



The social and health impacts of problem gambling

Definitions

Problem gambling refers to gambling that significantly interferes with a person's basic occupational, interpersonal, and financial functioning.

Pathological gambling is the most severe form and is classified as a mental disorder with similarities to drug abuse including features of tolerance, withdrawal, diminished control, and relinquishing of important activities.

A disproportionate amount of gambling harm and gambling losses is carried by people on welfare benefits and in low income areas.

Clinical definition of pathological gambling¹

The essential features of this disorder are a chronic and progressive failure to resist impulses to gambling, and gambling behaviour that compromises, disrupts, or damages personal, family, or vocational pursuits. The gambling preoccupation, urge and activity increase during periods of stress. Problems that arise as a result of gambling lead to an intensification of the gambling behaviour.

Characteristic problems include extensive indebtedness and consequent default on debts and other financial responsibility, disrupted family relationships, inattention at work, and financially motivated illegal activities to pay for gambling.

Social and health impacts of problem gambling

For many people gambling is a harmless recreational activity. However, it is estimated that 10,000 and 60,000 New Zealanders could be problem gamblers.² Every gambler affects at least five others³ so at least 50,000 to 300,000 people in New Zealand could be personally suffering because of problem gambling. Problem gambling seems to have tentacles which extend out to wreak havoc and can it can profoundly impact on the physical, emotional, and financial health of the family, spouses, children, whanua, and on friends, workmates and others in the community.

The social, physical and mental health of people with problem gambling and their families are often at risk as a result of

reduced household and associated social disruption.

They may experience stress-related physical and psychological ill health. Other adverse effects include family breakdown, domestic violence, criminal activity such as fraud, disruption to or loss of employment and social isolation. Problem gambling may also inhibit ability to provide adequate nutrition, heating, shelter, transport, medications and to access health services.

Some of the individual costs to the gambler include depression and anxiety, suicidal thoughts and behaviour. It is often related with excessive alcohol consumption, substance abuse and smoking. Many problem

gamblers also experience other dependencies. One in five severe problem gamblers are reported to be suffering from alcoholism or other dependencies.⁴

The public costs are the impact on the whanau/family, employers and the community. There is also the cost of crime and the police, the justice system and social welfare.

Added to that is the cost to the government for helping problem gamblers and affected others through counselling services. A 2008 New Zealand study² on the impacts of gambling found that 1.3% of the people who said they had committed illegal activities did so because of gambling (this equates to approximately 10,000 people).

Over 74,000 New Zealanders suffer from inferior mental health as a result of problem gambling.²



Personal

- Psychological harm
- Alienation from family and friends
- Poor work performance, lower productivity
- Depression, helplessness and anxiety
- Feelings of guilt, and suicidal ideation
- Alcohol consumption
- Smoking
- Loss of emotional safety
- Mood swings
- Deception
- Family disintegration
- Deprivation of children (through poverty)

Impact on others

- Children feel alienated because of insufficient time spent with parents.
- Children are also impacted by parental mood changes.
- The Australian Commission reported that there was approximately 1600 gambling related divorces per year.⁴
- It has been reported that 40% of problem gamblers' partners developed significant stress-related illnesses.⁴
- Children with parents who have a gambling problem are more likely to become problem gamblers themselves.⁴

Suicide

- Gambling is considered as an interactive or independent variables contributing to an individual's decision to commit suicide.
- In Australia it is estimated that there are between 35 and 60 suicides linked with gambling each year.⁴
- The Australian Commission found that the significant factors correlated with suicide attempts

were depression, acts of violence, debt levels, the duration of a gambling problem and the use of gambling as a way of forgetting problems.⁴

Child neglect

- Children can be affected in many ways by gambling parents such as cases of children left in cars outside casinos and gaming venues.
- Housekeeping money for food can often be directed into gambling creating poverty and hardship for children of gamblers. This in turn can cause absences, truancy and dropping out from school and the greater likelihood of undertaking risky behaviour such as drinking, smoking and drug use.

Ill health

An Australian study found that 20.3% of problem gambling clients reported physical symptoms associated with their problem gambling.⁴

Poor mental health

- Over 74,000 New Zealanders suffer from inferior mental health as a result of gambling.²
- 60% of those with at least moderate gambling problems indicated they suffered depression as a result of gambling.²

Domestic violence

One in ten gamblers in counselling reported domestic or other violent incidents related to their gambling.⁴

Financial

- Spending more than you can afford
- Unable to cut back on expenditure
- Chasing losses
- Borrowing money from multiple sources
- Bankruptcy
- Inability to pay daily expenses

References

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3. P. Adams (2004) *Gambling impact assessment... Introduction and overview*. Auckland: Uniservices.
4. Productivity Commission. (1999) *Australia's Gambling Industries Inquiry Report . Chapter 7 The impacts of problem gambling*. URL: <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/gambling/finalreport/index.html>

**Problem Gambling Foundation Freephone
0800 664 262**