

# **Problem Gambling and Criminal Behaviour in Queensland: A Report of the Second Year of the Study into the Social and Economic Impact of the Introduction of Gaming Machines to Queensland Clubs and Hotels**

**A Report Prepared by the Australian Institute for Gambling Research, University of Western Sydney, and the Labour and Industry Research Unit, University of Queensland, for the Queensland Department of Families, Youth and Community Care**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Background**

This report forms part of the output of the second year of the three-year Study into the Social and Economic Impact of the Introduction of Gaming Machines to Queensland Clubs and Hotels. The general aim of the research is to examine the role of gambling in general (and machine gaming in particular) in contributing to criminal activity. More specifically: to what extent are those who play machines, and especially those who play them heavily, likely to find themselves in financial difficulties which lead them to commit offences as a means to obtain funds?

This report highlights Australian and overseas research into the relationship between problem gambling and criminal behaviour. Additionally, the typical problem gambler in Queensland is profiled and a survey of those who have committed offences and who are currently within the correctional system is presented. There is a need for such information in order to generate soundly based government responses.

### **The Relationship Between Problem Gambling and Criminal Behaviour**

Research has shown that the typical problem gambler is a person whose gambling is no longer a recreational pastime or leisure activity. Gambling exceeds the planned limits in time spent, money lost, or both, and is beyond casual involvement. Motivated by the need to “chase losses”, continued gambling results in a rapid exhaustion of legal sources of gambling funds. Consequently, for some, illegal behaviours form the only possible alternative by which the gambling addiction can be maintained. Acts are often technically illegal but rationalised not to be so. As the losses mount beyond the gambler's capacity to repay, the pressure to further offend grows. This “cycle” highlights why some problem gamblers may turn to illegal activities in order to obtain money with which to gamble, though not all problem gamblers become criminals.

Numerous overseas and Australian research studies have inferred a direct causal relationship between problem gambling and criminal behaviour. Key similarities in much of the research include the following.

1. The typical problem gambler from these studies was a 35-year-old married male, from any of a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, who has gambled on the average for 17 years (the last 9 of which have been at the problem level).
2. There is a positive relationship between frequency of play (for machine gaming) and the potential to experience personal financial problems.
3. The crimes committed by problem gamblers are typically of the non-violent, property-related variety.
4. Patterns of problem gambling emerged slowly over the course of the gamblers “career” (highlighting the need for close monitoring of the introduction of new forms of gambling, i.e. video poker machines, for possible negative social effects).

5. There was a positive relationship between problem gambling and alcohol dependency.
6. The extent of the relationship between problem gambling and criminal behaviour is unknown.

### **Data from Break Even Centres**

The typical problem gambler in Queensland who has experienced legal and criminal problems was profiled using data from Break Even centres. This profile was found to be similar to the profile of the problem gamblers elsewhere in Australia and overseas (in the types of crimes committed, the development of problems over a long period of time, and the frequent use of alcohol).

Other key findings highlighted include:

- many of the crimes are committed against family and friends and often go unreported (further contributing to the “unknown” extent of the problem); and
- 68.8% of the male clients of Break Even in 1995 and 57.1% of the female clients had some form of legal problem caused by their gambling. These legal problems are described as mild, moderate or severe: mild is defined as “causing problems with the police”, moderate refers to having “taken money without authority, in order to gamble”, and severe relates to a “court appearance/prison due to gambling”.

### **The Arthur Gorrie Centre Survey**

The data from the Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre survey provides insights into those who have committed offences and who are already in the correctional system.

Key results from the survey include:

- 31.1% said they had personal or financial problems because of their gambling;
- 23% said they spent more than they could afford on the machines;
- 5.4% admitted they had taken money (without permission) to play poker machines;
- 5.4% noted they had been in trouble with the police due to their machine playing (i.e. the police were called, but no formal charges were laid); and
- 6.8% felt that playing poker machines had caused them to be in jail.

## **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

### **Financial Implications**

The total costs per annum (p.a.) of problem gambling to the state have been estimated at \$48 million (or \$9.70 per head of the adult population) in NSW. This appraisal was based on very conservative assumptions of court appearances, incarceration and policing. The NSW results may be generalised to Queensland and that the cost to the community in Queensland may be conservatively estimated as about \$12 million p.a. If more adequate costings are to be developed then more detailed information is required.

### **Implications for Prevention and Rehabilitation Policy**

As gambling-related crime appears more likely to occur the longer the gambling is at problem levels, then early intervention for problem gambling may significantly reduce this impact. Early intervention could be supported by heightened community awareness of the link between problem gambling and crimes committed to fund the habit, and knowledge of the ready availability of a service for problem gamblers.

### **Conclusion**

This report confirms the nexus between problem gambling and criminal offences committed to support the habit or pay debts arising from it. The direction of causality is complex but it would appear that for some people who gamble excessively a criminal offence becomes the “only” means of meeting debts and/or continuing to gamble.

The financial cost to the community in Queensland is significant.

There may be a need to develop a database within the legal system to monitor gambling-related crime in order to better assess the extent of the impact and develop policy.

As the likelihood of a problem gambler committing a crime in support of his or her gambling increases the longer the problem remains undetected, strategies that facilitate early intervention may be particularly effective.