

Document 1: Overview of the Health and Social Impacts Related to Gambling

Gambling occurs on a continuum ranging from not gambling, gambling recreationally, to harmful gambling, which is any type of repetitive gambling that an individual engages in which leads to or aggravates negative consequences for the individual, or family or friends. These harms include financial problems, addiction, or physical and mental health issues. Harmful gambling can range from experiencing some problems with gambling, with moderate risk of negative consequences, through to gambling that causes some serious social harm (problem gambling*) to the most problematic form, a gambling disorder.¹ Harms associated with gambling are not evenly distributed across our populations, with certain populations more at risk of experiencing harms related to gambling.

At-Risk Populations

Gambling and its associated risk factors place certain populations at an increased risk of experiencing gambling-related harm. Mental health, and in particular major depression, substance use, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and certain health behaviours are risk factors associated with the development of problem gambling. The factors that can influence susceptibility to gambling harms are described below.²

Youth

Gambling is common among adolescents, and they are particularly vulnerable to gambling related harms.³ A number of risk factors that have been associated with problem gambling in youth include; depression, tobacco, alcohol or illicit drug use, impulsivity, poor academic performance, socioeconomic status, and level of parental supervision. Some of the factors demonstrate the need for effective prevention efforts that reduce risk factors and for screening for youth with high-risk profiles.⁴

In 2017, more than one third (34%) of Ottawa students reported gambling for money at least once in the past year, 4% report gambling more than 3 times in the past year and 3% report gambled \$50 or more a time in the past year. In addition, a small proportion (less than 2%) of Ottawa students were considered to have a gambling problem.⁵ A 2012 survey in three Canadian provinces including Ontario, found that 9% of youth are engaging in online gambling. Furthermore, a higher proportion of those youth involved in

* Problem gambling is characterized by difficulties in limiting money and/or time on gambling that causes serious social harm. It includes moderate to severe gambling to the most serious form, a gambling disorder as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-5.

online gambling scored higher in problem gambling severity than youth involved with only land-based gambling.⁶

Older adults

Older adults represent the highest proportion of gamblers, with three in four participating in some type of gambling activity in the past year.⁷ Elevated participation rates may be as a result of the rapid expansion, accessibility, and variety of emerging gambling outlets, as well as increased leisure time and greater disposable income among some older adults.^{8 9}

Many older adults enjoy gambling without problems, and the prevalence of problem gambling is lower for this group than the general population. However, for a minority of older adults the consequences from problem gambling can be severe, as older adults are particularly vulnerable to a number of gambling related harms. Mental health disorders including dementia and Alzheimer's may influence an individual's control over problematic gambling behavior, thus increasing the harms experienced by an individual as a result of their gambling activity.^{10 11} Older adults on a fixed income may not be able to recover financially, which can make financial loss more devastating and possibly irreversible.

Older adults may also lack the support networks which provide important sources of community connectedness.¹² Several studies have examined older adults' motivations to gamble, and these include excitement, supporting charities, relieving boredom, socializing, and coping with stress and/or guilt.^{13 14} Older adults are often targeted by gambling venues through marketing and incentives, such as meals and transportation.^{15 16} Bus tours that visit casinos is a common strategy used to target older adults, and there is emerging evidence that this may be harmful; older adults who use the bus tours are more likely to have problems with gambling than those who didn't use such services. Use of these tours is also associated with more visits to casinos and more use of slot machines.¹⁷

For older adults there are also some benefits associated with gambling, such as increased socialization and entertainment. Despite the potential for harm, benefits have been demonstrated that can positively impact health and quality of life in the aging population.¹⁸

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Socioeconomic Status

Individuals in lower socioeconomic groups are at higher risk of gambling-related harm, as the impact of gambling loss is experienced more rapidly and intensely in groups already experiencing financial hardship.^{20 21 22} Higher income groups gamble more frequently and

spend more, however, people with lower socioeconomic status have higher rates of problem gambling.²³

Social and/or economic disadvantages, such as lower income, lower education, unstable housing conditions, and homelessness are all associated with problem gambling.²⁴ Both individual and neighbourhood levels of disadvantage are significant risk factors for problem gambling. For example, problem gambling rates are higher in individuals experiencing poverty, and those living in the poorest neighborhood have significantly increased odds (1.28X) of developing a gambling problem.²⁵ Problem gambling prevalence rates in homeless populations is significantly higher than in the general population. A 2014 study found that 25% of the clients of a Toronto homeless shelter met the criteria for a gambling disorder and a further 10% met the criteria for problem gambling.²⁶ Another study found that up to 12% of homeless adults met the criteria for problem gambling and 46% reported at least one symptom of problem gambling.²⁷

Other Potential Communities Affected

International and North American research has also shown that harms related to gambling have an impact on Indigenous communities^{28 29 30} and certain ethno-cultural populations.

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Currently, there is no local data that assesses the prevalence of problem gambling in various sub-populations in Ottawa. As such, local surveillance would be valuable in assessing the need of traditionally at risk populations for health promotion and treatment initiatives. Furthermore, a collaborative network, which includes representatives from various populations, would facilitate engagement with different community groups and ensure that locally developed health promotion campaigns are driven by local needs.

Harms Related to Gambling

Gambling harms refer to any negative consequences for the individual, their family or friends, or the community as a result of repetitive gambling.³⁶ More problematic levels of gambling can have a range of short and long term negative impacts not only on individuals who gamble, but also on their family and friends, as well as at the community level. These harms include financial, emotional, and physical impacts, as well as harms to family relationships and loss of connection to the community.^{37 38} Those experiencing problems with gambling and affected others experience a very similar range of gambling harms, including reduced spending on basic needs such as food and medication, selling personal items, loss of sleep, depression, attempted suicide and feeling compelled to commit a crime.³⁹

Comorbidity of Mental Health, Suicide and Substance Use

Those experiencing problem and disordered gambling have a higher prevalence of mental health and substance use than the general population. Additionally, mental health, substance use and problem gambling have a relationship in which each influence and intensify the other's harms.⁴⁰

Mental Health

A Gambling Disorder is classified as a non-substance related addiction in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V).⁴¹ The threshold for diagnosis is responding positively to four or more of these nine criteria:

- Gambling frequently when feeling distressed
- Gambling with increasing amounts of money to achieve the same excitement
- Repeated unsuccessful attempts to control or cut back on gambling
- "Chasing" one's losses through repeated visits after losing
- Lying to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling
- Restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling
- Often preoccupied with gambling
- Jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job or opportunity because of gambling
- Relies on others to provide money to relieve desperate financial situations caused by gambling

Greater participation in gambling is related to a range of negative mental health outcomes, and people experiencing problems with gambling are more likely to have other mental health concerns.⁴² There is evidence that individuals who have developed problem gambling will have a higher incidence of mental health illnesses, such as depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorders and personality disorders.^{43 44}

In one study, the prevalence of major depression among individuals with problem gambling was reported as 32.4%, compared with the national average of 4.7%.⁴⁵ Studies have demonstrated higher rates of major depression among those with problem gambling in the community, as well as those seeking treatment, than those who do not gamble.⁴⁶

Suicide

There is a link between suicide and problem gambling. Some research indicates that individuals experiencing disordered gambling were over three times more likely to have attempted suicide than the general population.^{47 48} Both suicidal ideations and suicide attempts are frequent in people experiencing problems with gambling.^{49 50} According to a report from the Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario, youth problem gamblers are four times more likely than non-problem gamblers to have thoughts of suicide and nearly 18 times more likely to report a suicide attempt.⁵¹ However, it is unknown whether these behaviours precede or follow the onset of problems with gambling.

Substance Use

Problem gambling and substance use share several characteristics, such as lack of control over the behaviour, and repeatedly engaging in the behaviour despite experiencing negative consequences.⁵² Higher participation in gambling is associated with increased substance use; individuals experiencing problems with gambling are five times more likely to report tobacco dependence, 11 times more likely to report cannabis dependence, and 23 times more likely to report alcohol dependence.⁵³

There are well-documented health and social harms related to substance use and the concern with gambling is that substance use co-occurring with gambling has the potential to exacerbate both issues.

Financial

Financial harm is often the crisis that precipitates treatment seeking by people experiencing problems with gambling.⁵⁴ Bankruptcies have been studied more than any other impact of gambling, and the majority of studies have found that bankruptcy increases following the introduction of casinos.⁵⁵ Gambling is the third most likely and fastest growing cause of bankruptcy in the western world, and one in five persons who experiences problems related to gambling will eventually file for bankruptcy.⁵⁶

Bankruptcy affects not only the person who gambles but the family as well. Persons experiencing problems with gambling may have accumulated debt by gambling with their pay cheques or family savings, or may have borrowed money from friends and relatives to try and avoid financial impact to their family.⁵⁷

Lack of finances directly affects one's ability to purchase food, essential medications, clothing, accessing health care services, housing, children's education requirements, and loss of utilities such as heating or water. There is a strong causal link between these

financial impacts and emotional and psychological distress amongst family members, due to their feelings of being unsafe or lacking control of the situation.⁵⁸

Impacts to Family and Community

Children who grow up in an environment where there are parental problems with gambling, are exposed to the effects of these problems, including family conflict, financial problems and inconsistent parenting behaviours. These children may witness domestic violence, and be subject to child abuse or neglect. They may also indulge more frequently and more heavily in potentially addictive substances and activities, and appear to be at greater risk for developing addictive patterns of behaviour. The children of people experiencing problems with gambling often experience higher than average levels of mental health issues, such as symptoms of anxiety and depression.⁵⁹ The rate of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts is significantly increased in the children of people experiencing problem gambling.⁶⁰

In addition to financial difficulties and harms from neglect of responsibilities, the families of individuals with gambling problems experience feelings of anger and hopelessness.⁶¹ It is estimated that problem gambling typically affects the lives of six close family members and friends.⁶² Other commonly noted family impacts include financial issues, such as unpaid debts and family conflicts about money, distress due to gambling-related absences; damage to relationships such as communication breakdowns and issues of trust.⁶³

While the impact of problem gambling is primarily on the family, the community also experiences effects. Job loss and reduced work productivity can lead to the need for unemployment and social assistance benefits. Consequently, there is a ripple effect on supporting organizations, such as charities and shelters, who seek to provide support to individuals experiencing problems with gambling.⁶⁴

Physical Health

Individuals experiencing problems with gambling are significantly more likely to have physical illnesses, some of which are associated with stress, such as high blood pressure, gastric distress and irritable bowel disease, and are more likely to experience decreased quality of life as a result of these conditions.⁶⁵ Obesity and sedentary behaviour are associated with more frequent rates of gambling, and obesity is also associated with problem gambling behaviour.⁶⁶

¹ Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (2015) Conceptual Framework of Harmful Gambling

http://www.greo.ca/en/topics/resources/Documents/Working-Conceptual-Framework-of-Harmful-Gambling_Feb-2016.pdf

² Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (2017) Applying a Public Health Perspective to Gambling Harm <http://www.greo.ca/en/programs-services/resources/Applying-a-public-health-perspective-to-gambling-harm---October-2017.pdf>

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