



research reveals...

an update on gambling research in ALBERTA

About The Alberta Gaming Research Institute

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province. The Institute's identified research domains include bio-psychological and health care, socio-cultural, economic, and government and industry policy and practice. The Institute aims to achieve international recognition in gaming-related research. It is coordinated by a Board of Directors working in collaboration with the Alberta Gaming Research Council. The Institute is funded by the Alberta government through the Alberta Lottery Fund.

OUR MISSION:

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

Your comments and queries are welcome either by e-mail abgaming@ualberta.ca or phone 780.492.2856.

Alberta Gaming Research Institute Board of Directors, 2003

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What is the link between gambling and criminal activity?

MANY ASSUMPTIONS exist about crime rates and gambling, especially in recent years when the range and number of gambling opportunities available to Canadians has grown dramatically. But the question of the impact of gambling on criminal activity is a subject that has not been examined in any depth in Canada. The University of Alberta's Dr. Garry Smith, along with co-researchers Drs. Harold Wynne and Tim Hartnagel, undertook to examine this complex and important topic in a recent project funded by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. Their study had three goals: first, to document as much of the gambling related crime as possible that occurred in a major Canadian urban centre (Edmonton) over a 20-month period (January 2001 through August 2002); second, to learn how law enforcement agencies and the gambling industry contend with gambling-related crime; and third, to employ novel research strategies to broaden and deepen our knowledge of the purported relationship between readily accessible legal gambling and certain types of criminal activity.

The researchers were given access to five different data sources, including Edmonton Police Services (EPS) files; the creation and use of a "gambling occurrence report" which was used by EPS officers to record any gambling-related occurrences or complaints; the application of EPS crime-mapping technology which allows the addresses of selected Edmonton gambling venues to be matched with EPS data on criminal activity at these locations; a review of Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) criminal investigation files; and, finally, interviews with the security managers of Edmonton's largest gambling venues, EPS and RCMP members.

While the EPS files did reveal instances of gambling-related criminal behaviour, the researchers believe that the files represent only a small portion of what actually occurs. The underlying reasons include time constraints, lack of cooperation by suspects, and gambling-related crimes are unreported and hence not entered into any databases. Moreover, many police files are never resolved. Therefore, unless a crime was committed at a gambling venue, there is more difficulty in knowing if it was related to gambling. In addition, many incidents that occur in gambling facilities are often handled internally. Two other areas also tend to hide the real numbers of gambling-related crime. One is theft by a family member from other family members, or "trusted employees" who steal from their employer, to support a gambling addiction. To avoid embarrassment or publicity, the matter is often dropped and no charges are pressed. Finally, research has shown 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.

The researchers indicate that the data they gathered is not conclusive enough to "infer that widespread gambling causes crime," but they do confirm that gambling and crime are connected in several ways. For example, gambling addicts will often commit crimes such as theft or fraud. As well, major gambling venues like casinos attract "opportunistic criminals" who will cheat at play, pass counterfeit bills, and launder money; they also attract "undesirables" who "disrupt play through vandalism, fighting and public intoxication."

The researchers offer some important recommendations. They note that gambling-related crime is definitely a community concern given the many legal and illegal gambling opportunities that exist. They suggest, however, that such crime can be managed if (a) police resources are increased so that more attention can be devoted to gambling, (b) if

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Responsible Gaming Features on Video Lottery Terminals: A step towards more responsible gambling?

COULD THE INTRODUCTION of “responsible gaming features” on video lottery terminals (VLTs) help make players more aware of their playing patterns and result in less problem gambling? This important question faced the Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation, when, through the Atlantic Lottery Corporation, it began introducing the first of 3,200 new and modified video lottery terminals (VLTs) in various sites across Nova Scotia in May 2001. The machines incorporated four “responsible gaming features” (RGFs), designed to discourage excessive play.

The four RGFs are: (1) a permanent on-screen clock denoting time-of-day; (2) a constant display of betting activity in cash amounts rather than credits; (3) pop-up reminders of time spent playing after 60, 90 and 120 minutes of continuous play; and; (4) a 5-minute cash out warning at 145 minutes of continuous play and mandatory cash out at 150 minutes.

Almost as crucial as the introduction of the new features was the question of whether or not they would achieve their goal. Focal Research Consultants, a Halifax-based company with an extensive background in conducting research into gambling, was selected to undertake a survey of VLT players to determine whether or not the new features were having an effect. Tracy Schrans, who undertook the study, is Vice-President (Research) at Focal Research Consultants. The full study, “Nova Scotia Video Lottery Responsible Gaming Feature Research” including appendices, can be found at www.gamingcorp.ns/responsible/pbrgf.htm.

In general, the study concluded that the responsible gaming features introduced to the VLTs did have an impact. Session lengths - the amount of time spent playing — were reduced; and there were improvements in tracking time and money spent, and in staying within desired time and money limits. The new terminals tended to attract those who were already more involved in video lottery play prior to the introduction of the new machines, and were equally likely to be have been adopted by players at some risk for problem gambling. Only those at no risk were less likely to have taken up play on the new machines.

One of the more surprising findings emerging from the research, notes Tracy, was an “increase in the rate of expenditure on the new terminals.” This increase on the new terminals explained much of the variance for reductions in session length such that on average, players participating in the study were spending the same amount of money in less time. However despite this exposure to at least one of the RGFs had implications for expenditures especially by those players at highest risk for developing gambling problems.

For high risk players, notes Tracy, a decrease in expenditure was associated with exposure to the 60 minute pop-up message whereas expenditures increased on the new terminals if they did not see the 60 minute pop-up. The effect was small but significant, indicating potential for further development in this area.

Focal Research made a number of recommendations arising from its research. For example, the consultants recommended that the clock have a permanent on-screen location and be even more



Tracy Schrans:
Responsible
gaming features
should continue
to be a priority

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gambling-related crime is carefully documented and aggregated from all sources, and (c) if more restraints are placed on the gambling formats that have the highest addictive potential, mainly machines such as video lottery terminals.

Garry hopes the study has an impact and raises awareness of gambling related crime. He noted that the study was discussed in the Canadian Senate recently during its deliberations about possible change to the criminal code involving video lottery terminals. This is an encouraging start, he says, and he has high hopes that future work in this area will reveal even more about gambling-related crime. A copy of the complete study entitled “Examining Police Records to Assess Gambling-Related Crime in the City of Edmonton” is available on the Institute website.

prominent and distinctive to alert players to the passing time. They also recommended that the cash display (which shows actual money gambled, as opposed to a credit display) be retained, and options examined to use it in conjunction with machine-based budgeting options. They suggested as well that the change from a credit based to a cash based betting system be facilitated by providing “supplementary educational information” about how the change could impact play behaviour. Focal Research also recommended that the pop-up reminders — the most effective of the four features — also be retained.

The new VLT features also had an impact beyond Nova Scotia. While it was the first jurisdiction in North America to introduce the modified terminals, other governments have begun to adopt machines with them. In the almost universally acknowledged quest to provide for more informed and responsible gaming environments, the features are a definite step forward. As Tracy notes, “certainly the incorporation of ‘responsible gaming features’ or other ways of providing players with means of playing within desired time and money limits should continue to be a priority whenever game modifications are being considered.”

Tracy Schrans presented an overview of her research and was but one of many very informative and knowledgeable researchers who contributed to a highly successful conference program, ‘Conference 2003: Prevention of Problem Gambling’ held on March 27 & 28, 2003 at the University of Lethbridge. The received presentations are now available on the Institute’s website, and a summary of the entire conference in print form. Call or e-mail the Institute’s office for a copy.

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