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Change and continuity in a help-seeking problem gambling population: A five-year record*

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of some trends among problem gamblers seeking

help through the BreakEven/Gambler's Help problem gambling counselling services in Victoria, Australia, between July 1995 and June 2000. Data presented are drawn from details collected on clients at registration, assessment, and all other client contacts to form a Problem Gambling Services minimum data set (MDS). Analysis of the MDS shows a number of noteworthy trends towards continuity or change. A major element of continuity is the ability of the service to attract women, who constitute around 50% of the clients for the period. Major changes include the increasing trend towards presentation of clients at an earlier stage in their "career" as problem gamblers. Also identified is persistence or change in client characteristics, such as gender differences in gambling activity and problem type and level. In addition, a range of other factors are explored, such as level of debt and its associated characteristics, the characteristics of people committing crimes to finance their gambling, and the differences between people presenting for counselling and problem gamblers in the community.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of some trends among problem gamblers who sought counselling from the specialist BreakEven/Gambler's Help problem gambling counselling services in Victoria, Australia, between 1 July 1995 and 30 June 2000 (the latest date for which data were available at the time of writing).

As part of the standard operating procedures of the BreakEven/ Gambler's Help problem gambling counselling services, data about clients are collected at registration and assessment and at each client contact. Counsellors record this information on forms during (or immediately after) contact with clients. These forms constitute the Problem Gambling Services minimum data set (MDS). The MDS was established and implemented in 1995, and revised in 1998, to provide information for a range of purposes, including individual case management, service planning, and analysis of gambling impacts. The Problem Gambling Research Program at the University of Melbourne provided annual reports between 1996 and 2001 based on analysis of the MDS, which were published by the Victorian Department of Community Services ([Jackson, Thomason, Ryan, & Smith, 1996](#); [Jackson et al., 1997](#); [1999a](#); [1999b](#); [Jackson, Thomas, Thomason, Holt, & McCormack, 2000c](#); [Jackson, Thomas, Ross, & Kearney, 2001](#)).¹

The scope of gambling in Victoria

Currently about 80% of Victorians gamble in any year, with figures ranging from a low of 75% in 1992, the year that electronic gaming machines (EGMs) or "pokies" were introduced, to a high of 87% in 1996 (Roy Morgan Research, 2000).

Participation in EGM play in the adult population has varied between a low of 13% in 1992 (representing only three months of availability when the survey was conducted) to a high of 15% in 1994, coinciding with the establishment of a temporary casino in June of that year, with participation rates for 1998 and 1999 being quite stable at 13% and 12%, respectively ([Roy Morgan Research, 1999, 2000](#); [Market Solutions, 1997](#)). Participation rates in EGM play for those who gambled show a similar pattern, with 20% participation in 1992, 41% in 1994, 31% in 1998, and 30% in 1999 ([Roy Morgan Research, 2000](#)). The introduction of the permanent casino at Crown Entertainment Complex in 1997 did not see any real change in the participation levels of EGM play.

There are 30,000 licensed EGMs in the state of Victoria: 2,500 located in Crown Casino and 27,500 in other venues, with half of these 27,500 in hotels and half in licensed clubs (Auditor-General of Victoria, 1996, p. 14). Noncasino EGMs are operated by a government-mandated privately operated duopoly (Tattersall & Tabcorp) operating under a licence that runs for 20 years from 1992. They operate these EGMs from 544 venues run by 470 separately licensed companies. In 1992, 3,349 EGMs were available, operating from 45 venues. This represented 12.2% of the potential total of 27,500. By 1995, when the BreakEven/Gambler's Help program was established, 20,834 EGMs were available, representing over 75% of the potential total. Annual growth between 1996 and 1999 averaged 6% of the potential total, ranging from 9% growth in 1996 to 1% growth in 1999. In this sense, the market was a reasonably mature one in terms of EGM opportunity by the time the counselling service was introduced.

In terms of other gambling opportunities, Tattersall's have operated lotteries in the state under licence since 1954, progressively adding new products (Lotto, Keno, Club Keno, Internet lotteries). Racing is catered for by three major metropolitan tracks and a range of rural racecourses, although declining attendance following the introduction of offcourse totalisers in 1961 through the Victorian Totalisator Agency Board (TAB) led to the closure of at least 34 racecourses between 1960 and 1983. The state-government-run TAB was privatised in 1994 with the formation of Tabcorp Holdings Limited.

In 1999, 48% of all adults who had gambled on EGMs in the previous 12 months were men, while 52% were women. These figures were reversed for those who gambled on EGMs regularly (at least monthly), of whom 52% were men and 48% were women. While gambling participation rates in general, and EGM participation rates in particular, show a spike in 1994 and a levelling out in 1998 and 1999, expenditure rates show a steady increase over this period.

There are a number of ways to look at this. Victorians' expenditure (loss) on EGMs outside the casino went from AUS \$13 million per week in 1993–1994 to AUS \$37

million per week in 1998–1999.² Expressed as a loss per week for adult Victorians, this represented AUS \$8.64 in 1993 and AUS \$18.90 in 1999 (Roy Morgan Research, 2000). Expressed as a proportion of household disposable income (HDI), there was modest growth in total gambling expenditure between 1972–1973 and the early 1990s (about 1.3% of HDI), then a very sharp growth to 3.49% by 1997–1998. Racing expenditure has shown a steady decline in the same period, from just under 1% to 0.6% of HDI ([Tasmanian Gaming Commission, 2001](#)).

Gambling revenue is now the second highest source of Victorian State Government revenue after Payroll Tax and Stamp Duty, and now surpasses Liquor, Tobacco, and Petrol Taxes combined. Total revenue from gaming increased from AUS \$0.4 billion in 1992–1993 to AUS \$1.04 billion in 1996–1997 to over AUS \$1.4 billion in 1998–1999, with EGMs contributing 62% of these taxes. Revenue from gambling now contributes 16% of the state's income, compared with 8.5% in 1982, and is used to pay for many basic services, such as health, education, and recreation. For further details on these issues of expenditure and taxation, see [Smith \(1998\)](#); [Productivity Commission \(1999\)](#); [McMillen, Jackson, Johnson, O'Hara, & Woolley \(1999\)](#); [Tasmanian Gaming Commission \(2001\)](#); and [Hayward & Kliger \(2002\)](#).

Problem Gambling Services strategy

The 1991 Victorian Gaming Machine Control Act and its 1996 amendments provided for the establishment of the Community Support Fund (CSF). This legislation requires that 8.3% of daily net cash balances from EGMs in hotels be paid into the fund. Clubs are exempt on the basis that their profits are supposedly disbursed to the community through their club membership.

In 1993, two years after EGM legalisation came into effect and one year after EGMs were introduced, the Problem Gambling Services Strategy (PGSS) was implemented by the Victorian State Government with a total budgetary commitment of AUS \$61 million to 2001 funded through the CSF. Gambler's Help, known until November 2000 as BreakEven, was established under the PGSS as a specialised statewide problem gambling counselling initiative.

In addition to funding Gambler's Help, the PGSS provides a range of other community and client services, including community education and mass media campaigns; regional gaming liaison and community education officers under the Department of Human Services; Gambler's Helpline, a free, 24-hour telephone counselling and referral service; and a research program to provide information regarding problem gambling in the community and inform appropriate service responses.

A number of family service agencies are partially funded through the PGSS to

provide counselling and other forms of assistance, such as material aid, to clients with gambling-related problems, in addition to the primary BreakEven/Gambler's Help service. Unfortunately, there is no requirement that these agencies collect uniform data on their clients. In a statewide survey of 121 of these family service agencies, most (89.3%) indicated that some people were using their services for gambling-related problems. For 15% of these agencies, clients with gambling-related problems made up 20% or more of their clientele; however, less than half of the agencies surveyed (43.1%) had data collection systems that enabled identification of gambling-related problems ([Jackson et al., 2000a](#)). Lacking the firm data from these agencies to provide a more complete picture of help-seeking, this paper will consider only those people with gambling problems who presented to BreakEven/Gambler's Help.

Gambler's Help client trends

Overall patterns of use of Gambler's Help

During the period from the time the BreakEven/Gambler's Help program started in 1995 and the year 2000, 12,500 people sought counselling assistance, with numbers doubling every year for the first three years. It is important to note that these data are population data; that is, they include the entire population of presentations to Gambler's Help services. Over this five-year period, between 75 and 80% of people presented for help with their own gambling behaviour; the rest presented for help in relation to someone else's gambling. While the numbers of males and females presenting to address their own gambling issues are almost identical, and have remained so for the five-year period under review, females are more than twice as likely as males to present due to concerns arising from the impact of another person's gambling, most notably their partner ($\chi^2 = 298$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). A more detailed description of partner presentations is discussed elsewhere ([Crisp, Thomas, Jackson, & Thomason, 2001b](#)).

These data contrast with results of a recent Ontario study where the ratio of male to female clients dealing with their own gambling problem was 1.9:1, although the proportion of people presenting for help with their own problems or the gambling problems of family/significant others is similar (73.5% and 22.8%, respectively) ([Rush & Moxam, 2001](#)). The male-to-female ratio of Gambler's Help clients also contrasts sharply with that of a recent study of callers to a Gambling Helpline in New England (62.1% male vs. 37.9% female) ([Potenza, Steinberg, McLaughlin, Rounsaville, & O'Malley, 2001](#)).

While the proportion of clients who present because of the gambling of others has more than doubled from 11.9% in 1995–1996 to 24.8% in 1999–2000, the more remarkable change reported in [Table 1](#) is the sheer increase in client numbers,

such that in 1997–1998 almost as many individuals attended Gambler's Help services as in the previous two years combined. This may reflect the large increase in Gambler's Help locations from 30 sites in 1996–1997 to approximately 100 in 1998–1999. In 1998–1999, registrations plateaued, but further growth occurred in the following year, 1999–2000.

Problem gambling client characteristics

Previous studies (e.g., [Ciarrochi & Richardson, 1989](#); [Taber, McCormick, Russo, Adkins, & Ramirez, 1987](#)) have shown that a “usual” problem gambler profile is an unmarried male under 30 years of age, and these studies have found the following cohorts to be overrepresented among problem and pathological gamblers: male, non-Caucasian, not married (Abbot & Volberg, 1996; [Volberg, 1994](#); [Volberg & Steadman, 1989](#)), under 30 years of age, unemployed (Abbot & Volberg, 1996), and having a lower level of education ([Volberg, 1994](#); [Volberg & Steadman, 1989](#)).

The demographic profile of BreakEven/Gambler's Help clients reporting as problem gamblers is analysed herein and creates a somewhat different picture than the studies cited above or the profile of problem gamblers not in counselling as identified by the Productivity Commission National Survey ([Productivity Commission, 1999](#)). Although more likely to be unemployed than the Victorian population overall ($\chi^2 = 12.3$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), BreakEven/Gambler's Help clients who are problem gamblers differ from their overseas counterparts in being relatively older (in their 30s) and relatively more likely to be female than male. Research data from service agencies in other Australian jurisdictions where EGMs are readily accessible, such as the states of Queensland and South Australia, show, as in Victoria, an almost equal distribution of males and females in their problem gambler client populations ([Dickerson, McMillen, Hallebone, Volberg, & Woolley, 1997](#)).

A number of factors need to be considered when accounting for this gender finding, particularly the difference in help-seeking behaviour between males and females. It is a general finding in other health and human service contexts that females tend to have a greater propensity for help-seeking than males ([Cockerham, 1997](#); [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1996](#)). Furthermore, although it may generally be a long time before an individual develops gambling-related difficulties with a newly legalised form of gambling, there is some evidence that suggests that female players in particular may seek help within one to two years of beginning to gamble on a new product ([Dickerson et al., 1997](#)).

Female clients presenting to BreakEven/Gambler's Help agencies in the second year of operation of the program (July 1996 to June 1997) differed significantly from the male clients in a number of characteristics. Many of these differences persist. When compared to males, females were likely to be older (39.6 years vs.

36.1 years of age), born in Australia (79.4% vs. 74.7%, $\chi^2 = 10.9$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), married (42.8% vs. 30.2%, $\chi^2 = 41.8$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), living with family (78.9% vs. 61.5%, $\chi^2 = 369.1$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$), and having dependent children (48.4% vs. 35.7%, $\chi^2 = 57.0$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Despite having similar personal annual incomes ($U = 255,151.5$, $Z = -.493$, n.s.), female gamblers reported average debts (AUS \$7,342) of less than half of that owed by male gamblers (AUS \$19,091) ($F(1,616) = 12.11$, $p < .001$).

Age structure of the help-seeking group

As [Table 2](#) indicates, females who presented to resolve problems associated with their own gambling were older than their male counterparts; however, the overall age profile of clients with gambling problems was similar throughout the five-year period. In 1999–2000, problem gamblers are slightly overrepresented in the 20–29 (20.7% compared with 19.5% of all Victorians), 30–39 (30.6% compared with 20.2%), 40–49 (27.5% compared with 18.4%), and 50–59 (13.4% compared with 12.7%) age groups when compared with the age distribution of Victorians aged 15 and over in the 1996 Census. They are underrepresented in the under-20 (1.2% compared with 9.0%) and over-60 (5.5% compared with 20.2%) age groupings.

Like the BreakEven/Gambler's Help client data, two Productivity Commission national samples (problem gamblers and data on people in counselling at agencies specialising in problem gambling counselling) reported a different age profile from adult Victorians in the 1996 Census ([Productivity Commission, 1999](#)). None of these gambling groupings appear to be representative of the general adult population in Victoria. Relative to the Productivity Commission samples, the BreakEven/Gambler's Help program reported greater numbers of younger clients (25–34 years old) in counselling, whereas the national sample reported more people in counselling for problem gambling in most of the older age categories.

Do BreakEven/Gambler's Help clients reflect the age structure of problem gamblers? The Productivity Commission survey identified the under-25 age group as the largest group of problem gamblers. Apart from the 65–69 age group, which constitutes only 4% of problem gamblers, it is this under-25 group that is the least represented in counselling in Victoria, with only about one third of the potential numbers in counselling over the years 1999–2000 and 2000–2001.

Marital status

In 1999–2000, almost half (48.0%) of all problem gamblers were married (legally or de facto), and a quarter (26.2%) indicated that they had never married (see [Table 3](#)). However, there were considerable differences between the sexes with respect to marital status. Male problem gamblers (35.3%) were twice as likely never to have married as their female counterparts (16.9%, $\chi^2 = 112.0$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$),

who were more likely to be widowed, divorced, or legally married. More females reported divorced or separated status than males.

A comparison of the marital status of problem gamblers with that of Victoria's general population based on the 1996 Population Census suggests problem gamblers are less likely to be married (37.3%) than the general population aged 15 and over (53.5%). However, the census data did not include a category for de facto marriages, which 10.7% of problem gamblers indicated was their marital status. This may account for some of the apparent differences. Problem gamblers reported higher rates for divorce (13.7% vs. 5.8%) and separation (9.5% vs. 3.2%) than the overall population of Victoria aged 15 and over.

Household and family structure

The living arrangements of problem gamblers presenting to BreakEven/Gambler's Help services changed over the five years (see [Table 4](#)). Females presenting in 1999–2000 were more likely to be living in a single-parent family than in the other years. With the exception of 1997–1998, female clients were less likely to be living with a partner, which was also true of their male counterparts. Increasingly, both sexes report living arrangements other than by themselves or with family.

Ethnic background

In a pattern highly consistent over the entire 1995–2000 period, approximately one quarter of clients presenting in 1999–2000 (23.6%) were born overseas, representing a wide range of countries. This is broadly consistent with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1996 Population Census data, which found that 27.5% of Victorians were not Australian born. However, the rates of problem gambling in some ethnic groups studied in the Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority-funded study of the impact of gambling on specific ethnic groups ([Thomas & Yamine, 2000](#)) were found to be much higher than for other groups. One might expect much higher rates of presentation to BreakEven/Gambler's Help within these groups than those found in the MDS data. As shown in [Table 5](#), over half of Gambler's Help clients born overseas (56.6%) were born in Europe.

Labour force status

[Table 6](#) reveals that almost three quarters (73.0%) of problem gamblers presenting for help in 1999–2000 were part of the labour force; they were either employed or looking for work. As in Australian society more generally, the labour force participation rate within the study sample is higher among males than females. However, the unemployment rate of 16.6% among Gambler's Help clients was more than double that for all Victorians aged 15 and over (7.3% (ABS, September

1999), $\chi^2 = 387.0$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

[Table 7](#) shows that the labour force participation rate for problem gamblers increased between 1996 and 2000, and at 73.0% for the 1999–2000 year was considerably higher than 62.9%, the census figure for all Victorians aged 15 and over as at August 1999 (ABS, 1999). This suggests that problem gamblers have higher rates of both employment and unemployment than the overall population of Victoria. This may be a reflection of the fact that people with gambling problems are predominantly of workforce age (15–64 years).

As can be seen from [Table 8](#), employed problem gamblers who presented for counselling in 1999–2000 reported holding a wide range of jobs. When compared to all employed people aged 15 and over in Victoria, the occupational categories of problem gamblers were very similar. The exceptions were that problem gamblers were underrepresented among professionals (9.6% vs. 19.0% of all Victorians) and overrepresented among labourers and related workers (15.9% vs. 9.7%) (ABS, 1999).

Income

The self-reported individual income of problem gamblers is not confined to a particular income level and varies considerably from less than AUS \$120 to over AUS \$1,500 per week; however, over half (53.5%) of the clients reported weekly incomes of less than AUS \$400. This is explained by the fact that 34.5% of the problem gamblers were in receipt of pensions and benefits. A further 23.3% of problem gamblers reported weekly incomes of between AUS \$400 and AUS \$599. Lower income figures among the female clients were not unexpected: they reflect the situation in the wider community. For example, in May 1998, the ABS reported that the average weekly earnings for male employees were AUS \$730 versus AUS \$484 for females.

Further details of income reported by problem gamblers are presented in [Table 9](#). It should be noted, however, that income figures do not account for variations such as whether net or gross income was reported or whether mandatory deductions (e.g., Child Support payments) are counted in gross amounts, and so on. The income distribution of problem gamblers is quite similar to that of all Victorians aged 15 and over from the 1996 Population Census figures, as shown in [Table 9](#).

Gambling behaviours

Clients presenting to BreakEven/Gambler's Help are asked to provide information about hours and dollars spent gambling at their most recent gambling session by gambling type and days spent gambling during a typical month by gambling type.

While [Table 10](#) shows that problem gamblers report involvement in a wide range of types of gambling, by far the most common is EGMs, which are used by more than two thirds (71.1%) of all problem gambling clients (86.4% of female clients and 58.3% of male clients). EGM use was the most common form of gambling reported by BreakEven/Gambler's Help clients during the entire five-year period. The next most commonly reported type of gambling was offcourse betting at the TAB (11.9%). No other gambling type exceeded 4%. Only a very small number of people reported involvement in forms of Internet gambling, but because it is quite new, there may be a lag period between the introduction of this type of gambling and clients presenting themselves for problem gambling counselling.

These findings concur with previous research findings that problem gambling is typically associated with particular types of gambling, such as EGMs, racing, video-based games, and casino gaming ([Blaszczynski, Walker, Sagris, & Dickerson, 1997](#)). The availability of EGMs, in particular, has been shown to have a strong association with problem gambling ([Dickerson et al., 1997](#)), and gamblers who regularly prefer racing and gaming machines have been found to be more likely to score in the at-risk categories in the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) ([Lesieur & Blume, 1987](#)). Although surveys indicate that between 30% and 40% of adult Australians play the lottery as a weekly habit, few, if any, manifest signs of associated problems ([Blaszczynski et al., 1997](#)).

These findings also lend support to research indicating that females are more likely to gamble on activities based on “chance,” such as EGMs and bingo, and males are more likely to gamble on forms of gambling based on “skill,” such as TAB and racing ([Walker, 1992](#)).

Despite the majority of problem gamblers reporting using EGMs on their most recent day of gambling, a number of issues should be taken into consideration in interpreting the data.

Staff in EGM gaming venues are now more aware of BreakEven/ Gambler's Help services as a result of the gaming industry's access to training programs for venue staff, the community awareness and education campaigns conducted throughout the state by BreakEven/ Gambler's Help community education workers, and the introduction of Responsible Gaming policies in many venues. Thus venue staff are more likely to be in a position both to recognise problem gamblers and to refer them to a BreakEven/Gambler's Help counselling service. Evaluation of a statewide mass media education campaign supplemented with locally distributed pamphlets also showed that venue patrons were aware of a wide range of messages encouraging responsible play and help-seeking. Of 71 venue patrons interviewed, unprompted recall of problem gambling educational material was 67%, while 79% recalled the slogan “If you have a gambling problem in your life call Gambler's Helpline toll free” ([Jackson, Thomas, Thomason, & Ho, 2000b](#)). This

study also showed a direct correlation between placement of educational materials and increased calls to Gambler's Helpline with a flow-on effect of referrals to BreakEven/Gambler's Help ([Jackson et al., 2000b](#), pp. 37–40).

Although the amount of money and time spent gambling varies between different types of gambling, as [Table 11](#) indicates, problem gamblers report spending considerable amounts of time and money on most forms of gambling.

A problem gambler's involvement in gambling can vary over time, and as [Table 12](#) suggests, BreakEven/Gambler's Help attracts problem gamblers with wide-ranging patterns of gambling. While one quarter (26.5%) presented to Gambler's Help when their gambling was increasing, 28.7% of problem gamblers had already decreased their gambling. In some cases there was a total reduction to the point where the clients were not gambling at all when they sought assistance.

The patterns of gambling behaviour in [Chart 1](#) show a slight trend for people's behaviour to be less stable at the point of referral, and more people tend to describe their pattern as binge gambling or one of increasing gambling activity. As [Table 13](#) shows, for the 1999–2000 cohort, this increase in gambling or binge gambling is likely to be more characteristic of EGM players than those engaged in offcourse betting.

Debt

The extent of clients' gambling-related debts is reported in [Table 14](#) and shows that males report being more in debt as a result of their gambling than females. This is consistent with the data presented in [Table 15](#) that males are more likely to borrow money to fund their gambling. The mean debt decreased from AUS \$14,140 in 1997–1998 to AUS \$8,295 in 1998–1999 but rebounded to AUS \$11,763 in 1999–2000.

Although, as [Blaszczynski et al. \(1997\)](#) have pointed out, it is difficult to treat self-reported expenditure (loss) information with certainty, we suggest that information on debt, while probably underreported, is worth examining in more detail to determine finer patterns. While over a third of BreakEven/ Gambler's Help clients in 1998–1999, for example, had zero debt, there was a small group of people who had considerable debt. Simple addition of the reported debt for 1998–1999 clients resulted in a total debt of AUS \$15,342,362 among the client cohort. However, looking at those with large debt, we find that only 1.3% of problem gamblers accounted for 29% of the total debt (26 people owed AUS \$4,486,000).

Further disaggregation of this small, high-debt group, compared to all 1998–1999 clients, showed that they were more likely to be male (62%), older (mean age of 41 years), born overseas, employed full time as a manager or clerical worker, with

either a very high or a very low individual income. They had higher proportions of most presenting problems, particularly financial and employment problems, and were four times more likely to have the maximum 10 maladaptive behaviours or DSM-IV items. Thus, while it is probably a good sign that some people are attending counselling with zero or low debt, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the problem gambling population includes people who have what can only be described as massive financial problems.

Presenting problems

In a specialised problem gambling counselling service it is not surprising that clients presenting on their own behalf are overwhelmingly concerned about their gambling behaviour, as [Chart 2](#) shows. Other presenting problems as reported by about half or more of these clients were financial, intrapersonal, and relationship or interpersonal issues. While some problems were reported by both sexes, substantial differences were revealed in respect to some problem areas.

Employment and other work-related issues and legal issues were more frequently indicated among the presenting problems reported by men, whereas women were more likely to report relationship and family problems and physical symptoms associated with their gambling.

Comparing the presenting problems reported by problem gamblers over the period from 1995 to 2000 reveals some fairly major changes. We can see quite distinct differences between the periods 1995–1997 and 1997–2000. In the 1997–2000 period all presenting problems declined, with the exception of gambling behaviour. There was a marked decline in leisure use issues and physical symptoms, for example.

Generally, the first two years of the BreakEven/Gambler's Help counselling service may be characterised by a high level of help-seeking for “symptomatic” effects of gambling. This declines steadily from 1997 as clients put a somewhat greater emphasis on gambling behaviour as the reason to seek help rather than for problems which are consequences of the gambling behaviour. This is not to suggest a simplistic notion of causality, however, with all problems deemed to be the result of gambling. It is clear that for many people in counselling, the gambling itself is symptomatic of other problems, such as loneliness, poor familial and interpersonal relations, and perceived lack of alternative leisure pursuits.

The number of presenting problems has also decreased over the years. This suggests both that individuals are seeking help from the program earlier in their “career” as problem gamblers and that the “backlog” of people with longer-standing problems, who had not previously sought help, was dealt with primarily in the first

two years of the service's operation. Almost one quarter (24.2%) of problem gamblers in 1999–2000 presented with only one, or none, of the problems listed in this chart compared to 2.4% in 1995–1996. Conversely, the proportion of those presenting with six or more problems was down to 18.5% in 1999–2000 from a high of 49.4% in 1995–1996.

DSM-IV “maladaptive behaviour” patterns

The client assessment form completed by the counsellors at BreakEven/Gambler's Help measures the extent to which gambling has become problematic and uses the DSM-IV criteria as part of the measurement of the type, frequency, and intensity of gambling behaviours and their adverse effects.

The proportion of gamblers reporting five or more maladaptive behaviours is reasonably stable at about three quarters for the period from 1996–1997 to 1999–2000 (see [Table 15](#)). This contrasts with the 1995–1996 figure of 81.7%, although the latter figure may be elevated due to the same backlog effect noted earlier. As with the number of presenting problems, there has been a decrease in the number of maladaptive behaviours that people present with. In 1995–1996, 18.2% of people presented with fewer than five of these behaviours compared with 25.7% in both 1998–1999 and 1999–2000.³

If we take the numbers of maladaptive behaviours to be a crude measure of acuity, then it would seem that clients' gambling problems are decreasing in acuity. However, we caution that this may not be a sound index of acuity. The quality and scope of a behaviour rather than whether it is shared with other behaviours might be a better case acuity index. These measures are not available within the current data collection and would need to be the subject of a separate investigation.

As [Table 16](#) demonstrates, the extent to which maladaptive behaviours manifest themselves also varies according to the type of gambling. Comparing people who gamble using EGMs with those who gamble at the TAB, the TAB clients were more likely than the EGM players to report being preoccupied with gambling; chasing losses; relying on others for money; and having jeopardised relationships, jobs, and education. EGM users were more likely to report gambling as a form of escape. TAB clients were almost twice as likely to report committing illegal acts to finance their gambling.

Further disaggregation of the two variables in the MDS relating to illegal actions in relation to gambling shows that males are twice as likely as females to commit such illegal acts. (The variables are illegal action reported as a current source of gambling funds and the DSM-IV criterion of having committed illegal acts.) Problem gamblers who are younger, unemployed, never married, living in a shared

household, reporting debt in excess of AUS \$10,000, presenting with legal problems, and reporting 10 maladaptive behaviours are over-represented in this area of illegal acts related to gambling.

Conclusion

This paper sought to describe some trends among people seeking help with gambling-related problems and, specifically, trends among clients of BreakEven/Gambler's Help, the specialised statewide counselling service established as part of the PGSS in Victoria, Australia. A number of areas covered by this overview have been analysed in some detail to date. These include

- gender differences in help-seeking and problem presentation ([Crisp et al., 2000](#))
- debt ([McCormack & Jackson, 2000](#))
- the particular issues faced by partners of problem gamblers ([Crisp et al., 2001b](#))
- the relationship between number of sessions of counselling and problem resolution ([Crisp et al., 2001a](#))
- the characteristics of older people's gambling and help-seeking ([McCormack, Jackson, & Thomas, 2003](#))

There are still numerous questions posed by this review, however. Just some of these are as follows:

- *Why is the gender profile for presentations to BreakEven/ Gambler's Help different from that recorded by other problem gambling counselling services?* Although we know that women are more likely to seek help with problems, this does not, in itself, seem to be a good enough explanation. We believe that the reason may lie in the location of these services as a specialist counselling program in generalist community health agencies rather than being stand-alone problem gambling services. This location philosophy addresses both access and stigma issues.
- *Why are the numbers seeking assistance now over two and a half times the per annum referral rate of the first year of operation of the service?* There is obviously a growing familiarity with the existence of both the face-to-face counselling service and the Gambler's Helpline telephone counselling service, which we might expect would lead to more referral, particularly because advertising of the service is increasingly a feature of public education campaigns and venue-based social responsibility initiatives. We have explored in a fairly minimal fashion the relationship between education and help-seeking, but we need stronger evidence of this relationship through

detailed evaluations of campaign outcomes. A high level of awareness of actual or potential gambling-related harms may also contribute to a readiness to seek help, to the extent that people may feel that they are less personally responsible (morally and behaviourally) for experiencing problems with their gambling, particularly on EGMs. The *Seventh Survey of Community Gambling Patterns and Perceptions* ([Roy Morgan Research, 2000](#)), for example, found that 84% of Victorians thought that gambling-related problems had worsened, while 83% thought that gambling was now a serious problem.

Increased numbers of referrals do not appear to be linked to higher levels of participation in gambling in the general community or to higher levels of participation in forms of gambling associated with greater risk of problem play, such as EGMs.

- *Is the fact that people are referring with fewer problems an indication that community education and the operationalising of beliefs about harmfulness, as noted above, are a sustainable trend towards early intervention?* If this is the case, it would be helpful to know what the policy and program mix was that has achieved this result, what the interplay between government regulation based on harm minimisation and industry social responsibility measures is, and whether the effect could be enhanced with higher levels of either or both.

We do not know whether fewer problems actually translates into less severity, although, naturally, we would hope for that effect. This still needs to be determined, as does the question of how long people have experienced their gambling problem before seeking help. We are still working on these two important questions:

- How do programs such as Gambler's Help attract more problem gamblers under 25 into counselling?
How do programs such as Gambler's Help attract non-English-speaking community members into counselling or into more relevant forms of intervention, given that we know that the client participation rate in counselling is almost identical to that of the general adult community profile, whereas we know that problem gambling rates in some of these communities are at least five to seven times those of the English-speaking population?

As suggested, these are just some of the questions that this overview has thrown up, and they are beyond the scope of this paper to answer. There are yet other areas that intersect with research being carried out in other jurisdictions which also need further exploration in the population reported here. Such areas include the DSM-IV profiles of male and female gamblers and also EGM gamblers compared with track (oncourse and offcourse) bettors. What is obvious, however, is the usefulness of "available data," in the form of an MDS, in gaining a broad picture of

help-seeking patterns and in helping to shape a more detailed research agenda in this area of gambling studies.

Notes

Endnotes

¹The research program is now known as the University of Melbourne/La Trobe University Gambling Research Program.

²The annual loss on all EGMs now exceeds AUS \$2.3 billion (Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 2002).

³These data are derived from Jackson et al. (1996; 1997; 1999a; 1999b; 2000a; 2001).

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Figures

Chart 1: Problem gamblers: Pattern of gambling behaviour

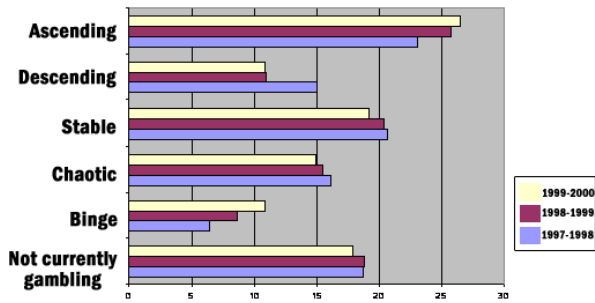


Chart 1:

Problem Gamblers: Pattern of gambling behaviour

Chart 2: Problem gamblers: Presenting problems by year of registration

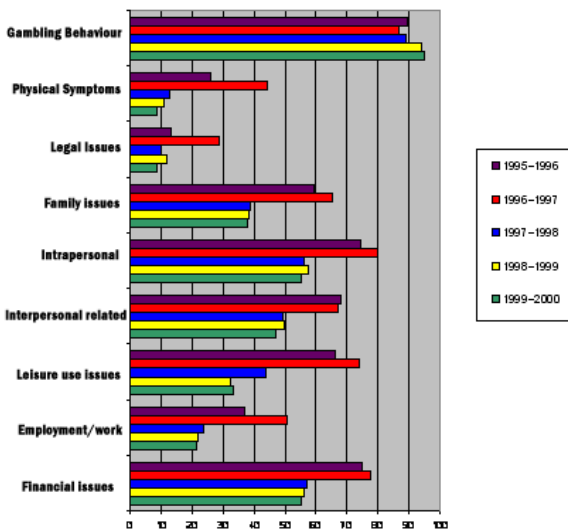


Chart 2:

Problem Gamblers: Presenting Problems by year of registration

Tables

Table 1

New clients: Client status by sex by year of registration

Year of registration		Client status			
		Self-identified gambling problem	Partner	Other	Total
1999–2000	Male	1310	133	94	1537
	Female	1287	357	235	1879
1998–1999	Male	1112	122	66	1300
	Female	1197	272	131	1600
1997–1998	Male	1223	129	64	1416
	Female	1233	307	129	1669
1996–1997	Male	813	46	24	883
	Female	694	140	70	904
1995–1996	Male	581	37	5	623
	Female	560	88	24	672

Table 2

New clients: Problem gamblers: Sex by age by year of registration

Year	Sex		Age cohort (years)						Total
			<20	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60+	
99–00	Male	<i>N</i>	25	313	431	322	136	57	1284
	Female	<i>N</i>	6	210	344	373	230	82	1245
	Persons	<i>N</i>	31	523	775	695	366	139	2529
		%	1.2	20.7	30.6	27.5	14.5	5.5	100.0
98–99	Male	<i>N</i>	17	304	386	246	108	38	1099
	Female	<i>N</i>	7	224	348	319	196	76	1170
	Persons	<i>N</i>	24	528	734	565	304	114	2269
		%	1.1	23.3	32.3	24.9	13.4	5.0	100.0
97–98	Male	<i>N</i>	12	305	384	276	97	37	1111
	Female	<i>N</i>	8	202	316	344	164	54	1088
	Persons	<i>N</i>	20	507	700	620	261	91	2199
		%	0.9	23.1	31.8	28.2	11.9	4.1	100.0
96–97	Male	<i>N</i>	8	227	290	174	72	16	787
	Female	<i>N</i>	5	123	205	195	95	27	650
	Persons	<i>N</i>	13	350	495	369	167	43	1437
		%	0.9	24.4	34.4	25.7	11.6	3.0	100.0
95–96	Male	<i>N</i>	4	126	192	136	60	15	533
	Female	<i>N</i>	5	84	151	141	78	39	498
	Persons	<i>N</i>	9	210	343	277	138	54	1031
		%	0.9	20.4	33.3	26.9	13.4	5.2	100.0

Table 3

New Clients: Problem gamblers: Marital status by sex, 1999–2000

Marital status	<i>N</i>			%
	Male	Female	Persons	
Married	423	529	952	37.3
Never married	457	212	669	26.2
Divorced	134	215	349	13.7
De facto	129	143	272	10.7
Separated but not divorced	134	109	243	9.5
Widowed	17	49	66	2.6
Total	1294	1257	2551	100.0

Table 4

New clients: Problem gamblers: Living arrangement by sex by year of registration

		Living arrangement				
		Family/ couple	One-parent family	Lone- person household	Other	Total
99-00	Male	582	46	245	413	1286
	Female	672	215	172	208	1267
98-99	Male	484	33	226	358	1101
	Female	644	202	161	169	1176
97-98	Male	580	17	243	361	1201
	Female	699	212	166	144	1221
96-97	Male	476	14	213	94	797
	Female	470	70	110	34	684
95-96	Male	477	14	213	94	798
	Female	470	70	110	34	684

Table 5

New clients: Birthplace

Birthplace	Persons	
	N	%
Australia	2639	76.4
Europe and the former USSR	415	12.0
Southeast Asia	164	4.7
Middle East and North Africa	67	1.9
New Zealand	56	1.6
Africa (excluding North Africa)	34	1.0
Northeast Asia	30	0.9
Southern Asia	22	0.6
South America, Central America, and the Caribbean	14	0.4
Other Oceania and Antarctica	9	0.3
North America	5	0.1
Total	3455	100.0

Table 6

New clients 1999-2000: Problem gamblers: Labour force status by sex

	Male	Female	Persons
Employed full-time	695	368	1063
Employed part-time	157	317	474
Unemployed	191	115	306
Unemployment rate	18.3%	14.4%	16.6%
Not in the labour force	230	450	680
Participation rate	81.9%	64.0%	73.0%

Table 7

New clients: Problem gamblers: Labour force status by year of registration

	99-00	98-99	97-98	96-97	95-96
Employed	1537	1307	1447	778	628
Unemployed	306	319	295	135	90
Unemployment rate	16.6%	19.6%	16.9%	14.8%	12.5%
Not in the labour force	680	625	681	569	402
Participation rate	73.0%	72.2%	71.9%	61.6%	64.1%

Table 8

New clients 1999-2000: Occupation by sex

Occupation	N			%
	Male	Female	Persons	
Manager/administrator	117	53	170	7.9
Professional	100	106	206	9.6
Associate/Paraprofessional	126	116	242	11.3
Tradesperson	255	36	291	13.6
Clerical or service worker	201	468	669	31.2
Production or transport worker	149	74	223	10.4
Labourer or related worker	232	109	341	15.9
Total	1180	962	2142	100.0

Table 9

New clients 1999–2000: Individual income by sex

Income	N			%
	Male	Female	Persons	
\$1500/wk or more (>\$78,000/a)	43	9	52	2.3
\$800–\$1,499/wk (\$41,600–\$77,999/a)	151	51	202	8.9
\$600–\$799/wk (\$31,200–\$41,599/a)	182	91	273	12.0
\$400–\$599/wk (\$20,800–\$31,119/a)	284	248	532	23.3
\$200–\$399/wk (\$10,400–\$20,799/a)	204	353	557	24.4
\$120–\$199/wk (\$6,240–\$10,399/a)	249	232	481	21.1
Less than \$120/wk (less than \$6,240/a)	63	119	182	8.0
Total	1176	1103	2279	100.0

Table 10

Type of gambling during a typical gambling episode by sex for 1999–2000 clients

Type of gambling	N			%
	Male	Female	Persons	
EGMs	841	1076	1917	71.1
Bet on races at TAB (offcourse betting)	275	14	289	10.7
Not known	84	63	147	5.4
Bet on card games	83	13	96	3.6
Lotto/lottery/pools/keno	41	35	76	2.8
Bet at races (oncourse betting)	53	10	63	2.3
Bingo	14	36	50	1.9
Numbers	32	1	33	1.2
Other kinds of gambling	18	7	25	0.9
Internet/on-line	2	0	2	0.1
Total	1443	1255	2698	100.0

Table 11

Gambling behaviour during a typical gambling episode for 1999–2000 clients

Type of gambling	Median number of		
	hours per episode	dollars spent per episode	episodes per month
Lotto/lottery/ pools/keno	1	20	4
Bet on races at TAB (offcourse betting)	2	100	8
Bet at races (oncourse betting)	3	100	5
EGMs	3	120	8
Bingo	2.5	30	4
Bet on card games	4	375	5
Numbers	4	350	4
Other kinds of gambling	3	300	4
Internet	2.5	200	10

Table 12

Patterns of gambling behaviour by sex for 1999–2000 clients

Pattern of Gambling	N			%
	Male	Female	Persons	
Ascending	266	356	622	26.5
Descending	132	122	254	10.8
Stable	223	226	449	19.1
Chaotic	186	165	351	14.9
Binge	133	120	253	10.8
Not currently gambling	255	167	422	17.9
Total	1195	1156	2351	100.0

Table 13

Problem gamblers: Pattern of gambling behaviour for selected types of gambling

Pattern of gambling	EGMs		Bet at TAB (offcourse betting)	
	N	%	N	%
Ascending	548	28.4	57	19.6
Descending	215	11.1	35	12.0
Stable	370	19.2	72	24.7
Chaotic	292	15.1	55	18.9
Binge	215	11.1	24	8.2
Not currently Gambling	289	15.0	48	16.5
Total	1929	100.0	291	100.0

Table 14

Total amount of gambling-related debt by sex for 1999–2000 cohort

	Male	Female	Persons
Maximum debt	\$2,000,000	\$500,000	\$2,000,000
75% quartile	\$10,000	\$6,000	\$8,000
Median debt	\$2,000	\$1,900	\$2,000
25% quartile	\$0	\$0	\$0
Minimum debt	\$0	\$0	\$0
Mean debt	\$14,771.46	\$8,555.61	\$11,763.03

Table 15

Maladaptive behaviours by sex for 1999–2000 clients

	Male		Female		Persons	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Maladaptive behaviour						
Gambles as a way of escaping	986	83.8	1,085	94.1	2,071	88.9
After losing money, chases losses	992	84.4	890	77.2	1,882	80.8
Repeated unsuccessful efforts to control gambling	892	75.9	924	80.1	1,816	78.0
Lies to family members, therapist, or others	846	71.9	844	73.2	1,690	72.6
Preoccupied with gambling	742	63.1	717	62.2	1,459	62.6
Needs to gamble increasing amounts of money	676	57.5	677	58.7	1,353	58.1
Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down	646	54.9	696	60.4	1,342	57.6
Relies on others to provide money	621	52.8	601	52.1	1,222	52.5
Has jeopardised relationships, job, education, etc.	714	60.7	506	43.9	1,220	52.4
Has committed illegal acts	261	22.2	165	14.3	426	18.3

Table 16

Maladaptive behaviours by selected types of gambling for 1999–2000 clients

	EGMs		Bet at TAB (offcourse betting)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Maladaptive behaviour				
After losing money, chases losses	1,583	81.7	251	87.2
Gambles as a way of escaping	1,762	91.0	245	85.1
Lies to family members, therapist, or others	1,431	73.9	240	83.3
Repeated unsuccessful efforts to control gambling	1,524	78.7	228	79.2
Preoccupied with gambling	1,236	63.8	217	75.3
Relies on others to provide money	1,024	52.9	194	67.4
Has jeopardised relationships, job, education, etc.	996	51.4	191	66.3
Needs to gamble increasing amounts of money	1,159	59.8	181	62.8
Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down	1,145	59.1	178	61.8
Has committed illegal acts	326	16.8	91	31.6

Article Categories:

- feature article

Keywords:

problem gambling

,

help-seeking

,

gambling-specific services

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