

Problem gambling and Aboriginal communities

Gambling as a recreational activity has long been recorded as widespread in Aboriginal communities, mainly in the form of community card games. Community card games are no longer the main form of gambling, having been replaced by the TAB and pokies. These are likely to have far more serious effects on individuals and families. Not only does the move towards poker machines reduce the social interaction of card games, it also draws money away from the community. Community knowledge about the real odds of various forms of gambling, especially the pokies, is generally low. Wins from community gambling, such as in card games, are generally used for the group rather than individuals; however, they are likely to be spent on non-essential items. This money has often come from the budget available for essentials, such as food and bills.

There is some evidence that people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities tend to experience higher levels of problem gambling than other Australians. Surveys in Queensland and New South Wales, for example, have found that problem gambling among Aboriginal Australians is as much as 15 times greater than for the general Australian population¹.

The reasons for this are complex but Aboriginal communities exhibit many of the risk factors associated with problematic levels of gambling. For this reason it is important not to interpret socioeconomic risk factors as cultural, but to consider them as structural factors. High rates of economic disadvantage, unemployment, lack of alternative recreational activities and high levels of drug or alcohol problems within these communities, particularly as associated with gambling activity² are all predictive of social gambling having the potential to become problematic gambling. The high unemployment rates and lower incomes common among Aboriginal people make them more vulnerable to both gambling with the intent of increasing incomes, as many other low-income gamblers do, and more vulnerable to the negative impacts of problem gambling than the wider community.

A culture of shared responsibility means that Aboriginal problem gamblers and their families are likely to receive support from extended family and friends, such as

a place to stay or help with food. This has helped to mask the extent of the gambling problems in Aboriginal communities. The extended family structure also means that problem gamblers are likely to affect a number of people³. Financial difficulties are the main indicator that there could be a gambling problem. Common signs include having no money, spending the whole pay, having no money for the children and not being able to save.

A number of factors impact on help-seeking:

- lack of Aboriginal counsellors - an individualistic model of counselling being perceived as not being relevant to a collectivist perspective typical of many Aboriginal people
- the shame and stigma associated with both gambling itself and the negative consequences of gambling
- perception that services will not address broad structural factors that may lead to relapse
- denial
- limited awareness of services available
- concerns about confidentiality and trust
- preference for Aboriginal counsellors.

Another factor is that, with historical experience of government and welfare services removing Aboriginal children over a number of generations, there is some residual suspicion and apprehension in Aboriginal communities about approaching generalist health and welfare services. This is particularly the case if that contact involves an admission of not coping. Many Aboriginal gamblers will seek help through a financial counsellor rather than a problem gambling counsellor. Research shows that the financial counselling approach is an effective starting point for Aboriginal clients because it provides practical support on which relationships, trust and credibility can be built.

¹ Dickerson, M, Allcock, C, Blaszczyński, A, Nicholls, B, Williams, J & Maddern, R 1996, *An examination of the socio-economic effects of gambling on individuals, families and the community, including research into the costs of problem gambling in New South Wales*, Casino Community Benefit Fund Trustees, Sydney.

² Brady, M 1998, The potential impact of poker machine gambling on Aboriginal residents of Yalata and the Maralinga lands, paper prepared for Maralinga Tjarutja, South Australia.

³ Mendleson Communication 2004, unpublished interview