The Extent, Nature and Predictors of Problems Associated with Machine Gaming in Queensland: A Survey-Based Analysis and Assessment

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 Family and Community Services

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Background

The *Gaming Machine Act 1991* allowed, for the first time, the operation of gaming machines in Queensland clubs and hotels. The first machines commenced operation in clubs in February 1992 and in hotels in April of the same year. This study was commissioned by the Minister for Family Services and Aboriginal and Islander Affairs in April 1993. Its central aim is to provide a means to assess the positive and negative aspects of the introduction of machine gaming to Queensland clubs and hotels, and thus to inform policy formulation.

Aims of the Report

Within the broader aims of the three-year Study into the Social and Economic Impact of the Introduction of Gaming Machines to Queensland Clubs and Hotels, this report represents a major component of the output of the second year of research. Its aim is to ascertain the extent to which those who play gaming machines are subject to a range of social, economic, legal and personal problems, and to assess the nature of problems experienced by players and the factors which predispose players to experience such problems. Further, the report explores the extent to which there are regional variations in patterns of playing and problems.

The rationale for the study is that there is a need for such information if policy with regard to the regulation of machine gaming and services for those experiencing problems is to be well-founded. The specific focus of the report on possible negative outcomes associated with machine gaming reflects the concerns of the Department of Family and Community Services as the agency with primary responsibility for the provision of services to those who experience gaming-related problems. The results reported here are based on surveys conducted in Brisbane, Rockhampton and Cairns in May 1995 as a means to explore these issues.

Key Findings

Where Players Play

The majority of players (64%) reported that they had played machines exclusively in licensed clubs, while less than 10% had played exclusively in hotels.

Frequency of Play

Over 90% of players reported playing once or twice a month or less often, while less than 1% reported that they played daily. There was virtually no regional variation in this respect.

Men tended to play slightly more often than women.

Those over 45 years of age played more often than younger players.

Those with incomes of less than $10 000 per year played more frequently than those with higher incomes (but spent less per session).

Labourers, tradespeople and salespeople tended to play more frequently than those in other occupations.

Higher proportions of the unemployed and the retired reported playing weekly or monthly than other players.

Expenditure per Session of Machine Playing

Nearly 65% of players reported usually spending less than $10 per session, with a further 23% saying that they spent $11–20 per session. Less than 1% of players reported spending $75 or more per session. There was relatively little regional variation, although Rockhampton players tended to report lower expenditure levels than those in Cairns or Brisbane.

There was no difference between men and women in terms of expenditure.

Players aged 18–19 and those over 65 tended to report lower levels of expenditure than other players.

Those with very low incomes reported lower spending levels than others.

Students, retired people, the unemployed and those engaged in home duties reported spending less than players in full- or part-time employment.

Estimated Average Weekly Expenditure

It is estimated that, on average, nearly 90% of players spend less than $5 per week on machine gaming and a further 10% spend between $5 and $20 per week. Only 0.5% of players spend $50 or more per week.

Player Perceptions of the Industry

Players were almost evenly divided on whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposition that 'Governments encourage gambling too much'.

Less than one quarter of players agreed that 'Poker machines should never have been introduced to Queensland'.

Nearly 60% agreed that 'Introducing poker machines has benefited the community'.

Over 90% of players agreed that 'Poker machines in clubs and hotels in Queensland should be carefully controlled and monitored'.

Machine Playing and Other Forms of Gambling

Based on this survey and our 1994 Brisbane survey, there is no apparent difference between players and non-players in terms of their propensity to engage in other forms of gambling.

Diversion of Money to Machine Playing

About one quarter of players said that, had they not spent money on machine gaming, they would have spent it on household expenses such as food and clothes, 23% on another form of entertainment, 13% said that they would have saved it and 6% said that they would have spent it on alcohol.

Machine Gaming and Economic Hardship

Few players reported experiencing difficulties in affording food, clothes or housing, or that they found themselves unable to cope financially.

Those who play frequently and those who spend relatively large amounts appear no more likely than less frequent players and those who spend relatively small amounts to experience financial difficulties.

Low income, low educational attainment and unemployment are much better predictors of financial difficulties than are expenditure and/or frequency of play.

The Incidence of Specifically Machine Gaming-Related Problems

Nearly 90% of players reported that their playing was always problem-free.

The most common problems reported were spending more than could be afforded (10% of players), being criticised about gambling by family or friends (7%) and wanting to stop but being unable to (5%), while the least commonly reported were problems with the police caused by machine gaming (0.4%) and stealing money to play (0.6%).

Over 10% of players reported knowing someone who had experienced playing-related problems, the most common type being financial (63%).

There were no strong associations between demographic characteristics (for example age, gender or employment status) and the tendency to report playing-related problems.

Players who played relatively frequently and/or spent relatively large amounts of money were more likely than others to report a range of playing-related problems.

Players who experience one problem are likely to experience others.

There is some evidence that those who report a relatively large number of problems and/or greater severity of problems are more likely than others to experience economic problems.

Sources of Help for Players Experiencing Problems

Over a third of players said that they did not know where they would seek help if they experienced playing-related problems; another 33% said that they would seek help from Gamblers Anonymous, and 13% from family or friends.

Only 1% of respondents said that they would seek help from Break Even.

Players who report having experienced problems are slightly more likely to be aware of where to seek help than other players.

Regional Variations

The survey data demonstrates a remarkable lack of variation between players in Cairns, Rockhampton and Brisbane, in terms of their demographic characteristics, patterns of playing and propensity to experience problems.

Policy Considerations

This report reinforces the general thrust of the findings of our 1994 report; that is, for most players, machine gaming is a relatively infrequent, low-expenditure pastime, which appears not to be contributing to economic, social, legal or personal problems.

Players are overwhelmingly supportive of the introduction of machines, but also of comprehensive regulation of the industry. This suggests that those who play machines approve of the Queensland Government's approach to machine gaming. Moreover, the results regarding attitudes to machine gaming are very similar to those from our 1994 survey, which included both players and non-players, suggesting that the support of players for the industry is not merely a reflection of their perceived self-interest. Rather, it reflects general community perceptions of the industry.

Lest the above conclusions be thought overly sanguine about the impact of machine gaming, the study reinforces our previous findings that a very small percentage of players appears to be accounting for a very large amount of machine gaming expenditure. In light of the demonstrated link between intensity of play and a propensity to experience problems, this suggests very strongly the need to provide services for players who experience problems. Further, while there appears to be no direct link between intensity of play and economic hardship, there is an apparent link between experiencing gaming-related problems and economic problems.

The survey has demonstrated the lack of notable demographic differences between those who experience problems and those who do not, or between players and the general population. This suggests that any programs of assistance need to be accessible and acceptable to the broadest possible range of individuals, rather than being targeted at any particular group.

Assistance must obviously be targeted at heavy players, but given the lack of striking demographic differences between such players and players in general, this targeting cannot be made on the basis of any demographic characteristics.

There is a lack of variation between players in the three Queensland cities from which survey samples were drawn, in terms of most characteristics but, particularly, in terms of their tendency to experience problems. Given the differences in the ratio of machines to population in each city and the more general historical, geographic and other differences between them, it is noteworthy that there were not differences in patterns of playing and playing-related problems.

Where people have access to machines, there is a significant likelihood of problems for a small, but not negligible, proportion of players. This suggests, firstly, that where there are machines in operation, there is a need for services for those experiencing playing-related problems and, secondly, that the more machines are available in Queensland the greater the number of people who will experience problems.

The difficulties in targeting players with problems based on demographic characteristics, as well as the fact that where there are machines there are likely to be problems, suggest the likely efficacy of venue-based provision of services.

There was a striking lack of awareness of Break Even among players interviewed for this study. Very few players mentioned Break Even by name when asked about services for those experiencing problems and those who had experienced problems were no more likely than others to be aware of the service. In contrast, over a third of people mentioned Gamblers Anonymous and those who reported experiencing problems were more likely to know of it than others. The lack of awareness of Break Even, when compared to the level of awareness of a much more widespread and long-established organisation, suggests to us the need for, and likely efficacy of, much greater promotion of Break Even to players.