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Online Version of Alberta's Voluntary Casino Self-Exclusion Intervention Evaluated



A recently completed research investigation conducted by Dr. Igor Yakovenko (U. of Alberta) and Dr. David Hodgins (U. of Calgary) has resulted in recommendations the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission (AGLC) are planning to implement to improve the effectiveness of Alberta's voluntary casino self-exclusion (VSE) program. The purpose of the Institute-funded research was to evaluate the effectiveness of a new, online implementation of the VSE program, which the researchers developed. A novel feature of their study was that it involved a research collaboration with the AGLC who provided assistance with access to data, data collection, and analysis.

Researchers Interested in Improving Alberta's Voluntary Self-Exclusion (VSE) Program

Yakovenko and Hodgins note that voluntary self-exclusion (VSE) programs are an ideal circumstance to offer brief interventions, given that individuals are already electing to prevent themselves from gambling through self-exclusion. In Alberta, there has been a VSE program in place since 2000. Gamblers who sign up with the program voluntarily exclude themselves from all Alberta casinos and racing entertainment

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.

centres (RECs) and the gambling opportunities these represent for a self-determined period between six months and five years. Although the program has been helpful for participants, there were reportedly difficulties reaching rural populations and a lack of self-help support for gamblers to utilize during their exclusion periods.

Michelle Hynes-Dawson, AGLC Vice-President of Corporate Responsibility & Reputation, is responsible for overseeing the Commission's business units of marketing, communications, stakeholder relations and social responsibility. According to Hynes-Dawson, "[The AGLC] is always looking for ways to reach Albertans with social responsibility programming and, while the self-exclusion program is a great resource for casino-goers, we're regularly looking for ways to reach all gamblers." A series of conversations between Hodgins and Hynes-Dawson eventually led to a mutually beneficial decision to evaluate an online adaptation of the VSE.

New VSE Participants Given Choice of Either Online or In-Person Interventions

Beginning in Spring 2012, Albertan gamblers who applied to self-exclude at either VSE information centres or through staff in gambling venues were offered the opportunity to participate in the evaluation of the online intervention. Two hundred gamblers were randomly assigned to participate in either the "online self-management program" group or an in-person self-awareness educational workshop group.

The new program had the following four major changes which differed from the existing VSE program:

- 1 It was offered in an online format that individuals could access from their home or other convenient location.
- 2 Program content was enhanced to include motivational interviewing (MI) and self-management tools adapted from the Brief Self-directed Gambling Treatment (BSGT) program.
- 3 Individuals were required to engage in the online program at the beginning of the exclusion term. This meant the self-management tools, support, and treatment were immediately and continually available to them throughout their exclusion terms.

- 4 Individuals were given the option to complete a second online component of the program at the end of their exclusion terms. This component encouraged assessment of progress, their current problem gambling status, and their future goals and needs.

Following a baseline assessment after randomization, the researchers contacted participants by telephone for three-, six-, and twelve-month follow-up interviews. Results of these interviews were analyzed and findings used to inform the research recommendations made by the researchers for improving the VSE program.

Recommendations for Improving Alberta's VSE Program

Findings from the randomized controlled trial of VSE program participants resulted in Yakovenko and Hodgins making the following recommendations for VSE program improvement:

- **Regardless of the format of the program, VSE is associated with improved functioning in disordered gamblers.** Though not necessarily a causal relationship, participants in both VSE workshop formats gambled less, spent less money gambling, and reported decreased need for formal treatment.
- **The new online program is an effective alternative to the face-to-face VSE program.** Although the outcomes between the two programs were not significantly different on most variables, the online program is easier to administer, able to reach more individuals, and is based on motivational evidence-based principles of psychotherapy for gambling disorder.
- **The design of the online VSE program was well-received by the users, praising its high quality content.** However, based on the feedback from the online participants, there is room for improvement in future iterations of the program.
- **Only a third of the participants in each group completed their assigned VSE workshop.** There is significant room for improvement in the uptake of offered resources during the exclusion period.

Continue on page 3....

- **Confidence in meeting gambling goals and perceived control over gambling may have a significant mediating impact on VSE outcomes.** Consequently, it is recommended that self-efficacy should be prioritized as a target for any offered treatment/self-help resources.

In discussing the VSE research, Hynes-Dawson stated that, "The AGLC reviewed the report and [we] are now actively using it to make recommendations and decisions around the future of the online VSE program. It has allowed us to be much more certain of our decisions and realistic about likely outcomes and uptake." She also appreciated that the researchers were able to understand the gap that existed in the program for some individuals. In addition, she felt that the recommendations clearly articulate the technological solutions necessary to reduce this gap for the ultimate benefit of all Albertans.

Dr. Igor Yakovenko is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Public Health, University of Alberta. Dr. David Hodgins is a Professor of Clinical Psychology at the Department of Psychology, University of Calgary. Their project received research funding provided by the Alberta Gambling Research Institute (Grant #61 "Effectiveness of a voluntary casino self-exclusion online self-management program"). Results from this investigation are being prepared for publication in a peer-reviewed journal.

Who Participated in the Online VSE Pilot Study?

Number: 200 self-excluded Alberta gamblers
 Gender: 59% male; 41% female
 Average Age: 42
 Employment: 77% employed full-time

Overall, the baseline characteristics of participants were consistent with high levels of gambling-related problems, likely hazardous drinking, and a moderate quality of life.

Dr. Rob Williams Initiates Plans for Comprehensive National Study of Gambling



Dr. Robert Williams, Institute Research Coordinator at the U. of Lethbridge, will lead a large team of Institute-affiliated researchers¹ in a national study of gambling that begins this summer. Comprehensive national investigations of this type have been undertaken in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, but, until now, none has ever been conducted in Canada. The purpose of this project is to address this deficit.

The value of national investigations are three-fold. First, they document all the background information pertaining to the provision and participation in gambling which makes such studies an excellent reference tool for policy makers and researchers. Second, they undertake a rigorous examination of the impacts of gambling at both the national and regional levels. Third, they involve significant

Continue on page 4....

participation from major gambling stakeholders due to the high-profile nature of these investigations and the practical relevance of their findings. This, in turn, creates the potential for meaningful policy improvements with respect to the provision of gambling.

The methodology for the investigation is comprised of several primary research elements. A revised gambling question module is to be included in the 2018 iteration of Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) of 28,000 Canadians. Next, there will be a two-year online panel conducted by the Leger survey research firm. It will comprise a cohort of 10,000 Canadians who gamble regularly and who are members of the Leger360 survey community. The online panel baseline survey will take place in 2018 with a follow-up survey planned for 2019. Lastly, independent corroborating investigations will complement these two large surveys and will utilize key informant interviews of provincial stakeholders and Indigenous leaders. Surveys of problem gamblers in treatment and casino patrons will also be undertaken.

The many different research themes investigated in this project will see participating Institute researchers assigned responsibility for their existing areas of gambling research interest and subject expertise. There will also be involvement from researchers in other provinces to supplement the expertise of the immediate Institute research team. Products from this study will include independent and detailed scholarly journal articles as well as a detailed final report summarizing the overall state of gambling and problem gambling in Canada.

Funders for this ground-breaking investigation include the Alberta Gambling Research Institute, the Canadian Consortium for Gambling Research, the Canadian Centre for Substance Abuse and Addiction, and Gambling Research Exchange Ontario.

1 The Institute researchers involved in the project are Dr. Rob Williams, Dr. Nady el-Guebaly, Dr. Garry Smith, Dr. Fiona Nicoll, Dr. Dan McGrath, Dr. Darren Christensen, and Dr. Yale Belanger. Additional contributors and consultants are Dr. Seamus O'Shea, Dr. David Hodgins, Dr. Shawn Currie, Ms. Glenda Wong, and Mr. Rhys Stevens.

Ten research objectives will comprise the focus of the Canadian national study:

- 1 Comprehensively document the current legal and regulatory framework for gambling in each province, including types of legal gambling, revenue generation and its distribution, harm minimization strategies, and historical development of gambling policy.
- 2 Measure current Canadian and provincial rates of gambling participation and prevalence of problem gambling.
- 3 Measure Canadian and provincial prevalence of participation in online gambling and develop a profile of Canadian online gamblers.
- 4 Survey Canadians regarding their attitudes toward gambling as well as their knowledge about gambling in Canada.
- 5 Obtain validated survey data to inform development of Canadian Low-Risk Gambling Guidelines.
- 6 Understand the Indigenous-Canadian experience relating to gambling and problem gambling.
- 7 Create a profile of Canadian problem gamblers.
- 8 Unravel the etiology of problem gambling and problem gambling remission.
- 9 Examine the role of legal gambling provision and harm-minimization initiatives as predictors of concurrent Canadian and provincial rates of problem gambling.
- 10 Assess the impact of Canada's imminent cannabis legalization on gambling behaviour and gambling-related harm.

Dr. Aaron Gruber Discusses Near-Misses at U. of Lethbridge Gambling Research Group Event



At the U. of Lethbridge Gambling Research Group's January 24th meeting, Dr. Aaron Gruber (Neuroscience) presented findings from his Institute-funded investigation of the effects of "near-misses" on gambling behaviour. Gruber indicated that near-misses happen far more frequently than simply by chance on electronic gambling machines (EGMs), and his research interest is to determine what effect this has on the player's brain and their choice behaviour. In order to test his hypothesis that near-misses affect choice valuation, Gruber and his co-investigators developed a series of choice-task laboratory experiments that simulated EGM gameplay using a "hot machine" (60% payout rate) and a "cold machine" (40% payout). He found that the undergraduate student participants were able to accurately choose which machine was best to play and which they should avoid when the probability of near-misses were equal among the two choices.

Interestingly, when either of the machines became "unbalanced" (i.e., near-misses were added), performance on the task declined. A subsequent test in which subjects chose bet size for each EGM, rather than selecting the EGM, showed that they correctly estimated the hot machine to have higher expected value, regardless of unbalancing either EGM. These data suggest that near-misses affect choice but not internal valuation. Results of the experiments appear in the *Journal of Gambling Studies*.

For Additional Information:

Banks, P. J., Tata, M. S., Bennett, P. J., Sekuler, A. B., & Gruber, A. J. (2017). Implicit Valuation of the Near-Miss is Dependent on Outcome Context. *Journal of Gambling Studies*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10899-017-9705-3>

2018-19 Graduate Student Scholarship Program

The application deadline for the Institute's 2018-19 Graduate Student Scholarship program is **Friday, April 27, 2018**.

Scholarships are tenable at any of the Institute partner universities (U. of Alberta, U. of Calgary, U. of Lethbridge) as long as research is directly related to the Institute's mandate. Program guidelines and application forms are available from the Institute web site.

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Glenda Wong
Email: gfwong@ucalgary.ca

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Dr. Nady el-Guebaly
Email: nady.el-guebaly@ahs.ca

INSTITUTE LIBRARIAN

Rhys Stevens
Email: rhys.stevens@uleth.ca

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Karen Buttner
Email: kbuttner@ucalgary.ca

Media Inquiries
Ph. 403-220-3062

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RESEARCH COORDINATORS

University of Alberta
Dr. Garry Smith
Email: garry.j.smith@ualberta.ca

University of Calgary
Dr. David Hodgins
Email: dhodgins@ucalgary.ca

University of Lethbridge
Dr. Robert Williams
Email: robert.williams@uleth.ca

RESEARCH CHAIRS

University of Alberta
Dr. Fiona Nicoll
Email: fnicoll@ualberta.ca

University of Calgary
Dr. Daniel McGrath
Email: Daniel.mcgrath@ucalgary.ca

University of Lethbridge
Dr. Darren Christensen
Email: Darren.christensen@uleth.ca

**Please forward any comments
or inquiries to:**
Email: agri@ucalgary.ca
Ph. 403-220-3062

**Rhys Stevens, Dr. Rob Williams
and Glenda Wong**
Writers

**Glenda Wong, Rhys Stevens
& Karen Buttner**
Editors

North Design Group
Design/Layout

Photo Credit/Images:
**Aaron Gruber photo supplied
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