



# research reveals...

an update on gambling research in ALBERTA

## About The Alberta Gaming Research Institute

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. The Institute's identified research domains include bio-psychological and health care, socio-cultural, economic, and government and industry policy and practice. The Institute aims to achieve international recognition in gaming-related research. It is coordinated by a Board of Directors working in collaboration with the Alberta Gaming Research Council. The Institute is funded by the Alberta government through the Alberta Lottery Fund.

### OUR MISSION:

**To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society**

Your comments and queries are welcome either by e-mail [abgaming@ualberta.ca](mailto:abgaming@ualberta.ca) or phone 780.492.2856.

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## The development of empirically-derived “Low-Risk” gambling guidelines: An interview with Dr. Shawn Currie

“RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING,” “safe gambling,” and “controlled gambling” are all terms that have been variously applied to the act of gambling in such a way as to eliminate the propensity for problematic behaviours. Regrettably, no scientifically-developed definition currently exists that provides clear limits on exactly how the risks associated with gambling can be significantly lowered. It is the objective of Dr. Shawn Currie, clinical psychologist with the Addiction Centre in Calgary, to begin to remedy this situation with his Institute-funded research investigation titled “*An empirical approach to developing low-risk gambling guidelines.*” Dr. Currie was recently interviewed about this project and the following questions and answers provide a more in-depth examination of his work.

### What is your research background?

I am primarily a clinical researcher in the area of addictions (alcohol, smoking, and gambling) and health psychology. Recently, I have started to analyze large epidemiological datasets<sup>1</sup>.

### What sparked your interest in the development of low risk gambling guidelines?

When reviewing the literature for problem gambling, I noticed there was frequent mention of “responsible” or “controlled” gambling. In some treatment studies, gamblers can opt for controlled gambling rather than abstinence. I’m also involved with a second prevention program funded by the Institute in which we are teaching adolescents about the risks associated with gambling. In our presentations to students, we promote responsible gambling rather than complete abstinence. Hence, the term responsible or safe gambling is widely used. Gambling is unlike drinking in that there seems to have been no clear definition developed for responsible or safe participation in the activity. For many years, the Canadian Medical Association



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and major addiction foundations have actively promoted low-risk drinking guidelines. These guidelines have clear limits on the frequency and quantity of drinking (e.g., restrict drinking to no more than 2 drinks per day). It seems timely that gambling should also develop such guidelines.

Why is it important to make clear gambling guidelines available to the general public?

Guidelines developed by the Responsible Gambling Council in Ontario are currently available to the general public although how actively they are disseminated I am not sure. These guidelines are limited because they were not empirically derived and they set no clear quantitative limits on frequency or expenditure on gambling. The aim of this current project is to develop a set of “threshold” limits on frequency, duration, and expenditure (i.e., money spent) that clearly distinguish responsible from high risk gambling. Once fully developed and endorsed by gambling experts, our guidelines will provide the general public with a template to gauge and moderate their gambling activities to stay within the safe limits.

What does “low risk gambling” mean? Would it be possible to gamble without any risk at all?

“Low risk” is another way of saying responsible gambling. My definition of low-risk gambling would be to stay below the frequency and expenditure limits that separate safe from high risk gambling levels. Any gambling carries a level of risk of harm. The only way to gamble without risk would be not to bet money, but then this would not be true gambling.

To your knowledge, are low risk guidelines being used anywhere in North America or the world?

I’m not aware of any widely disseminated guidelines that establish clear quantitative limits on frequency, duration, or expenditure of gambling activities. Several research studies have developed their own definitions of safe gambling and used them as a guideline for gamblers wanting to control rather than abstain from gambling.

Would low risk guidelines be applicable across demographic groups?

A practical issue is whether separate guidelines need to be developed for men and women. Currently, there are separate drinking guidelines for men and women. We also know that men are more likely to develop a gambling problem than women. Hence, separate guidelines make sense but ultimately may not be practical to promote. A related issue is whether guidelines should be specific to type of gambling

activity. For example, most would argue that lotteries are a relatively safe form of gambling because of the imposed low frequency of the event. So, do we separate out lottery play from VLT play, which most experts agree is the most addictive form of gambling?

Is there any evidence that such guidelines actually change the behaviours of gamblers?

A study by Alberta researchers<sup>2</sup> showed that three-quarters of the problem gamblers in the study were able to control their gambling when provided with a clear monthly monetary limit (in this case, not to exceed spending more than 5% of their income on gambling). Other research has shown that controlled gambling is a realistic treatment goal for some gamblers. However, I'm unaware of any research on the impact of current responsible gambling guidelines on the general public.

Have low risk guidelines proven to be effective in minimizing potential harms in other areas (e.g. alcohol consumption)?

That is an excellent question. After all, what is the point of disseminating guidelines if the public ignores them? Walsh, Bondy, and Rehm<sup>3</sup> concluded that there is a critical need for research evaluating the use of low-risk drinking guidelines as a vehicle for primary prevention. So the short answer is we don't know how effective the drinking guidelines are in changing public drinking patterns. Rates of drinking have decreased in Canada over the last 2 decades; however it is difficult to attribute this decrease to the promotion of responsible drinking over other factors such as higher taxes on alcohol.

What are the most important research findings from your study to date?

The population data that we have analyzed show there are clear thresholds of gambling behaviour which distinguish low risk from high risk gambling. For example, spending more than 5% of your monthly income on gambling seems to increase the level of risk (which in this study we have defined as experiencing two or more harms from gambling in the last year) by a factor of 8.

Has your research uncovered anything that you find particularly surprising or unexpected?

At this point, the relationship between level of risk and increasing gambling activity seems to be independent of gender, age and even socioeconomic status. That is, the more one gambles, the more likely they are to experience harm from the gambling regardless of their age or gender.

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## Any “next steps” planned for your research or a follow-up study?

In Stage 2 of this particular study, we plan to disseminate the results to date to a large group of gambling experts (researchers, clinicians, and policy makers) to get feedback. The vehicles for dissemination will be gambling conferences (e.g., the Discovery 2005 conference in Ontario), and the Addiction Centre web site ([www.addictioncentre.ca](http://www.addictioncentre.ca)). Other gambling researchers in Alberta and across North America should expect a letter in the next couple of months with an invitation to review a tentative set of guidelines and complete feedback survey.

<sup>1</sup> Epidemiology is the branch of medicine that deals with the study of the causes, distribution, and control of disease in populations. The data set examined for this project was Statistics Canada's *Canadian Community Health Survey [CCHS] Cycle 1.2*.

<sup>2</sup> Robson, E., Edwards, J., Smith, G., & Colman, I. (2002). Gambling decisions: An early intervention program for problem gamblers. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 18, 235-255.

<sup>3</sup> Walsh, G., Bondy, S., & Rehm, J. (1998). Review of Canadian Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines and their effectiveness. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 89, 241-247.



## Funded projects — 2004-05 Research Grants Competition

The Institute would like to announce that the following six projects from the 2004-05 Research Grants competition have received Board approval:

*Cue-induced and gambling task related brain activity in pathological gamblers* [Major Grant].

Dr. David Crockford, Dept. of Psychiatry, U. of Calgary.

*The structure of impulsivity in pathological gambling* [Major Grant].

Dr. David Hodgins, Dept. of Psychology, U. of Calgary.

*The effect of ethnicity and gender on playing the lottery* [Major Grant].

Dr. Gordon J. Walker, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, U. of Alberta.

*Gambling and problem gambling within forensic populations in Southern Alberta* [Small Grant].

Dr. Robert Williams, School of Health Sciences, U. of Lethbridge.

*Aboriginal gaming in Canada: An overview of the issues affecting an industry in its infancy* [Small Grant].

Dr. Yale Belanger, Dept. of Native American Studies, U. of Lethbridge.

*Gambling in Canada 2004* [Collaborative Initiative].

Dr. Roger Gibbins, Faculty of Political Science, U. of Calgary.

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