering rehabilitation or counselling. Gambling is seen differently and is not generally accepted by judges as a mitigating factor. The study also states the almost two thirds of

offenders with gambling problems received custodial sentences ranging from three months to six years, with only a few being ordered to undergo counselling or treatment as a requirement for Good Behaviour Bonds or parole conditions (Crofts, 2002).

Problem Gambling

There are nearly always clearly identifiable underlying issues for those who are problem gamblers. Just about any kind of emotional disturbance can contribute to the development of a gambling problem, with the biggest risk factors being isolation and depression. A distinction can be drawn between two types of gamblers the 'pathological gamblers' and 'problem gamblers'.

- Pathological gamblers are long-term committed gamblers who will usually have lost families, houses, jobs to gambling. Like other addicts, they need to stay away entirely and recovery is rare.
- Problem gamblers have developed a more limited problem and may learn to bring their gambling back into affordable limits.

Different gambling problems such as EGMs, TABs and casinos have different demographic profiles and different psychologies.

Electronic Gaming Machines gambling:

- Most often women;
- Reasons include boredom, depression, excitement, relaxation;
- Has a hypnotic effect that relieved emotional and even physical pain but also leads to inability to track time and value of money;
- Relieves isolation temporarily through the presence of others without the demands of relating;
- 'Intermittent reinforcement' effect;
- Experience cognitive distortions.
- Emotional attachments to particular machines
- When the machine is not paying it's "due to pay" or if it paying, it's "on a roll";
- Lack of understanding about poker machine payment schedules.

Casino Gambling:

- More men;
- Tend to dream more about the "big win";
- Can lose huge amounts in a very short period of time;
- Reasons are more based on 'excitement' as a motivation.

TAB Gambling:

- Almost exclusively men;
- Tends to be an ingrained habit possible linked to the family of origin (Dad);
- The social aspect is important

Impact of the Family

Increasingly attendance at gambling venues may be a cause for concern, *particularly* if the person has significant depression, is socially isolated or has difficulties with impulse control. The associated harms extend to several areas:

- Personal (depression, anxiety, ill-health, suicide)
- Interpersonal (divorce, separation)
- Vocational (poor performance, absenteeism, job loss)
- Financial (debts, asset losses, bankruptcy)
- Legal (obtaining money for gambling illegally)

Families may experience the gambler going through cycles of repeated relapsing and that the behaviour gets worse with time unless treated. They may notice:

Practical issues:

- Money missing that can't be accounted for;
- Bills no longer being paid

Changes in behaviour:

- Family member talking a lot about gambling or uses a lot of gambling metaphors such as "down on my luck;", "can't take a trick", "this could be my luck day"

- Defensiveness when questioned about gambling
- Family member appears agitated if they can't gamble
- Secrecy and denial are huge issues
- Rationalising, denial and minimising of gambling behaviour such as "I can stop any time". "I don't have a problem, because I haven't lost my house", "I'm ahead over all"
- Superstitious rituals such as a particular brand of cigarettes becomes lucky because they were smoking it when they had a big win
- Cognitive distortion such as distorted perceptions of losses where wins "count" but losses don't

Strategies for assisting family member

Assist the family member to become a responsible gambler by:

- See gambling as entertainment and not to take it seriously;
- Only gambling with money set aside for entertainment and setting limits on this amount;
- Understanding that you can't win in the long run;
- Taking frequent breaks to remain relaxed and sociable.

Practical Strategies can help such as:

- Getting rid of credit card and/or ATM cards;
- Placing withdrawal limits on accounts;
- Another family member manages household money;
- Restricting money carried in their wallet

Self-exclusion is an option offered by casino and EGM venues but not the TAB:

- Venues require the gambler to go via the Australian Hotels Association and attend a meeting with a solicitor (free of charge). Photos are provided to all venues nominated by the gambler. Clubs and hotels have no liability, and there is no penalty if violated.

Services for Gambling Problems

- Gamblers Help - 1800 159 789
Provides a telephone Helpline and a network of face-to-face services accessible from any area in Victoria.
- Gambler's Anonymous - 9696 6108
- A Problem Gambling Resource Kit (2007) - Available for health and welfare workers to assist them in responding to problem gambling on www.justice.vic.gov.au
- Crown Responsible Gambling Customer Support Centre - 1800 801 098 (Free Call)
Offers a free, confidential service providing information, referral and professional counselling and Self-Exclusion.

References

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