



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

Dr. Nady el-Guebaly, Chair, University of Calgary
Dr. Dennis Fitzpatrick, University of Lethbridge
Dr. Chris Hosgood, University of Lethbridge
Dr. Edd LeSage, University of Alberta
Ms. Sheila Murphy, Chair, Alberta Gaming Research Council
Dr. Rick Szostak, University of Alberta
Dr. Pam Sokol, University of Calgary

Node Coordinators:

University of Alberta: Dr. Garry Smith
(garry.j.smith@ualberta.ca)
University of Calgary: Dr. David Hodgins
(dhodgins@ucalgary.ca)
University of Lethbridge: Dr. Robert Williams
(robert.williams@uleth.ca)

Executive Director, Vickii Williams
(vickii.williams@ualberta.ca)

The bingo experience: Is it really negative?

AMONG THE MANY FORMS OF GAMBLING, bingo is regarded as probably the least sophisticated. After all, it's often one of the first games of chance that children are exposed to; it's seen as relatively harmless and doesn't require any particular skill. Yet bingo carries a generally negative reputation - many Albertans see it as boring and a waste of time. Still, a lot of people, especially seniors, like the game enough to ignore the stigmas and play bingo regularly. Is bingo really so bad? This question caught the attention of Dr. Sandy O'Brien Cousins, Professor of Exercise Gerontology in the University of Alberta's Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation. What interested her specifically was the stereotypical image of bingo: a game played by "little old ladies" who seemingly have nothing better to do. What do they 'get' out of bingo that we fail to understand? And what is really wrong about bingo playing that society can label it so negatively?

Affiliated with the University of Alberta for more than 30 years, Dr. Cousins holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Physical Education, and an Ed.D in Adult Education/Gerontology, all from the University of British Columbia. Her research since 1985 has focused on seniors and exercise, and she has developed an internationally recognized research program focused on exercise gerontology, health promotion, life-long barriers to participation including cutting-edge work on self-talk. Although her scientific publications are prolific, she claims her most prestigious applied work was as primary author of Health Canada's *Physical Activity Guide for Older Adults* (1999), of which millions have been distributed.

Sandy has researched age stereotyping before, and the image of bingo as an activity for older women was one she was eager to investigate. It also followed naturally from her previous work, since bingo is typically associated with inactivity and generally unhealthy lifestyles (smoky environment, fast-food diets). A discussion with Dr. Garry Smith, Professor Emeritus of Physical Education and now University of Alberta Node Coordinator for the Alberta Gaming Research Institute, led Sandy to propose a research project to the Institute. The resulting study was entitled *The Lifestyles of Elders Who Play Bingo: High Quality Aging or Gambling with Health?*

The study had three objectives: (1) to identify the social and health characteristics of elders who play bingo; (2) to understand the lifestyle patterns of a bingo 'way of life' among weekly players in later life; and (3) to capture the personal meaning of, and motivation for, the bingo experience and its contribution to a "good old age" (health, wellness and quality of life).

Sandy discovered two things early on in her research: (1) the subject of gambling stereotypes and actual lifestyles had not been studied in any depth, and (2) the stereotypes about elderly women in bingo halls were apparent. "If you check out clip art images for bingo on the web," she says, "you'll find that almost all of them depict older women." Sandy and her research assistant, U of A student Chad Witcher, used an inductive approach to part of the study that based their findings in the actual experiences of older players. Sandy notes that "by giving bingo players 'voice' and the opportunity to explain what bingo means to them, we get right to the source of



"Why does bingo have a negative image?"

what it is like to be a bingo player." She points out that other investigators have suggested that such approaches would be a "major improvement" in the investigation of gambling information, perhaps because the perspectives most often lacking are those of the actual players. Accordingly, a variety of materials — case studies, personal experiences, interviews, observations, field notes, and social interactions — were deployed as a way "to get a better fix on the subject at hand."

Targeting Albertans 65 and over, Sandy and Chad used a combination of data-gathering strategies. A computer-assisted telephone survey of 400 Albertans provided information on health and lifestyle patterns, as well as on gambling patterns for both players and non-players. Written surveys of 45 bingo players supplemented the database with more "hard-core" bingo players. Audio-taped interviews of regular players provided rich descriptions of the lives of eight women, and gave an in-depth perspective of what it is like to be a weekly bingo player. Finally, a focus group of ten people aged 76 to 91 added saturation to the interpretive side of the study and confirmed that the researchers, through their other surveys and interviews, had "heard it all before."

The study's findings are wide-ranging, with a wealth of content. For example, although bingo is an important recreational activity for only 16% of Albertans over age 65, it still is played by millions of North Americans. Moreover, "while bingo players come from all walks of life, seniors who play bingo tend to be older, female, less healthy, of lower income, and of lower education. Older women are a visible group in bingo halls, but older men are part of the scene." In addition, the most significant vice of bingo players was found not to be smoking but lack of exercise. While the full study results will be published in peer-reviewed publications in the near future, one section perhaps best sums up the results:

"We do NOT suggest that women playing bingo are desperate individuals with lives that are fraught with difficulties. Rather, the data speaks to important social and psychological contributions of bingo that are likely to contribute positively to health and wellness. The women in this study provided everyday examples of fun-loving seniors who aimed to get the most out of life."

Sandy suggests that bingo is popular with seniors for the simple reason that few other forms of leisure activity are available to people in their circumstances. Being elderly, female, and often managing physical disabilities, their choices of where to go at night for some fun is very limited. The lack of such choice is a challenge that society may have to deal with soon, as people live longer lives. Casinos, movies and the theatre are too expensive for some, and few other activities offer any welcoming social opportunity for women in this group. "Bingo offers a level playing field — they can perform as equals in a game of pure chance. Bingo offers moments of triumph in a world that could otherwise be viewed as a tedium of apathy and despair. Bingo offers them community; 'where else does an older woman go for a night out?'" Winning or losing doesn't seem to be as important to these people as the outing itself. If they win, they see it as a chance to recoup some of the costs of playing. If they don't, they know that they are providing a donation to whatever charity is helping operate the bingo.

As important as the results are, Sandy points out that her research would never have been funded were it not for the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. She hopes that this study will help counter the negative stereotype that has long been associated with elderly people in bingo halls. "Yes, there are problem gamblers in bingo," she acknowledges, "but on balance — for these people at least — bingo seems to be a good thing." As she notes in her findings, "older women in general add risks to their health by adopting sedentary lifestyles with too much sitting, but at least the bingo players are not sitting at home alone. They appear to be enjoying a good life by 'havin' fun, makin' money, and meetin' friends.'"

To read the associated research report, and for Sandy O'Brien Cousins' contact information, please see the Institute's website (www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca). As well, a brief overview of Dr. Cousins' research results is being run by the ACCESS Network as a public service announcement during the months of March and April, 2003.

12th International Conference on Gambling and Risk-Taking

Fairmont Waterfront Hotel, Vancouver, BC, May 26 - 30, 2003

The Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming at the University of Nevada, Reno is sponsoring the 12th International Conference on Gambling and Risk-Taking. The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is one of the Conference's Associate Sponsors. The objective of the conference is to stimulate research and facilitate discussion and debate about gambling and commercial gaming throughout the world. For further details, see the conference web page: www.unr.edu/coba/game/confer.asp

Seniors and Gambling

How many seniors gamble? Figures from an Institute-sponsored prevalence study of 1804 gamblers in 2002 indicate that gambling participation significantly drops off among Albertans after age 64 (69.7% participation rate). The same study found that older Albertans are least likely to develop gambling problems.

Why do seniors gamble? Seniors gamble for a variety of reasons but often report that they enjoy the social interaction, excitement, and escape from loneliness that gambling offers. Bingo, buying lottery tickets, and playing casinos games are the most common gambling activities reported by seniors.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Gambling Literature Online Database – Seniors

URL: <http://gaming.uleth.ca/hitlist.php?subject=37>

Seniors / Elderly Gamblers – Bibliography

URL: http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/agrilibrary/word/seniors_elderly.pdf

Measuring Gambling and Problem Gambling in Alberta Using the Canadian Problem Gambling Index

URL: http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/documents/research/gambling_alberta_cpgi.pdf

Vickii Williams	Executive Director	
davidnorwood-ink	Writer/Editor	
Epigrafix	Design/Layout	
Garry Smith	Media contact	780.492.2770

e-mail: abgaming@ualberta.ca p: 780.492.2856

ISSN 1499-2639 (Print)
ISSN 1499-2647 (Online)

© AGRI 2003