



A Study on Chinese Problem Gamblers
Caritas Addicted Gamblers Counselling Centre
&
Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong



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Summary Report

Background

1. The Caritas Addicted Gamblers Counselling Centre and Professor Catherine So-kum Tang of the Department of Psychology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong have conducted several studies on problem gamblers in Hong Kong. Results of these studies will facilitate the planning and implementation of public education, prevention, and intervention programs for problem gamblers.
2. The present study focused on problem gamblers seeking services at the Caritas Addicted Gamblers Counselling Center during the period from October 2003 to September 2004.

Method

3. This was a survey study based on the South Oaks Gambling Screen instrument. This survey also included information on gamblers' mental and physical health status as well as their gambling-related problems. Among 534 clients at the Caritas Addicted Gamblers Counselling Center, 352 completed the survey. The response rate was 66%.
4. The respondents closely resembled typical clients of the Centre. Among them, 314 were men and 38 were women. The average age of the respondents was 30-39 years old, more than half of them had high school education, and the average amount of gambling debt was \$200,000 to 300,000. Among the respondents, 24% had gambled for less than 10 years, 40% for 11-20 years, and 36% for more than 20 years.

Results

5. Table 1 presented the mental and physical health status of the respondents. About 70% of them experienced emotional distress, 39% reported insomnia, 24% complained of somatic discomfort, 24% lost motivation to work, and 15% had suicidal thoughts.
6. Table 2 summarized gambling-related problems of the respondents. A great majority of them (82%) had argued with their family members over gambling, 50-78% had wanted to stop gambling but did not think they were able to do so, 48% lost time from work or school, 30% had borrowed money from loan sharks to gamble or to pay gambling debts, and 17% even sold their personal or family properties to get money for gambling or repayment of gambling debts.
7. There was no significant relationship between types of gambling activities (e.g., gambling in casinos, horse races, soccer and mahjong games) and respondents' educational attainment, amount of gambling debts, mental/physical health status, and gambling-related problems. However, those who gambled in soccer games were the youngest (30% being under 30 years old), and their gambling history was also the shortest (30% gambling for less than 10 years).

Differences Among Gambler Groups

8. According to the South Oaks Gambling Screen instrument (possible scores ranging from 0-20), all respondents scored at or above 5. Among the respondents, 17% would be classified as problem gamblers

(scoring 5-9), 57% as pathological gamblers (scoring 10-14), and 26% as severe pathological gamblers (scoring 15-20).

9. In comparison with the other two gambler groups, severe pathological gamblers were more likely to start gambling at a young age, to gamble in casinos, to engage in multiple types of gambling activities, and to accumulate the highest amount of gambling debts (Table 3). However, there was no gambler group difference on gender, age at the time of the survey, educational level, and years of gambling.
10. Among the gambler groups, pathological and severe pathological gamblers reported greater emotional distress and insomnia, severe pathological gamblers had the most somatic complaints and suicidal thoughts, and pathological gamblers were the most likely to lose motivation to work (Table 1).
11. Among the gambler groups, severe pathological gamblers were the most likely to have gambling-related problems than pathological gamblers, who in turn were more likely to report gambling-related problems than problem gamblers (Table 2).

Years of Gambling

12. In comparison with different years of gambling, those who had gambled for more than 20 years had the most somatic complaints, those who had gambled for less than 20 years reported more emotional distress and suicidal thoughts, those who had gambled for 11-20 years had more sleeping problems, and those who had gambled for less than 10 years were the most likely to lose motivation to work (Table 4).
13. Table 5 showed that respondents with different duration of gambling history had similar demographic characteristics and gambling-related problems.

Recommendations

14. Based on the above findings, the following recommendations are made:
 - 14.1 More resources should be allocated to public education and prevention programs for problem gambling. These programs should be designed according to characteristics of different gambling activities. For example, territory-wide school-based public education programs should be launched to prevent youngsters gambling in soccer games. For adults, prevention programs against casino and horse race gambling should be conducted in the workplace.
 - 14.2 In addition to reducing gambling behaviors, counselling services to gamblers are also assist them to cope with their emotional distress, self-destructive tendencies, family problems, and the sense of helplessness/uncontrollability in relation to their gambling behaviors. Thus, the current services to problem gamblers are under great pressure. To increase the number of counsellors and strengthen their professional training is needed.
 - 14.3 Resources should be made available to provide support services for their family members and related public education programs. This is important to prevent problem gamblers to worsen to pathological or severe pathological gamblers.
 - 14.4 Research on personal, family, and social risk and protective factors is greatly in need to provide the knowledge base for related public education, prevention, and intervention programs for gamblers.
 - 14.5 Services to gamblers should also include financial and debt management. Thus, to strengthen the cooperation with the debt counselling service providers is needed.

Table 1 Physical and Mental Health Status – as broken down by gambler groups

| | Problem Gamblers (n = 60) | Pathological Gamblers (n = 200) | Severe Pathological Gamblers (n = 92) | Total (N = 352) |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| Emotional distress | 62% | 76% | 73% | 73% |
| Insomnia | 20% | 43% | 43% | 39% |
| Somatic complaints | 18% | 24% | 31% | 24% |
| Loss of work motivation | 18% | 26% | 21% | 24% |
| Suicidal thoughts | 10% | 15% | 18% | 15% |

Table 2 Gambling-related Problems – as broken down by gambler groups

| | Problem Gamblers (n = 60) | Pathological Gamblers (n = 200) | Severe Pathological Gamblers (n = 92) | Total (N = 352) |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--------------------|
| Arguing with family members over gambling expenses | 50% | 87% | 96% | 82% |
| Wanting to stop gambling but did not think capable of | 65% | 78% | 90% | 78% |
| Hiding signs of gambling from spouse, children etc. | 33% | 77% | 89% | 72% |
| Borrowing money but cannot pay back as a result of gambling | 28% | 74% | 95% | 71% |
| Borrowing money from relatives or in-laws to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 27% | 64% | 94% | 65% |
| Using household money to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 17% | 62% | 92% | 60% |
| Claiming winning money by gambling but in fact losing money | 20% | 52% | 74% | 51% |
| Borrowing money from spouse to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 8% | 52% | 81% | 50% |
| Losing time from work or school due to gambling | 27% | 42% | 83% | 48% |
| Borrowing money from loan sharks to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 8% | 26% | 60% | 30% |
| Selling personal or family property to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 5% | 10% | 25% | 17% |

Table 3 Comparing Gambler Groups

| | Problem Gamblers (n = 60) | Pathological Gamblers (n = 200) | Severe Pathological Gamblers (n = 92) |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Age < 30 years old | 13% | 17% | 16% |
| Age starting to gamble < 20 years old | 54% | 58% | 63% |
| Years in gambling > 10 years | 66% | 72% | 76% |
| Debt > \$200,000 | 48% | 45% | 56% |
| Gambling in casinos | 13% | 61% | 70% |
| Gambling in horse races | 61% | 77% | 72% |
| Gambling in soccer games | 51% | 51% | 55% |
| Gambling in mahjong | 31% | 44% | 48% |
| Gambling in casinos, horse races, and soccer games | 11% | 28% | 34% |

Table 4 Mental and Physical Health Status – as broken down by history of gambling

| | < 10 years (n = 82) | 10 - 20 years (n = 140) | > 20 years (n = 127) | Total (N = 352) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Emotional distress | 77% | 77% | 65% | 72% |
| Insomnia | 34% | 48% | 32% | 39% |
| Somatic complaints | 22% | 19% | 29% | 24% |
| Loss of work motivation | 33% | 25% | 16% | 24% |
| Suicidal thoughts | 16% | 18% | 12% | 15% |

Table 5 Gambling-related Problems – as broken down by history of gambling

| | < 10 years (n = 82) | 10 – 20 years (n = 140) | > 20 years (n = 127) | Total (N = 352) |
|--|------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Arguing with family members over gambling expenses | 79% | 84% | 84% | 82% |
| Wanting to stop gambling but did not think capable of | 79% | 78% | 78% | 78% |
| Hiding signs of gambling from spouse, children etc. | 68% | 81% | 66% | 72% |
| Borrowing money but cannot pay back as a result of gambling | 64% | 69% | 77% | 71% |
| Borrowing money from relatives or in-laws to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 65% | 64% | 65% | 65% |
| Using household money to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 57% | 62% | 61% | 60% |
| Claiming winning money by gambling but in fact losing money | 43% | 57% | 48% | 51% |
| Borrowing money from spouse to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 34% | 55% | 60% | 50% |
| Losing time from work or school due to gambling | 55% | 49% | 43% | 48% |
| Borrowing money from loan sharks to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 33% | 31% | 27% | 30% |
| Selling personal or family property to gamble or to pay gambling debts | 15% | 16% | 20% | 17% |

Enquiry : Mr. Joe Tang
Social Work Supervisor
Caritas A G Counselling Centre

Dr. Catherine So-kum Tang
Professor
Department of Psychology
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Tel. No. : 2499 7828

2609 6503

Fax No. : 2499 7820

2603 5019

Email : fsag@caritassws.org.hk

ctang@cuhk.edu.hk

Website : www.gamblerscaritas.org.hk

Gamblers Hotline : 1834 633