

GAMBLING RESEARCH



A Case Study of Bingo Regulation in Alberta: Summary of Interview Findings

by Dr. Kate Bedford¹ and Dr. Garry Smith

Research Project Overview

In 2012 we received a small grant (#S28) from the Alberta Gambling Research Institute to conduct a study into bingo regulation in Alberta. Four types of research methods were involved: 1) Review of the current legislation, licensing guidance, and case law shaping regulation of bingo. 2) Documentary analysis of public statements from various stakeholders about bingo in Alberta, such as expressed in research recommendations on the sector commissioned by regulatory agencies; reports published in the provincial and local press and in online blogs; responses to provincial consultations; advocacy from industry associations, charity associations, and legal gambling specialists representing those bodies; and media statements from the police or licensing actors. 3) Interviews with key stakeholders involved

in bingo regulation, including licensing officials; owners and managers in bingo halls; those who run bingo games in legions/churches/veterans hospitals, etc.; charity beneficiaries of bingo revenues; and commercial suppliers to charity bingo games. 4) Participant observation in bingo games to experience how rules and regulations are interpreted and enforced.

As part of method 3) in August 2012 Dr. Bedford conducted 27 interviews (23 recorded and transcribed) with bingo stakeholders, ranging across provincial government policymakers, inspectors, suppliers, bingo hall managers, bingo volunteer coordinators, charity volunteers, presidents of hall associations, and bingo industry stakeholders. The aim of these interviews was to ascertain the key challenges involved in regulating



The primary aim of the Alberta Gambling Research Institute, a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge, is to support academic research related to gambling.

MISSION

To facilitate evidence-based broad research that informs gambling public policy and educates Albertans and the wider audience about the effects of gambling.

the sector, as experienced by a variety of stakeholders.

Two academic articles have been produced based on this research and submitted to scholarly journals. One is about the case law on bingo regulation in Canada, focusing on court conflicts between charities, bingo businesses, and regulators. The other is about the regulation of volunteers. In addition to these articles, a brief summary of the interviews was produced for circulation among the interviewees.²

Themes of Interest from the Interviews

A. Areas of agreement

Although the interviewees tended to provide diverse opinions, there was consensus on four key issues:

1. The need for an overhaul of the provincial terms and conditions for bingo, to simplify the rules.
2. The struggle that charities face to mobilize volunteers.
3. Gaming inspectors were viewed in a positive light. Halls reported good or excellent relationships with their inspectors.
4. Responsible gambling concerns/gambling addiction concerns were seen to be less significant in bingo than in other gambling forms (especially VLTs) since there is less opportunity to lose large sums of money/play is time-limited. Some interviewees felt that the current responsible gaming training was adequate; others felt it was unnecessary and failed to appreciate the distinctive nature of bingo as a social, softer gambling form – but generally interviewees said that responsible gambling concerns were less pressing in bingo than in other sectors.

B. Key areas of debate

1. The degree to which bingo halls should be standardized. Government stakeholders and industry operators, especially those who were also involved with casinos, were supportive of standardization: it was seen as a route to bring in new players and a necessary step towards expanding electronic play. Bingo hall managers were less supportive: they saw standardization as a way of reducing the distinctive features of play that attracted customers to specific halls, and they disagreed with the claim that variations in the

game intimidated or confused players. Both rural and urban halls, and halls across the province, tended to be wary of standardization and the ‘franchising’ of bingo.

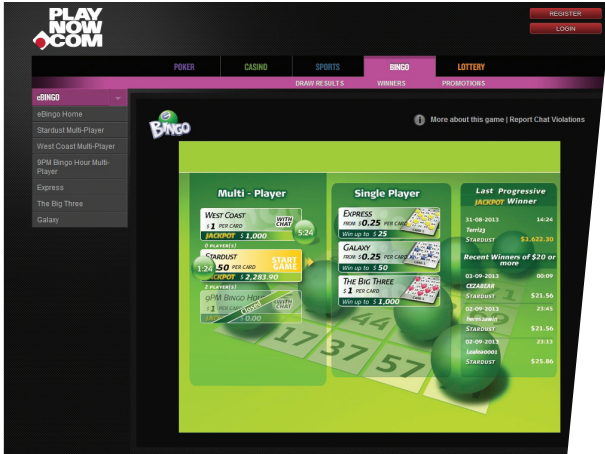
2. The varying sorts of expertise in the sector. The bingo sector includes people with many types of expertise, including people with regulatory experience of other types of gambling; gaming entrepreneurs; suppliers; and people in halls with many decades of experience as volunteers, callers, floor staff, players, and managers. Some routes exist for sharing expertise (i.e., via the hall managers association, or Bingo Alberta), and expertise circulates within the sector to some extent (i.e., most managers have experience as volunteers and players). However significant numbers of interviewees, at all levels, suspected that those at other levels did not necessarily value, or understand, their expertise. There is an important on-going debate occurring over what sorts of expertise should be included in any revitalization strategy.
3. There is, as expected, no consensus on what should be done to revitalize the sector. Some interviewees were pessimistic about the next 5 years; others optimistic. Some favoured electronic gaming expansion as a solution; others opposed it. Some saw standardization as a key ingredient in recovery; others saw it as potentially harmful. There was no clear pattern by type of work in the sector, or by rural or urban location.



Dr. Kate Bedford

Two Lessons from the Interviews Requiring Further Consideration

1. The balls lesson. Many halls reported that they had been, essentially, saved from closure by the “bingo balls” tickets. No-one (including the various suppliers of the tabs) had predicted how successful they would be. It may be worth thinking hard about what lessons this might hold for revitalization of the sector. In particular, balls tickets were unplanned; low-cost (for players and for halls); low-tech; and available to incorporate into bingo games on a hall-by-hall basis.



Example of e-Bingo product offered by BCLC to British Columbia residents via PlayNow.com web site

2. The volunteer lesson. It is hard for many charities to get volunteers to work bingos. As a solution, sports and recreation clubs have tended to support the use of credits (which can be off-set against membership fees) and the ability to penalize volunteers (i.e., via 'fines' such as cashing pre-signed cheques if people fail to attend a session). The 1999 Bingo Review considered reform to this practice, but decided to keep credits in place – they remain the key solution to the challenge posed by volunteer mobilization in many halls. What do stakeholders (including volunteers themselves) think about this staffing model? When do volunteers work best in bingo halls and why? When does this form of staffing not work so well, and why? What role (if any) can players have in choosing the charities that fundraise at their hall, and might this help build stronger relationships between volunteers and players? (Such good relationships were a feature of the halls that seemed to be most successful.) Is there a value in exploring some of the suggestions made by interviewees about improving the system of volunteer credits (i.e., allowing volunteers to use the credits to exchange for food vouchers in grocery stores; improving oversight of charitable purposes and use of proceeds by sports and recreation clubs so as to ensure that membership fees are not excessive and that volunteers feel genuinely free to donate their labour)?

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2 We have decided to remain very general in our summaries of the interviews, to ensure that anonymity of respondents is not jeopardised.

A Few Facts About Bingo in Alberta

Bingo Events

- In Alberta, only eligible charitable or religious organizations that have been issued a licence are allowed to conduct bingo events.
- A licensed group's volunteers may hold bingo events at an association, a community, or a privately operated bingo facility.
- There are currently 24 privately-owned and operated bingo association facilities in the province.

Bingo History

- In the 1920s under an exemption under the Criminal Code to conduct small raffles, Albertan charitable and religious organizations begin offering the relatively new game of bingo in community halls and church basements.
- Bingo experienced an expansion of its availability and popularity until the mid-1990s (including the introduction of satellite bingo in 1996) and has since declined.
- DIGI Bingo and Keno were introduced into bingo halls across the province in 2003 in order to help revitalize the bingo industry. DIGI bingo is a hand-held electronic device that replaces paper cards. Devices "hold" up to 42 bingo cards and players enter called numbers into the unit which then automatically marks all cards containing a particular number.

Bingo Participation & Expenditure

- In 2009, prevalence survey results indicated 4.8% of adult Albertans had participated in bingo in the past year. Bingo revenue per adult Albertan peaked in 1992 at 16.0% participation.
- The average annual bingo expenditure by Alberta players was approximately \$408 in 2009.

Sources: *Gambling in Alberta: History, Current Status, and Socioeconomic Impacts* (Williams, Belanger, & Arthur, 2011); Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) web site.

FROM THE LIBRARY: Sampling of Bingo-Related Research Publications

Bedford, K. (2011). Getting the Bingo Hall Back Again? Gender, Gambling Law Reform, and Regeneration Debates in a District Council Licensing Board. *Social & Legal Studies*, 20(3), 369-388.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0964663911407652>

Abstract: This article explores the gendered nature of gambling promotion as a modality of economic regeneration in the aftermath of the Gambling Act 2005. Using an exploratory case study of a district council licensing board, I examine how the gambling forms that reflect women's gambling cultures are faring under the current legal environment, focusing on the apparent contrast between casino promotion and bingo neglect. I ask what this reveals about the intertwining of legal reform, gender, and perceptions of worthwhile risk-taking in attempts to promote local development. In particular I probe the discrepancy between the state's legal regime (more restrictive of casinos than bingo halls) and local actors' regeneration ambitions (centred on casinos). In this way I examine what local legal actors 'see' as being legally and economically necessary or possible as they encounter a new legislative landscape around gambling.

Downs, C. (2009). *A social, economic and cultural history of bingo (1906–2005): The role of gambling in the lives of working women*. Berlin: VDM.

Abstract: This social history of bingo takes the long view on presumptions that bingo is a game rooted in the commercialization of gambling in the 1960s. It rebuffs the notion that in the 1960s commercial gambling entrepreneurs targeted women who had never previously gambled; enticing them with a new form of gambling. This work investigates whether a tradition of playing games of chance existed amongst women, and seeks to establish whether this included gambling amongst working class women, who would nowadays make up the majority of players of bingo. The nature and influence of bingo on British culture, links between bingo and criminality, the move of bingo-specific language into wider use and the potential of bingo to cause moral panics are all examined in a book that applies scholarship to a leisure pursuit that has long been treated as a something of a joke by middle-class society.

White, J., Brown, K., & Dowd, B. A. (2010). Bingo in Alabama: More than just a game. *Cumberland Law Review*, 41(3), 509-532. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed September 3, 2013).

Abstract: In this article the author discusses the state of the game bingo in Alabama and describes the various perspectives of people towards the game. It is mentioned that one group consider bingo as a simple game, one group advocates that it should be prohibited, another asserts that it is important for the state's economy and politicians have used it as a political issue in elections. The author presents a brief history of bingo and electronic bingo and discusses how neglecting the issue can affect the growth and economy of Alabama. The author informs that closing of many bingo facilities have increased the unemployment rate, divorce cases and social isolation.



Wood, R. T., & Williams, R. J. (2011). A comparative profile of the Internet gambler: Demographic characteristics, game-play patterns, and problem gambling status. *New Media & Society*, 13(1123-1141). <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1461444810397650>

Abstract: Overcoming the methodological limitations of many previous studies, the present study employs a two-phased approach to data collection, and a weighted approach to data analysis, thereby obtaining survey data from 1954 Internet gamblers and 5967 non-Internet gamblers. Using this data, the authors examine: (1) the comparative demographic and health characteristics of Internet versus land-based gamblers; (2) the characteristics predictive of Internet gambling; (3) the game-play patterns of Internet gamblers; (4) the comparative gambling expenditures of Internet versus land-based gamblers; and (5) the comparative rate of problem gambling among Internet versus land-based gamblers. The article concludes with a discussion of the methodological implications the present study holds for future research. Moreover, in light of the key finding that Internet gamblers are three to four times more likely to have a gambling problem, the article concludes with a discussion of relevant theoretical and policy implications. *[Note: study included questions related to online bingo].*

Small Research Grants Awarded to Albertan Investigators

The Institute is pleased to announce that the following three new small grant applications were recently approved:

1. **Using Reach Behavior to Measure the Role of Information, Ambiguity and Experience in a Gambling Choice Task** -- Dr. Craig Chapman (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, U of Alberta), Nathan Wispinski (Honours Psychology student, UBC); & Chris Madan (Psychology PhD student, U of Alberta).
2. **The Evaluation of an Internet-Based Self-Directed Motivational Enhancement Intervention for Problem and Pathological Gamblers** -- Dr. David Hodgins (Professor & Head, Dept. of Psychology, U of Calgary) & Jennifer Swan (MA student, Dept. of Psychology, U of Calgary).
3. **Chasing the Loss: Factors that Predict Within- and Between-Session Chasing in Gamblers** -- Dr. David Hodgins & Igor Yakovenko (PhD student, Dept. of Psychology, U of Calgary)

The purpose of the Small Research Grants program is to enhance the ability of researchers to conduct gambling related research. Applications are accepted at any time during the year. Program details and application forms are available from Grant Applications page on the Institute web site.



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