



GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

Public lecture reviews effectiveness of problem gambling prevention initiatives

On Tuesday, October 21st, Dr. Rob Williams delivered an informative public lecture entitled, *“Prevention of Problem Gambling: A Comprehensive Review of the Evidence & Recommended Best Practices”* at the University of Calgary. In his address, Williams examined a broad array of both educational and policy initiatives undertaken internationally to prevent problem gambling. He also reviewed the effectiveness of these initiatives and cautioned attendees that, “It is difficult to unseat a program, treatment, or initiative that is entrenched even if the evidence suggests there are better ones available.”

The biopsychosocial model of addiction

As a prelude to his examination of specific prevention initiatives, Williams commented that, “In order to prevent something, you need to know what caused it.” He noted that there currently exists a small but growing body of evidence pertaining to the causes of problem gambling. Fortunately, much of the literature relating to the causes of substance abuse is also broadly applicable to problem gambling. According to Williams, the biopsychosocial model provides an excellent explanation of the nature of addiction. In essence, the model shows how an individual’s biological propensities, environmental experiences and psychological makeup combine to shape their behaviour. According to Williams, “[With gambling], operant-classical conditioning also plays a part... it can become progressively more difficult to resist the temptation of gambling; as it continues, some people experience negative consequences and back off their involvement.”

Dr. Nady el-Guebaly, Alberta Gaming Research Institute Board Chair, provided a warm welcome to presentation attendees. He noted that the Institute was nearing its 10th year of existence and that its mandate continues to be the development and promotion of research into the four “pillars” of gambling research—biopsychological, sociocultural, economic and public policy. He also pointed out that this event coincided with Alberta’s Responsible Gambling Awareness Week 2008.

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.*

OUR MISSION

To significantly improve Albertans’ knowledge of how gambling affects society

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Education-focused prevention initiatives

Education-focused prevention initiatives are strategies to help inoculate individuals from becoming problem gamblers.

Williams segmented education-related prevention initiatives into the following categories: **upstream interventions, informational awareness campaigns, school-based statistical instruction, school-based prevention programs, and Responsible Gambling Awareness Information Centres (RGICs).**

Upstream interventions relate primarily to youth and involve strengthening familial bonds, enhancing exposure to well-socialized peers, and effective schooling. Though upstream interventions are untested for problem gambling, the literature consistently identifies them as *the* most powerful way of reducing adolescent problem behaviour.

Information awareness campaigns (e.g., anti-problem gambling advertisements) are a commonly used prevention strategy worldwide. Evidence suggests they provide temporary improvements in public awareness of problem gambling. Studies from fields outside of gambling studies indicate that such campaigns have little impact on actual behavioural change. Williams did, however, cite exceptions (e.g., sodium consumption, HIV testing, birth control pills).

School-based statistical instruction refers to enhancing an individual's understanding of the mathematics associated with gambling activities. An evaluation of several such studies—including one undertaken by Williams himself that focused on undergraduate university students—revealed that these initiatives alone have no effect on gambling behaviour though they do tend to dispel gambling fallacies.

Of the four empirical studies that have been undertaken on comprehensive school-based gambling prevention programs, impacts on behaviour have been inconsistent (i.e., they were effective in some instances but not others). "There are some promising results but not as powerful as you might hope for and certainly not a panacea," said Williams.

At present, there have been no formal evaluations of on-site information & counseling centres (e.g., Responsible Gambling Awareness Information Centres¹). Utilization rate statistics for centres are not particularly high. Also, such services have not resulted in higher rates of treatment provision in those Canadian provinces that offer them.

Policy-focused prevention initiatives

Policy-focused prevention initiatives are constraints put on the general availability of gambling, who is permitted to gamble and how gambling is commercially provided.

Dr. Williams began his review of policy-related prevention initiatives by explaining the truism that the availability of a product is directly related to its consumption. "With alcohol, for example, the more outlets... the more the consumption... the more the likelihood of problems," stated Williams. Theoretically, this relationship should also hold for problems related to problem gambling.

Williams explained that the first type of policy-based prevention initiatives involved restricting the general availability of gambling. Specifically, this included **limiting the total number of gambling venues, restricting access to the types of gambling formats deemed harmful** (e.g., EGMs), **confining gambling opportunities to gambling-only venues, restricting where gambling venues can be located, and reducing venue hours.** Jurisdictions that had only modestly restricted gambling availability generally had

¹ These centres are located in some Canadian casinos and provide information to patrons and casino staff on risks of problem gambling and local referrals for help.



Dr. Robert Williams is a professor in the School of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge and a Node Coordinator with the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. He is an internationally recognized expert in the field of gambling studies and a leading authority on the prevention of problem gambling. His full presentation is available from the following URL: http://gaming.uleth.ca/agri_downloads/4386/2008-Prevention-AGLC.pdf.

minimal success in reducing problem behaviours. Outright bans (e.g., South Carolina's ban on VLTs) were cited by Williams as having had success in decreasing the indicators of problem gambling.

A second type of policy-based prevention described by Williams was restrictions on who was permitted to gamble. Examples included a **prohibition of youth gambling, denying venue entry to local residents, and restricting venue entry to higher socioeconomic groups**. Interestingly, Williams reported that, despite a virtual worldwide underage gambling prohibition, youth still exhibit significant rates of problem gambling. He drew an analogy with alcohol by explaining that, in some countries, early exposure to alcohol and behavioural modeling appears to have beneficial effects in promoting responsible usage.

A third group of policy-related initiatives involved restrictions on how gambling was provided. Examples included the **provision of employee problem gambling training, modification of EGM parameters, limiting access to money, restricting alcohol & tobacco in venues, restricting advertising & promotions, venue design, increasing the cost of gambling, and independence between gambling regulator and provider**. Several of these initiatives were shown to have some utility in prevention, though few have been empirically tested.

Best practices in problem gambling prevention

In his presentation summary, Williams indicated that there were several key factors to keep in mind when considering problem gambling prevention initiatives. They are: (1) No single initiative will be effective on its own; (2) Problem gambling cannot be completely eliminated but its prevalence can be decreased, and; (3) Generic programs at the school-based level show promise as effective and efficient strategies for dealing with the issue.

Williams concluded his lecture by providing the following 10 best practices in problem gambling prevention:

1. Effective prevention will likely require some inconvenience to non-problem gamblers and some loss of revenue
2. Use a large array of educational and policy initiatives
3. Coordinate these multiple initiatives
4. Decrease the general availability of gambling
5. Restrict or eliminate high-risk forms of gambling
6. Restrict the use of tobacco and alcohol while gambling
7. Restrict access to money while gambling
8. Invest in interventions that provide support to children in their early years
9. Impart knowledge, attitudes and skills to inhibit the progression to problem gambling
10. Keep these initiatives in place for many years, because population-wide behavioural change takes a long time



Institute names 2008-09 graduate student award recipients

Congratulations to graduate students Cheryl Currie, Brian Soebbing, Josée Couture, and Sandeep Mishra for being recipients of the Institute's 2008-09 research allowance award.

Cheryl Currie is a Ph.D. student in the School of Public Health, University of Alberta. She received a \$5,000 research allowance award to examine relationships between cultural identification, substance abuse and problem gambling among urban Aboriginals in Edmonton.

Brian Soebbing, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, also received an award of \$5,000. He plans to examine the efficiency of sports betting markets in Canada and Europe as well as the relationship betting markets have with the uncertainty of game outcome in professional sports leagues.

Josée C. Couture is an MSc. Student in the Department of Sociology, University of Calgary. Her \$3,000 award will further the research she conducted for her undergraduate honours thesis, 'The history of gaming and its impact on First Nations in Canada.' She will continue to examine the impacts that the gaming industry has had on First Nations communities in Canada.

Sandeep Mishra, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Psychology, University of Lethbridge, received an award in the amount of \$5,000. His research will investigate individual differences in risk-acceptance. These differences will be associated with gambling history and behaviour on gambling-related tasks in the laboratory, with a focus on special populations of high-risk individuals.

REMINDER: Graduate students are encouraged to submit scholarship award applications for the 2009-10 academic year by Monday, February 2, 2009 at 4 p.m. The 2009-10 Scholarship Program Guidelines and Application Form are available on the Institute web site.

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The Institute's 2007-08 Annual Report was released on November 18th, 2008. It is now available for download from the Institute web site. Print copies can be requested by contacting Vickii Williams, Executive Director <abgaming@ualberta.ca>.

