



GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

Presenters tackle “Big Questions” at Institute Conference 2011

The Institute’s tenth annual gambling research conference was held at The Banff Centre in Banff, Alberta on April 8th and 9th, 2011. Conference program organizer Dr. Garry Smith assembled a diverse and well-known group of speakers to address the conference theme of “Engaging the Big Questions in Gambling Studies.” This event proved a valuable forum for researchers, graduate students, clinicians, gambling providers, government regulators and other stakeholders to meet and discuss issues of critical importance to those involved with the field.



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



Conference 2011 Welcome Reception.



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Selected presentation highlights:

What Have Been the Dominant Gambling-Related Issues and Trends in Canada Over the Past Three Decades? — Dr. Colin Campbell, Douglas College, New Westminster, British Columbia

Dr. Campbell kicked off the Institute conference by singling out key themes and events pertaining to the evolution of gambling and gambling research in Canada. The four identified “domains” he identified and discussed related to political, technological, socioeconomic, and academic themes.

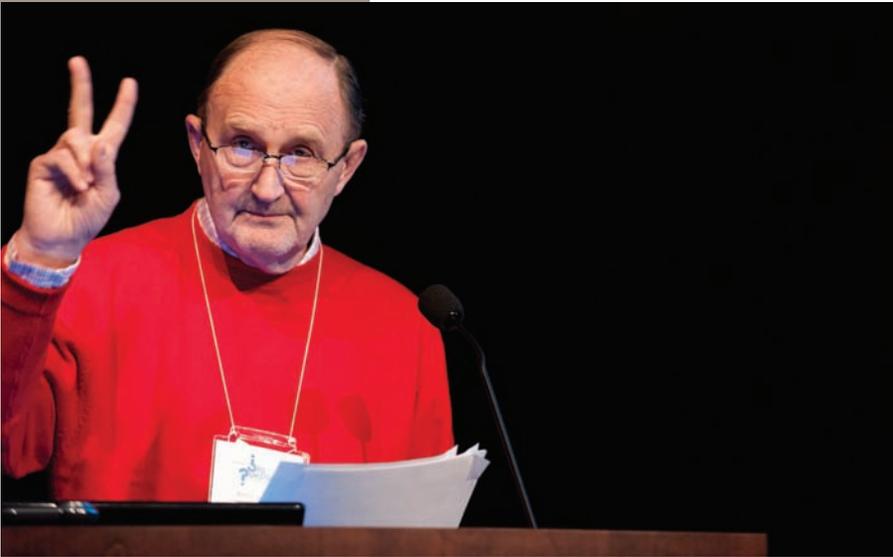
Campbell stated that **politicized** gambling issues appearing in provincial legislatures are often “rubber-stamped and approved with little debate.” For example, he cited the distinct absence of genuine public consultation regarding a recent proposal to expand Edgewater Casino in Vancouver. There was no provincial-level debate on the topic and only a “symbolic” municipal one. Canada’s federal government has also remained silent on how and why gambling changes are made and there has been no progress on calls for a national gambling study.

Significant **technological** developments highlighted by Campbell related to the introductions of both electronic gambling and Internet gambling by provincial governments. A related and particularly thorny “grey area” is the legal status of Internet gambling hosting infrastructure delivered from Kahnawake First Nation lands. To date, its legality has remained unchallenged.

A lack of a definitive methodology concerning measurement of the overall impact of gambling in communities has remained a major unresolved **socioeconomic** issue. Also during this time, the concept of responsible gambling has emerged. It was Campbell’s contention that, “Responsible gambling has been the industry and government response to problem gambling... but what is interesting in this construct is the combination of pro-gambling forces and provincial governments.”

Academic issues comprised the fourth and final domain identified by Campbell. He noted with enthusiasm the establishment and growth of research funding agencies in jurisdictions across Canada. Much of the research funding has, however, been directed toward problem gambling and authorship of resulting research publications has been largely dominated by those in the fields of psychology or psychiatry.

Campbell concluded his conference-opening session with several provocative and challenging statements which served as fodder for stimulating discussion over the course of event. Perhaps the greatest challenge he issued was for attendees to ensure that gambling-related research be designed in such a way so that it is useful for guiding decision-making processes.



“Scandals often spawn social change which leads to a better way of doing things.”

Why do Gambling Scandals Happen? How Might they be Prevented? — Dr. Garry J. Smith, University of Alberta

In the introduction to his presentation, Dr. Garry Smith explained that scandals are an age-old problem and that understanding their individual components is key to avoiding them in the future. The term scandal is derived from the Greek word “scandalon” signifying a trap or stumbling block. Fittingly, Smith went on to characterize gambling scandals as being a phenomenon of liberal democracies.

Factors for this include: (1) the existence of a free press who are rewarded for unearthing scandals; (2) competing political parties who have incentive for them to be revealed; (3) adherence to the “rule of law”, and; (4) a belief in due process to resolve issues.

The recipe for a gambling scandal presented by Smith is one that often contains several key ingredients. Included are a wrongdoing, an individual to reveal it, and an interested public. While their ingredients are similar, the severity of scandals is compounded by such factors as whether there was a cover-up, the celebrity of those involved, who gets blamed, and the seriousness of transgressions. Gambling scandals commonly involve sports-related gambling (e.g., point shaving, betting on one’s own team), cheating scams (e.g., seeing “hole” cards in online poker), or government/political involvement (e.g., lottery retailer frauds & ticket tampering).

Smith next provided an in-depth examination of two headline-grabbing lottery-related scandals that took place separately in Ontario and British Columbia. In both instances, organizational cover-ups seemingly took precedence which resulted in considerably undermined public trust in the system and a temporary reduction in lottery ticket sales. Smith argued that multiple subsequent gambling “mini-scandals” in British Columbia are evidence that underlying conditions at that province’s lottery corporation have not changed in a meaningful way.

In concluding, Smith explained that scandals are often unpleasant for the actors involved but they are not entirely bad. “Scandals often spawn social change which leads to a better way of doing things,” said Smith. In his opinion, the key to resolving scandals is the acquisition of new information so that ethical and lasting change can occur. To prove his point, Smith described how Maple Leaf Foods effectively dealt with a tainted food scandal in which it was involved. Their actions as a “redemptive organization” illustrate the best course of action for other organizations who might find themselves caught in scandals of their own.



“In an urban environment there are a lot of stressors that can lead to people turning to gambling... often people have learned to cope by gambling.”

**How has Gambling Affected the Canadian Aboriginal Population?—
Ms. Cheryl Currie, Department
of Public Health, University of
Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta**

Cheryl Currie’s conference presentation began with her pointing out that more than one-half of Canadian aboriginal peoples live in Canada’s cities. In Alberta, this number is closer to 60 per cent. In terms of actual population figures, there were 52,000 urban aboriginals living in Edmonton as of 2005. Approximately half of urban aboriginals in Canada live below the poverty line and many are single

women with children. To date, there have been few research studies specifically looking at this population and even fewer that examine their experiences and involvement with gambling.

A main focus of Currie’s presentation was to describe a research investigation that she and her colleagues recently concluded. The study involved interviewing a non-random sample of the aboriginal and Métis population (n=381) in Edmonton, Alberta. Targeted advertisements (e.g., ads in aboriginal newspapers, posters, e-newsletters) were used to recruit participants. Subsequent analysis of the sample’s characteristics found that these individuals were indeed representative of the national urban aboriginal population though slightly older and more likely to be single. Other analyses revealed that a high percentage of the sample (33%) scored as problem gamblers according to the CPGI instrument. Surprisingly, even the team’s pilot study of aboriginals in the university population (n=60) showed high rates of problem gambling.

Currie reported that problem gambling is negatively impacting Edmonton’s urban aboriginal population in a number of ways. In comparison to non-problem gamblers, problem gamblers were found to have experienced more depression related to their finances, a higher number of suicide attempts, and a greater amount of associated shame. Currie’s research study also sought to better understand the reasons provided by individuals to explain their participation in gambling activities. Results of this analysis indicated that problem gamblers were most frequently using gambling as an escape. “In an urban environment there are a lot of stressors that can lead to people turning to gambling... often people have learned to cope by gambling,” said Currie. Of the myriad of reasons given by individuals for seeking this escape, only two were found to be statistically significant. The first was experiencing racism in the past 12-months and the second was experiencing it early in their lives.

In concluding, Currie said that her finding that undesirable social circumstances lead to addiction is not new. In fact, more than 24 centuries ago the philosopher Socrates argued that individuals who have a secure role in a welcoming and balanced society can easily resist “master passions” (i.e., addictions). She recommended that steps involved in reducing problem gambling among Canadian urban aboriginals must involve a thorough examination of the root causes, encouragement of individuals to reclaim their aboriginal identities, and working to address the social determinants of health within this community.



“For us, responsible gambling is a term which transfers responsibility to those that are harmed.”

**Whose Responsibility is Problem Gambling? —
Dr. Charles Livingstone,
Department of Health, Monash
University, Victoria, Australia**

Dr. Livingstone began by explaining that his main research interest related to poker machines which he considered to be vastly different from other gambling formats. In an effort to orient conference attendees to the Australian poker machine landscape, he then presented a number of fascinating visuals of Australian EGM venues. While doing so, he explained that typical Australian EGM establishments contain

about 50 machines per venue and tend to be owned by large enterprises (e.g., Woolworths supermarket chain is one of the largest proprietors in Australia). Australian “clubs”¹ also contain large number of machines which are extremely lucrative and provide the means for those organizations to offer subsidized meals, drinks and other amenities.

A goal of Livingstone’s presentation was to reframe the way that people think about issues like responsible gambling. Livingstone said that, “For us, responsible gambling is a term which transfers responsibility to those that are harmed.” He said that those with opposing viewpoints on topics like EGM gambling are seeking to challenge “conventional wisdom” in order to move the issues from the realm of the “un-discussed” to one that is actively debated in public. Those seeking such change are often forced to contend with various powerful actors and interests (e.g., businesses—operators and manufacturers, regulators) within the system who are most interested in maintaining a “business as usual” approach. Livingstone himself disputed the notion of the rational sovereign consumer that is frequently applied to gamblers. To illustrate, he asked the question... how rational our own choices are when, for example, we choose a spouse or buying a vehicle? He also provided further evidence of seeming irrationality using the statistic that 30% of the Australia’s 600,000 regular EGM gamblers have a measurable problem based on CPGI level.

Livingstone said that the interventions frequently used to combat social issues like problem gambling could be considered to be either “upstream” or “downstream.” Upstream interventions are designed to prevent harm and are very broad in scope. They include legislation, regulation and active material policies (e.g., traffic safety standards, reducing smoking by limiting places to smoke). Downstream measures treat the consequences of harm (e.g., counseling, self-exclusion, and responsible gambling policies) and are only minimally effective. Livingstone finished with a comment that he felt a sustainable EGM industry was achievable. But this would only be possible if existing power relationships are altered, the futility of downstream responses for problem gambling was acknowledged and the individual responsibility that has been downloaded to gamblers was removed.

¹ An Australian club is a working-class social grouping often originating through an association with a sports team. These organizations get beneficial tax treatment and have grown into significant EGM operators.



**How do Governments Justify Their Involvement in Gambling? —
Dr. Jim Cosgrave, Trent University
[Oshawa Campus], Oshawa, Ontario**

Trent University sociologist Dr. Jim Cosgrave began by asking conference attendees to consider the question: “[Is Canada] in a gambling culture or in a gambling moment within culture?” He indicated that he was first confronted with this question when it appeared in the comments section of a gambling-related article published on the CBC News web site. This question perplexed him for some time and sparked his interest in studying gambling-related issues.

“If you want to do something about problem gambling you charge people to get into a casino *but* you lower the revenue you bring in.”

Cosgrave mentioned that his research has identified several distinct gambling eras within modern Canadian gambling history. These eras coincide with different rationales used by governments to justify their involvement in gambling operations. From the 1960s to early 1980s, Canadian governments tended to frame lottery gambling as a “social good” that served the welfare state by funding social programs. Later, starting in about 1985, governments used the “alibi” of curtailing illegal gambling to justify a renewed push into other forms of gambling in addition to the lottery. During the spectacular expansion of gambling from the 1990s to the present, Cosgrave identified that revenue-generation became the dominant discourse surrounding government-run gambling. He stated, “We used to talk about the citizens... the state now orients towards the citizen as a consumer in this period of expansion.”

The proliferation of government gambling has created a number of associated ramifications according to Cosgrave. For instance, the Canadian citizen is now assumed to have become a “rational autonomous consumer” of gambling products and services which has, in turn, given rise to the discourse of the responsible gambler. In addition, governments have subtly denigrated the work ethic through their advertising slogans that promote consumer fantasies (e.g., the now-defunct Super 7 lottery proclaimed that “earning money is great; winning it is even better”). The spread of gambling enterprises also relates to neo-liberal conditions; it is now harder for states to government to generate taxes and citizens do not want to pay them.

Cosgrave felt that current government alibis for their involvement in gambling enterprises were particularly weak and increasingly questionable. He stated that it was problematic to consider pathological gamblers as unavoidable economic casualties—especially since there are solutions to the problem. “If you want to do something about problem gambling you charge people to get into a casino *but* you lower the revenue you bring in,” said Cosgrave. The justification for movement toward government-provided online gambling has been based on potential loss of revenues. “What they’re forgetting,” said Cosgrave, “is that there are all kinds of other activities that they’re ‘losing money’ on... why isn’t the government out there providing movie theatres of selling hot dogs?” To conclude, Cosgrave stated that government forays into gambling had been economically successful but the concept of ‘public good’ needed to be brought back to the forefront.

Archived conference PowerPoint presentations from all conference sessions are available from the Completed Conference 2011 Program web page on the Institute web site.



Conference 2011 Award Winners

Best Oral Research Poster Presentation: Dr. Mike J. Dixon, University of Waterloo

Dr. Dixon was awarded best oral presentation for “Psycho-physiological Psychological Responses to Wins, Losses and Near-misses in Slot Machine Play.” Near-misses resemble jackpot wins but fall just short. Dixon and research collaborators assessed the psycho-physiological responses of 65 participants to wins, losses, and near misses while playing a realistic slot machine simulator. Their research results suggest that near misses foster continued play via frustration-induced arousal—players likely continue to play hoping to get a rewarding outcome that will release them from their frustrated state.

Best Research Poster: Candice Jensen, University of Waterloo

Graduate student Candice Jensen was awarded best research poster for “Miscategorizing Losses as Wins in Multi-Line Video Slot Machine Games.” In multi-line slot machine games, small “wins” often amount to less than the spin wager, resulting in a loss of credits to the gambler. These outcomes have been termed losses disguised as wins (LDWs)—with the disguise being the winning sounds and flashing lights that may positively reinforce the player. Jensen’s research findings indicate that the presence of LDWs in multi-line slot machine games may distort participants’ memory of win frequency during a gambling session and may contribute to the allure of these games.

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2012 Conference Announcement

The Institute’s 2012 conference has been scheduled April 12-14, 2012 and will once again be held at The Banff Centre in Banff, Alberta, Canada.