

REGION OF WATERLOO PUBLIC HEALTH

POSITION STATEMENT ON THE HEALTH IMPACTS OF PROBLEM GAMBLING

Gambling has taken many different forms and has been housed in many different venues over time. While gambling is regularly marketed as an exciting recreational activity, the prevalence of problem gambling and its associated risks has been identified as a significant public health issue.

- **It is the position of Region of Waterloo Public Health that:**

- Gambling is a risky behaviour that may lead to problem gambling.
- Problem gambling has a significant negative impact on the individual, their family and the community.
- Easy access to gambling options can in and of itself lead to increased gambling and problem gambling behaviour.
- The economic cost of treatment, health care, absenteeism from work, and time spent in court per problem gambler is high. This can lead to a strain on resources for local services since there is a higher concentration of problem gamblers in communities surrounding a gambling venue.
- Information about the health risks of gambling should be made available to all residents of the Region of Waterloo.
- The negative consequences of problem gambling must be considered before pursuing the expansion of local gambling options.

Problem Gambling is defined as a progressive disorder characterized by continuous or periodic loss of control over gambling; preoccupation with gambling and money with which to gamble; irrational thinking; and continuation of the activity despite adverse consequences.¹ In 2005, 5.8% of Ontario adults were at risk for problem gambling and 1.2-3.4% had a moderate or severe problem with gambling.^{2, 3, 4} However, these are conservative estimates, as problem gambling tends to be underreported. For example, only 46.7-58% of severe problem gamblers and 10.8-25% of individuals with moderate problems recognized their issues in self reports.³ Individuals struggling with problem gambling may experience a range of negative physical and mental health outcomes in addition to socio-economic hardship, ultimately adding costs to our health care and social support system.

- **Problem gambling leads to negative health outcomes on individuals.**

- *Physical Health*
A number of negative health outcomes are associated with problem gambling. These include back and neck pain, headaches, lack of sleep, digestive problems like irritable bowel syndrome, hypertension, and more severe cardiac problems.⁵

- *Mental Health*

A range of mental health issues have been associated with problem gambling. Individuals may start to experience severe mood swings and be prone to emotional outbursts, anxiety, loss of appetite and interest in sex, and depression.⁶ While some pathological gamblers claim to do it as a way to “escape” from problems and relieve depression or anxiety, they also find themselves needing to bet increasing amounts of money in order to feel better.⁷

- *Suicide*

Problem gambling can cause some individuals to have suicidal thoughts. While the exact number of suicides attributed to problem gambling may never be known, the Canada Safety Council has estimated that it is likely over 200 per year.⁸ Furthermore, spouses of pathological gamblers are three times more likely to attempt suicide and their children are two times more likely.⁹

- **People struggling with problem gambling are more likely to be socially disadvantaged in other ways.**

- *Who is at Risk?*

It is important to note that problem gambling does not specifically affect one segment of the population over any other, but instead impacts different groups in different ways. For example, *Men* have traditionally been seen as more at risk to problem gambling and are more likely to experience problems earlier and wait longer to seek treatment. In contrast, *Women* have been found to develop a gambling problem in a shorter period of time and are the fastest growing group seeking help.¹⁰

Individuals who have experienced a significant early win; have difficulty dealing with stress in their lives; or have impulse control issues may also be more likely to develop a gambling problem.⁴

- *Youth*

While gambling is illegal for children and teens under eighteen, a 2009 study found that 42.6% of Ontario students gambled in some form in the past year.¹¹ Youth can also develop gambling problems. In fact, research has suggested that youth may be up to 2.5 times more likely to become problem gamblers.¹⁰

Youth problem gamblers are also more likely to have substance use problems, and have high attempted suicide rates.⁹ In fact, young problem gamblers were 18 times more likely to report a suicide attempt than their fellow students,¹¹ highlighting the effect problem gambling can have on mental health.

- *Older Adults*

As our population ages, a greater number of individuals have more time and disposable income, which can lead to an increase in gambling frequency, a risk factor for problem gambling.¹⁰ For older adults, being single, widowed, or divorced increases the risk of problem gambling. Similarly, experience with alcohol or substance dependence may also increase this risk.^{12, 13}
- *Low Income Individuals*

Research has shown that while those with low income are less likely to gamble, those that do gamble are more likely to spend a larger proportion of their income and are more at risk of developing a gambling problem.^{4, 14, 15} Pathological gambling in low income households can quickly worsen any existing financial troubles and can lead to the development of the health problems described above.
- *Newcomers to Canada*

Toronto Public Health conducted phone interviews with community services organizations and found that newcomers may be more at risk for problem gambling due to high rates of unemployment and poverty, which can cause them to see gambling as a solution to their financial troubles.¹⁶
- **The financial and societal costs of problem gambling are high.**
 - The financial impact of gambling not only affects individuals and their families but exacts a toll on society as well. The cost of treatment, health care, absenteeism at work and time spent in court is estimated to be as high as \$56,000 per problem gambler.^{9, 17}
 - Expected economic gains from new gambling venues may be misleading. Studies have shown that the local business community is much less likely to benefit from gambling ventures if the venue cannot market itself as a tourist destination. Some individuals may spend the same amount of money gambling they would have spent at other local businesses in the community instead, potentially leading to store closures and job losses.^{17, 18}
 - From a social perspective, problem gamblers are more at risk of experiencing social and economic hardships like divorce, breakdown of family and friend networks, decreases in work productivity, domestic abuse, bankruptcy, theft, fraud, and homelessness.^{5, 8, 10}

- **Problem gambling increases with easy access to gambling facilities.**
 - A relationship exists between the proportion of problem gamblers and proximity to casinos or racetracks with slot facilities. The number of problem gamblers is higher in the area surrounding these venues.^{10, 16, 20, 21}
 - Youth exposure to gambling activities and venues normalizes the activity and reinforces the notion that gambling is harmless, potentially making them less likely to acknowledge their own problematic behaviour if it develops.²²
- **More information is needed on how to successfully treat problem gambling and how to encourage problem gamblers to seek help.**
 - Problem gambling is sometimes referred to as a “hidden addiction,” since there are no “obvious” visible changes to the affected individual. This makes it easier for a person suffering from a gambling problem to hide their addiction from family, friends, and professionals, and can cause them to experience a greater loss of control over their actions.¹⁰
 - Although treatment programs and support groups exist, studies have shown that these are not used by the majority of problem gamblers.¹⁰ Also, while strategies such as voluntary bans or limiting access to funds can be useful, these require the individual to recognize their problem and take the necessary steps to change their behaviour.
 - Problem gambling requires time, resources, and commitment to overcome. Problem gamblers who manage to change their behaviour are also prone to relapses. In the first year following treatment, relapse rates in studies have ranged from 80 to 90%.¹⁰

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