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Indigenous Australian gambling crime and possible interventions: a qualitative study

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Abstract

This paper has two purposes. First, we examine crime associated with the consequences of card and commercial gambling by Indigenous Australians in two states, in north Queensland (QLD) and in northern New South Wales (NSW). Second, we identify public health interventions potentially useful for reducing harmful gambling consequences. Permission was granted by Indigenous Elders and a university ethics committee to conduct this research. Using qualitative methods and purposeful sampling, interviews were conducted with 229 Indigenous Australians and 79 non-Indigenous gambling help counsellors, gaming venue managers and others. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews. Results show two types of crime were most evident, those committed to support a gambling habit (fraud and theft) and family dysfunction. Potential interventions reported to hold promise for minimising some harmful gambling consequences include: appropriate community education and awareness campaigns targeting Indigenous gamblers, families and their communities; the provision of Indigenous gambling outreach services; and culturally appropriate gambling counselling and treatment services. As gambling issues are interlinked with cultural, social and economic influences, the real challenge is to work with regional Indigenous communities to develop and deliver relevant holistic interventions appropriate to their needs.

Keywords: Indigenous Australians, Gambling, Crime, Public health, Interventions

Background

As an ancient civilisation, Indigenous Australians and their communities have survived by adapting to change for over 40,000 years (Randall, 2003). Yet Indigenous Australians are not one homogeneous community (Blainey, 1975). Like any group of people there is diversity among communities. 'Community' is often used to describe Indigenous groups identified by their kinship, language or belonging to a particular place (Altman & Smith, 1992). Strong links between individuals and their communities underpin the health and well-being of both. The social, emotional and cultural well-being of a community depends on the opportunity of each individual being able to achieve their full potential, thus bringing about the total well-being of their community (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Group, 1989). Given the cyclical effect and deep-seated relationships between community, family and individuals, individual activities eventually affect the collective good. Based on inclusive traditions of

reciprocity and meeting kin obligations (Randall, 2003), the involvement of family and community in dealing with social issues such as gambling is generally expected.

Gambling prevalence research has focused almost exclusively on the dominant population in many jurisdictions (Cox et al. 2005; Petry et al. 2005; Productivity Commission, 2010), with limited research being conducted with smaller population sub-groups (Wynne & McCreedy, 2005; Dyall, 2010; Duong-Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2001). For Australia, this includes Indigenous Australians (McMillen & Donnelly, 2008). Yet international research indicates that some Indigenous people are more at risk of developing gambling-related problems than non-Indigenous people (Ministry of Health, 2009; Wardman et al. 2001; Williams et al. 2011). Indigenous Australians are reported to face similar risks, including the risk of gambling crime (Stevens & Young 2009a). Crime has long been associated with gambling (Campbell & Marshall, 2007; Warfield, 2008), but its identification with Indigenous gambling has been relatively unknown.

Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine crime associated with gambling by Indigenous Australians and to identify potential interventions for reducing negative gambling consequences such as crime. The research presented here forms a small part of several larger projects in northern Queensland (QLD) and northern New South Wales (NSW).

Theoretical approach to gambling and crime

A public health approach is useful for addressing gambling issues because it places a heavy emphasis on harm prevention, harm reduction and consumer protection for the gambling population (Korn & Shaffer, 1999). This approach also identifies the particular needs of problem gambler groups needing treatment and counselling (Korn et al. 2003). Public health principles implicitly acknowledge that a diverse range of policies and strategies are needed to target different groups such as low, moderate and high risk gamblers (Shaffer, 2003). However, disadvantaged and minority groups may not understand or participate in public health programs. For example, Dunbar and Scrimgeour (2007) have noted that unequal power relationships might restrict their involvement. Additionally, for Indigenous people a public health approach may overlook multi-generational concepts of time (Blackstock, 2009) and the deprivation effects from colonisation (McDonald & Wombo, 2006; Young et al. 2007), both structural and cultural (Lavelle & Poole, 2010).

Thus, other theories and explanations may inform public health models for population sub-groups. For instance, greater financial risk-taking due to the psychoeconomics of gambling (Shaffer et al. 2002) or deprivation trap (Chambers, 1983) is often associated with poverty. Winning is seen as having the potential to drastically change the lives of the poor, more so than for the wealthy. The psycho-economic drive underpins attempts that disadvantaged people make to improve their lives. Partly as a result of colonisation, discrimination and continuing economic and social marginalisation, some Indigenous Australians find themselves living in poverty (Saggers & Gray, 2007). Thus gambling may be perceived as a way to their increase income. Using deprivation theory, McGowan and Nixon (2004) suggest that risky gambling behaviour by disadvantaged people is exacerbated by increased opportunities to gamble, the introduction of continuous forms of gambling that encourage further gambling, and an emphasis on individual and material rewards rather than social and/or spiritual rewards.

In all States and Territories in Australia, gambling opportunities have increased, as have the variety of continuous gambling opportunities over the past decade (Office of Economic and Statistical Research [OESR], 2009). If these conditions encourage further gambling, then the need for funding will intensify.

Some gamblers turn to crime if unsuccessful in obtaining money elsewhere (Lesieur, 1994). Bellringer et al. (2009) identify four categories of gambling-related crime – illegal gambling, crimes occurring near the gambling location, family abuse, and crimes committed to support a gambling habit. Yet most gambling crime involves monetary rather than violent crime (Campbell & Marshall, 2007).

Gambling crime may be related to causal factors (to repay 'loan sharks') or consequences (money laundering) (Doley, 2000). Causal links between gambling and crime are complex – do gamblers commit crimes or do criminals gamble? Bellringer et al. (2009:8) report both behaviours, with some criminals 'becoming problem gamblers during the course of their criminal careers' and other gamblers becoming criminals to finance their gambling in a complex, two-way relationship.

Crimes linked to problem gambling tend to be income-generating crimes. In a national prevalence survey in the United States (US), up to 30% of pathological gamblers seeking treatment report committing crimes to support their gambling (Petry 2005). In Australia, a positive, significant relationship was found between criminogenic problem gambling and expenditure using data from Victorian gaming venues, police records and the population census (Wheeler et al. 2010). Gambling was recorded as the most common motivation for fraud with an average loss of \$1.1 million per recorded incident (Productivity Commission, 2010). In fact, 528 Australians received criminal convictions for gambling fraud between 1998 and 2008, with poker machines the preferred form of gambling (Warfield, 2008).

Yet, before involvement with the criminal justice system, crime usually occurs within families and relationships as theft (Productivity Commission, 1999). Family crime, or dark crime, is often hidden and unreported (MacDonald, 2002; McMillen & Grabosky, 1998). Consequences of gambling crime can be extensive and spill over into a community, especially if arguments are followed by violence and victimisation (Cultural Perspectives Pty. Ltd 2005). Some groups, including Indigenous communities, may already have widespread concerns with structural disadvantage, poor access to local resources, substance misuse and crime. Community traits such as these 'can concentrate risks of problems with gambling, as well as compound some community-wide disadvantages' (Productivity Commission, 2010, p3.9). While a public health approach aims to improve the lives of all people, for Indigenous Australians, disadvantage associated with historical discrimination may leave some more vulnerable to gambling-related problems including crime than their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Over a decade ago, Hunter and Spargo (1988) observed the potential for negative outcomes of gambling on cards by Indigenous people in several isolated, remote communities as being associated with poor nutrition, substance abuse, neglect of children and crime. Later, Stevens and Young (2009a) investigated relationships between gambling-related problems and negative life events amongst Indigenous Australians using Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] data. Respondents were asked if gambling had been a problem for them, their family or close friends in the past year and their responses indicated the reach of gambling-related problems on peoples' social networks

rather than individual measures of gambling problems (Stevens & Young, 2009a, p. 37). Of six significant problem gambling correlates reported, one was linked to social and community safety including: youth gangs, alcohol problems and physical assaults for remote areas, and family violence and theft and break-ins for non-remote areas (Stevens & Young, 2009a, p. vii). Using similar methods in the Northern Territory, Stevens and Young (2009b) showed that gambling problems were associated with indicators of social breakdown and transgression such as being a witness to violence, trouble with the police, abuse or violent crime and substance abuse. Although no primary data were collected, these analyses help to highlight connections between some Indigenous problem gambling and crime.

Concerned about gambling contributing to incarceration, the QLD Department of Corrective Services (2002) conducted two small surveys amongst its prisoner population. From a representative sample of 178 prisoners including 73 Indigenous Australians, the prevalence of problem gambling was reported being up to 20 times higher than the general population using the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) (Ferris & Wynne, 2001). Those most at risk with their gambling were (in descending order): non-Indigenous men, Indigenous women, non-Indigenous women, and Indigenous men (Queensland Department of Corrective Services 2002). Later, a health survey of women prisoners asked questions about their gambling (Hockings et al. 2002). Approximately 212 (60%) women agreed to participate, including 53 Indigenous women. However the research report contained no gambling results even though specific interventions for a range of problems including gambling were recommended. Thus opportunities for collecting and disseminating gambling research to underpin our understanding of Indigenous gambling and crime have been minimal.

Methods

Participants

The majority of participants were Indigenous Australian adults living in northern NSW and northern QLD, aged over 18 years and belonging to a local Indigenous community. We drew up a list of potential participants from prior activities and asked these people to nominate knowledgeable others who might cooperate with the research (Patton, 1990). Guided by this expertise, snowball sampling was used for recruitment until saturation was reached (Berg, 2009) with 60 Indigenous Australians in QLD and 169 in NSW. As findings emerged, we found a need to obtain the views of others. Following the same method, we recruited a non-Indigenous sample of 48 people in QLD and 31 in NSW. The final sample was 308 people (164 women and 144 men) with whom 150 individual and 61 small group interviews were conducted. Most Indigenous participants had lived in communities where gambling was obvious and many had been or were gamblers themselves. The non-Indigenous others included gambling help counsellors, gaming venue managers and people who worked with Indigenous communities. See Tables 1 and 2 for demographics of QLD and NSW participants.

Participants were given written and verbal information about the research. Interview procedures were explained. All who agreed to participate signed an informed consent form. There were 26 refusals. We were given approval to conduct this research from Indigenous Elders, Traditional Owners and community leaders and the

Table 1 Demographic data of Queensland participants

Location	QLD Indigenous sample (n = 60)	QLD non-Indigenous Sample (n = 48)	Total (n = 108)
City	34	21	55
Regional town	18	16	34
Remote	5	3	8
State-wide	3	8	11
Male	25	26	51
Female	35	22	57

Note. Although identities remain confidential and anonymous, this Indigenous sample in QLD of 60 people comprised Elders and Traditional Owners (6), community members and organisation representatives (23) and others associated or working with aged care (1), child safety (4), community health and outreach (4), counsellors (4), education (1), elected councillors and mayors (3), employment (1), environmental protection (1), housing (2), justice and legal aid (3), rehabilitation (3), religious pastor (1), social workers (2) and sport and recreation (1).

The non-Indigenous sample in QLD of 48 people consisted of gambling help counsellors (14), gaming venue managers (20) and others working in community development (5), corrective services (1), family support (1), health (2), legal aid (2), religious pastor (1), welfare (1) and youth worker (1).

university Human Research Ethics Committee (for further explanation, see Breen et al. 2010; Hing et al. 2010).

Research sites

In northern QLD, three different regions, a city on the north-eastern seaboard, a north-western regional outback mining town and a remote northern area were chosen as research sites. Although they had contrasting geographic, social and economic profiles, Indigenous kinship affiliations were strong over the three regions and mobility was high. All forms of gambling were available in the city, casino games were not available in the regional town and commercial gambling was only available in the remote area if people travelled long distances to town. Access to gambling by telephone and internet was unreliable.

In northern NSW six different but adjoining local government areas (LGAs) were chosen as research sites. They had a wide variety of geographic, social and economic profiles. Yet Indigenous people here make up one tribal group. All six LGAs had

Table 2 Demographic data of New South Wales participants

Location	NSW Indigenous sample (n = 169)	NSW non-Indigenous sample (n = 31)	Total (n = 200)
Local Government Area 1	27	6	33
Local Government Area 2	48	8	56
Local Government Area 3	30	7	37
Local Government Area 4	14	1	15
Local Government Area 5	30	5	35
Local Government Area 6	20	4	24
Male	74	19	93
Female	95	12	107

Note. While identities remain confidential and anonymous, this Indigenous sample in northern NSW of 169 people comprised Elders and Lands Council representatives (16), community members and organisation representatives (60) and others associated or working with aged care (4), child and family services (5), communications (1), community health and outreach (8), community development (5), community services (2), counsellors (3), education (13), employment (5), environmental protection (5), housing (2), justice and legal aid (5), health centres (4), men's group (15), mental health (1), public servants (5), rehabilitation (1), sport and recreation (3), transport (2), welfare (1), women's refuge (2), youth worker (1).

The non-Indigenous NSW sample of 31 people consisted of gambling help counsellors (10) and gaming venue managers (21).

abundant commercial gambling opportunities and some card games available. Access to gambling by telephone and internet was reliable.

Procedures

A qualitative research design was used which included semi-structured interviews and observations (Creswell, 2007) conducted by one Indigenous and two non-Indigenous researchers. Interview times and sites were chosen by participants. Interviews with small men's groups were conducted solely by the Indigenous male researcher due to cultural respect (Phillips, 2003). Interviews were not digitally recorded for cultural reasons. Extensive notes were taken and transcribed immediately. See Appendix 1 for a list of the guiding interview questions.

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, by identifying, analysing, and reporting on thematic patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A set of guiding questions was asked of all participants so their collected responses were collapsed into one document. The guiding question then became the descriptive code label. Interpretative coding was undertaken in a search for themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Across the interviews, key themes, those consistently repeated across the data set, and supporting sub-themes emerged as the analysis deepened (Berg, 2009). Themes were then depicted as a family tree diagram (Creswell 2007). At the bottom of the tree is a broad data base of participant responses (or grand-children). These relate to a smaller number of specific patterns or sub-themes (or children). The sub-themes are then related to a few over-arching themes at a higher yet more abstract level (or parents). For a simple representation of the development of the theme 'Financial Hardship Outcomes', please see Table 3. To ensure confidence in the results, Nvivo software V.8 was also used in the analysis, to review the emerging pattern of themes (QSR International 2008).

Results

This research was part of several larger studies where the strongest negative gambling outcome reported was financial hardship (Breen et al., 2010; Breen et al., 2011; Breen

Table 3 A representation of the theme development 'financial hardship outcomes'

Major Theme (parent)	Financial hardship outcomes			
Sub-themes (children)	Loss of funds	Unable to repay debts	Cycle of gambling dependency	Crime
Coded extracts & phrases (grand-children)	Gambling to make money;	Ask family for help;	Some cannot gamble in moderation;	Desperation leads to some crime;
	Take a punt on a risk . . . might win;	Depend on reciprocation;	Develop a dependence;	Gambling-related fraud;
	Gamble all pay in one go;	Go to payday lenders;	As severe as substance abuse;	Stealing;
	Cannot pay bills;	Obvious to emergency relief services.	Demand sharing;	Gambling-related violence;
	Increasingly difficult circumstances.		Trapped in a cycle of hopelessness and despair.	Crime by kids.

Source: adapted from Creswell (2007:153-4).

Note. There were many sub-themes making up the major theme 'Financial hardship outcomes' of which 'crime' was just one.

2011; Breen, 2012; Hing et al., 2010). In this paper only those results including crime associated with gambling and recommended gambling interventions are presented. In the general synthesis, crime was a less strong theme, reported by about 10-15% of participants. However in several locations, crime was a repetitive theme. Participant responses about crime arose from general questions on risk factors and negative gambling consequences so card and commercial gambling are combined here. Please note that all quoted responses are from Indigenous participants unless otherwise specified.

Crime

Consequent to frequent intensive gambling, some people resort to crime as one way to manage their increasingly difficult financial circumstances. Using four crime categories developed by Bellringer et al. (2009), crimes here appeared to fall into two categories, those committed to support a gambling habit (fraud and theft) and family abuse and dysfunction. Fraud and theft were mostly reported from participants in four of the six LGA's in northern NSW. Family dysfunction was reported in most research sites across NSW and QLD. Family dysfunction was described as dependants committing crimes and youth gambling being ignored. A less obvious crime was said to be family violence. With one or two exceptions, little gambling-related crime was reported by 41 gaming managers at their venues.

For crimes committed to support problematic gambling, work and welfare-related fraud were two strong themes. Work-related fraud, described as *"stealing at work"* and *"people ripping off their workplace"* was often connected to poker machine gambling. For example, one city organisation manager explained his experience as: *"an employee took \$100,000 and put it into poker machines ... (the) individual did jail time. Other individuals were involved but only one convicted"*. Another woman reportedly with a *"really bad gambling problem"* was caught stealing from her government employer *"... to feed her gambling problem"* recalled one of her departmental colleagues. A Legal Aid officer often assisted Indigenous women in court for *"gambling-related fraud"*.

Welfare-related fraud, linked to either card gambling or commercial gambling, was typically called *"Centrelink fraud"* explained a community support worker. In the city: *"one person ... had a gambling problem. She was ripping off Centrelink, got caught"*. *"Nine out of ten times in the court, Centrelink fraud ... (was) based on gambling problems"* said a regional legal advisor. Summarising these responses, one state-wide counsellor observed *"attitudes change when gambling; responsibility is thrown out the door"*.

Some participants explained gambling crime as desperate theft: *"if you have no money, if family has no money ... desperation leads to some crime"*. In one LGA some participants noted that the increasing crime rate was linked to gambling theft. A local community member described activities by gamblers as lying, cheating and stealing. He went on to say *"[after] hocking your own stuff, but then don't get it back"* some gamblers start *"selling their items and other people's for money"*. Support for this response came from another community man in an adjoining LGA who remarked: *"jewellery and bikes will be gambled or stolen to gamble"*.

Crimes committed in or near gaming venues were usually ascribed to high alcohol consumption, not gambling. The effects of high alcohol use are immediately visible while the effects of gambling problems may be longer term and out-of-sight. Only one manager

(non-Indigenous) from a north QLD regional town remarked "*Gambling related violence is high in (name of place)*". There was some conjecture that gambling-related violence occurred but the over-consumption of alcohol was of far greater concern to managers.

Within the context of family dysfunction, one very serious outcome was seen as dependants committing crime. This was described by several participants as petty crime committed by children of gamblers who had to adjust to a decreasing pool of family resources. In one LGA a child support officer described gambling as "*an underlying issue*" seen as "*leading to stealing and crime by kids if they are hungry and not supervised*". This response was reinforced by local community members. For example, two responses included: "*shoplifting and petty crime by hungry kids*" and "*kids commit crime, often for food*". A non-Indigenous man from a remote location reported "*some crime associated with kids stealing food from the store when they are hungry*". In terms of parental role models, a participant from a different LGA was concerned that "*stealing food and money, gambling and drinking gets transferred to kids as they watch that behaviour*", while an Elder here saw links between crime and deprived children as causing "*kids to suffer, there's no discipline, causes crime*".

In one LGA, youth gambling on cards was plainly obvious. Card gambling was a regular occurrence here where: "*kids play in street nearly every day, 16 year olds*" and "*kids play a lot of cards*". Several concerned community members saw potential lifetime patterns of risky behavior being established by these young gamblers. One long-term resident said "*80% young kids play cards for money; sets them up for later patterns of gambling*". This was reinforced by a family support worker who saw an easy transition from cards to commercial gambling "*kids start playing cards in the street in the open, very young. Underage gambling on cards in main street. At 18 they go to venues*".

Perhaps more seriously, it was noted that while card gambling attracted some youth, access to commercial gambling in some locations was seen as easy, even though it was illegal for those under 18 years. One male Elder was worried about the vulnerability of youth with access to commercial gambling in his LGA:

... access to it, some of these kids are 16 and 17 but they look ... 25 and they'll be up there playing the machine, drinking or whatever the case may be and it comes back to that access. You can't see any publicans pulling them up if they're putting in \$50 to \$100 at a time into the machine. Publicans don't want to pull them up".

Some youth were seen to imitate their peers in risky behaviour. The motivation to gamble and to commit crimes to get extra money was reported by several participants in one LGA. For instance, one woman in this community explained: "*they gamble because they want to throw in (buy) for alcohol and marijuana. Parents know and don't care; 16 year olds are doing this*". The eventual cost of such risky behaviour could be contact with the legal system as one female Elder observed:

"You've got young people around the 13, 14, 15 year old mark starting to grow up and they tend to get a feel for what other kids around them are doing and wear in terms of clothes. If they even got that off their parents they seem to look to thieve and they look to break into people's homes just to get some money ... the more alcohol that is involved I think the more risk they take".

Although limited to just one or two LGAs, youth gambling appeared to be associated with other risky behaviour.

Violence within families as a consequence of gambling was a real concern to several participants, but rarely mentioned in the context of crime. However, violence against anyone, either physical or threatened, is a crime (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). One participant, a health professional who worked in several LGAs, reported gambling losses as creating “a strain on relationships” which “can be a precursor to domestic violence”. A child safety worker stated:

“Violence is huge because of gambling . . . if one person’s got a problem, then obviously that person’s trying to hide that problem from the other partner, then that leads from one thing to another . . . verbal and physical abuse”.

Further in a regional outback town, a male Elder described exploitation and threatening behaviour as: “Yes, a lot of domestic violence problems. You get your men that stand over for their key cards and that would have ramifications”.

Gambling losses reported by an experienced family support officer in one LGA were seen as producing “a lot of conflict, domestic violence. People don’t have a win, they just blow their money and they’re going to start taking it out on the missus”. This extended to children, where a community member recognised that some gamblers “cannot meet basic needs, affecting ability to be good parents, child neglect abuse of kids as a result of stress over losses”. Similarly, another community member in a different LGA commented that gambling contributes to “break-ups and domestic violence”.

Regarding locations, gambling crimes involving fraud and theft appeared more obvious to participants in northern NSW and less obvious in north QLD. Crime associated with dependant youth stealing for food was reported in both northern NSW and north QLD. Youth gambling on cards for money was reported and observed in two LGAs in northern NSW. Violence within families as a consequence of gambling losses was reported in both northern NSW and north QLD.

Thus, direct financial, legal and social well-being consequences were associated with gambling problems and crime for the gambler, but there were also some reports of indirect and serious consequences for gambler’s families, children and communities. To reduce negative gambling consequences, participants were asked for their ideas on appropriate interventions.

Potential interventions

Interventions for gambling-related problems usually include professional help (formal treatment, gambling telephone helplines, online counselling), non-professional help (support from family, friends, groups) and self-help (self-exclusion and personal strategies). There is low usage of mainstream professional help and very few culturally specific services available for Indigenous Australian gamblers (Breen et al., 2010; Cultural Perspectives Pty. Ltd 2005). The Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council (AHMRC) (2007) maintains that shame and stigma prevents Indigenous Australians

from seeking gambling help while Cultural Perspectives Pty. Ltd (2005) state that a lack of comfort with counselling, little confidence in gambling help services and confidentiality concerns were barriers. Challenges for gambling help providers were described by Cultural Perspectives Pty. Ltd (2005) as - diversity within and across Aboriginal communities; gambling not being identified as a significant problem; co-morbidity with alcohol and other drugs and depression; and structural disadvantage associated with poverty and unemployment.

With this in mind, all participant suggestions for interventions to potentially reduce any negative consequences of gambling were valued and treated as important. Their responses were analysed thematically and are reported here as interventions that could be implemented by Indigenous people themselves, by gambling counsellors, by the gaming industry and venue managers, and by the government.

For Indigenous Australians, these Indigenous participants raised the need for them to: open up discussions about gambling leading to a better awareness of its ripple effects; realise the urgency for balanced, appropriate community education about gambling to assist Indigenous gamblers to make informed decisions (such as the development, broadcast and distribution of media messages specifically aimed at Indigenous audiences with Indigenous-appropriate community education booklets); train and appoint Indigenous gambling liaison workers and gambling counsellors to assist those seeking help in a culturally sympathetic manner; encourage education in budgeting and money management (for example providing community workshops or including budgeting sessions in health and employment programs); and to return to Indigenous cultural values including collective social norms, respect for leadership by Elders and strong role models. Several remarks underpinning these themes included: *“educate on the consequences of gambling and what happens when you lose your money”*; *“recognise the issues and problems gambling can cause”* and *“more Aboriginal counsellors, more educators”*.

For gambling counsellors, most participants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, agreed that cultural awareness training would help in providing appropriate gambling services to Indigenous gamblers. This means exploring the need for, and development of culturally sensitive problem gambling help services and not expecting that mainstream services to be appropriate for all Indigenous gamblers. If staff in mainstream services expect Indigenous people to be open, direct, articulate and expressive about their problems in a clinical, non-Indigenous setting (Cultural Perspectives Pty. Ltd 2005), then cultural sensitivity will be low as typical communication styles used by Indigenous Australians are more circular and non-dyadic (Steane et al. 1998). Thus some people said there was: *“a lack of appropriate and cultural services for Indigenous people”*; *“focus services on Aboriginal people”*; *“fear of being stigmatised”*. Indigenous participants advocated for gambling counsellors to cooperate with and train other community service workers on Indigenous gambling issues. This should help them recognise signs of gambling-related problems in their clients and overcome a general concern. One person said that *“gambling is not seen as a big issue, not linked to other influences such as crime, drugs and alcohol”*. Providing culturally appropriate professional gambling help and encouraging its use may assist some Indigenous people who gamble to seek help before reaching a crisis.

For the gaming industry and venue managers, many Indigenous participants saw them as responsible for providing a safe environment with proper regard for responsible

gambling practices. One suggestion was to raise gambler protection by withdrawing media announcements about gambling odds, gambling draws and winnings. A further proposal was for gaming venues to support gambling education and awareness programs in community centres and schools. Comments supporting these proposals were: *“overdue area that needs attention”*; *“Aboriginal pamphlets (explaining gambling)”*; *“educate our people on the impacts of gambling”* and *“talk to the principal at the school”*.

In relation to what governments can do, Indigenous participants perceived governments as being mandated to remove historical structural inequities affecting Indigenous Australians generally in education, employment and more. Concerning employment, some wanted *“more Aboriginal people in the hospitality industry”*. However, in regard to gambling, they wanted risk reduction through the proper implementation of responsible gambling activities in local venues. Suggestions for reducing gambling risks included: *“government could be less ambivalent to the problem by establishing a whole of government approach through health, police”*; *“tough regulations about money limits in a 24 h period for spending on gambling”*; *“smart cards linking spending per session”*. In particular, it was identified that *“stronger ties need to be seen between gambling and crime and gambling and other problems”*. A few participants considered that strengthened government efforts in venues could be achieved by strict monitoring of licensing laws. Governments were expected to provide funding for culturally relevant public health gambling services for the social wellbeing of all Indigenous people, based on regional needs.

These responses, although summarised into groups, potentially show those in the public health field multiple ways to address the concerns of Indigenous people about gambling and its consequences. As gambling issues are closely connected with cultural, social and economic issues, providing gambling assistance to Indigenous communities needs to be relevant to people in that location (Stevens & Young 2009a). One practical implication of this research is the need to identify who, how and in what format public health interventions could be targeted and implemented in these locations.

From these responses, significant elements that may form the basis of a model of Indigenous intervention can be drawn out including: the need for community education and awareness campaigns, better knowledge of services, human resource development for Indigenous and non-Indigenous counsellors, culturally appropriate intervention strategies, greater integration of services and improved government funding.

Discussion

This research has increased understanding about crime associated with the consequences of problematic gambling by some Indigenous Australian gamblers. As well it has broadened our awareness of culturally relevant interventions reported to assist people who gamble make safer choices and reduce harm in their gambling decisions.

Of the four categories of gambling-related crime identified by Bellringer et al. (2009), two prominent categories were crimes supporting a gambling habit and crimes linked to family dysfunction. Being mindful to not stigmatise all Indigenous people who gamble as problem gamblers and criminals (Volberg & Wray, 2007) these results need to be considered within the broader context of Australia's colonial history and discrimination.

High involvement in gambling, as in frequent gambling and gambling more than the gambler can afford, has been associated with Indigenous gambling-related crime

(Queensland Department of Corrective Services 2002). It is not difficult to see how high gambling involvement can lead to fraud and theft for some. Consistent with the psycho-economic theory (Shaffer et al. 2002) some people gamble in the attempt to make money. Although randomness is a key feature of commercial gambling, when losses outweigh wins and more money is needed, resorting to fraud and theft to finance gambling reflects the very high risks taken by some gamblers to improve their financial position. Some Indigenous people who may experience a lack of control in living with structural disadvantage (Productivity Commission, 2010) may compound their disadvantage by gambling to reduce social and economic hardship.

Family dysfunction as a result of gambling was the second type of crime revealed in this research. Contrary to research describing the majority of gambling crime as monetary crime (Campbell & Marshall, 2007), child neglect and violence were also reported here. Gambling losses permeate outwards to affect gambler's children and families as reported by McDonald and Wombo (2006). Some Indigenous people who gamble ignored their children's physical and emotional welfare as observed by Hunter and Spargo (1988) and appeared to compromise a healthy start to life when gambling losses led to poor nutrition and neglect. Our research found that hunger and neglect can lead children to petty crime. For these children long-term risks may be created in early contact with the legal system. Being first charged with a criminal offence as a child increases the probability of victimisation or unfair treatment for an Indigenous Australian from about 10 % to about 45% (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). Apart from signalling some family dysfunction, childhood contact with the legal system may affect future employment and income prospects. Gambling losses may limit some children's aspirations for the future.

Violence, especially within families, was reported by a few participants as a consequence of gambling, consistent with Stevens and Young (2009a) findings in non-remote areas. Women were most often the victims of violence. Yet violence was not widely perceived as a crime. Reticence to report a crime, even violence, may be based on historical discrimination or protection of the family structure. The chance of being a victim of violence for an Indigenous Australian is about 10% compared to just over 5% for non-Indigenous Australians (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). By adding the marginal effect of variables such as social and financial stressors (including gambling problems), that chance of being a victim increases to nearly 40%. A strong positive relationship exists between violent victimisation and financial stress (Snowball & Weatherburn, 2008). Thus, strategies to reduce financial stress can be expected to reduce violence. While not suggesting that financial stress is always linked to gambling, associations between one gambling consequence (financial hardship) with another (violence) are obvious, as was also found in the Northern Territory analysis by Stevens and Young (2009b).

Conclusions

Drawing on responses from several projects provides a broad explanatory base to support these results although this research lacks the statistical significance and generalisability of a quantitative study. This research relied on the voluntary and genuine involvement of all participants. It is not possible to evaluate the extent to which

different people in different locations could have contributed additional information. Although problem gambling was not directly measured amongst these participants, there is little doubt that gambling impacts cause concern and hardship for some Indigenous people who gamble, their families and communities

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the limitations just noted, it is still possible to draw conclusions regarding crime and public health interventions. These participants recognised that gambling was an issue not openly discussed, yet one that should be on the public agenda. For gambling to become a topic of public discussion, appropriate gambling information and community education was seen to be needed to raise awareness about harmful impacts. It should be targeted at all groups in the community including non-gamblers, gamblers and youth.

Working with Indigenous groups, taking a holistic rather than a single issue approach may reveal serious underlying issues (such as financial stress) contributing to a presenting problem. Over time, the capacity of people working to reduce gambling harm may become fertile ground for developing practical preventive approaches for improving Indigenous social and emotional well-being as advocated by Lavelle and Poole (2010). Additionally, reducing social and economic structural inequity by opening alternative opportunities for all Indigenous Australians should assist some reduction in psycho-economic drives to gamble.

The provision of Indigenous counsellors, liaison workers and culturally appropriate gambling help services may play a critical role in reducing stress for those requiring gambling counselling. Recovery, rehabilitation and support are important components of a public health approach and should be available to all.

Thus, our findings signal the need for further research. There is an obvious need to conduct research in other states and territories to compare and draw lessons. Aggregated results can shape public health strategies in culturally appropriate ways, but regional differences must also be kept in mind. Analysis and critique of risk factors associated with gambling and crime may be a catalyst for developing appropriate harm prevention and reduction programs. The potential negative consequences for some Indigenous children demands that this work be given strong and urgent support.

Appendix 1: Guiding interview questions

Card gambling by Indigenous people:

- Who do you think gambles on cards
- What card games do people play?
- Where do they play cards?
- How often do they play cards?
- How long do they play cards each time?
- How much do they spend on cards gambling each time?
- Why do they gamble on cards/motivations?

Commercial gambling by Indigenous people:

- Who do you think gambles on commercial gambling?
- What types of gambling do people gamble on?

Where do they gamble?
How often do they gamble?
How long do they gamble for each time?
How much do they spend gambling each time?
Why do they gamble on commercial gambling/motivations?

Risk factors:

What do you see as risk factors that encourage some Indigenous people to gamble, and to gamble out of control?
Do these vary for the different types of community and commercial gambling?

Protective factors:

What do you see as protective factors that might assist Indigenous people to gamble responsibly, to control or abstain from gambling?
Do these vary for the different types of community and commercial gambling?

Positive consequences of gambling:

Can you describe any positive effects of gambling on local Indigenous individuals and families. (*Prompts: social, recreational, cultural, economic/financial, health-related*)
Any other positive consequences of gambling?

Negative consequences of gambling:

Can you describe any negative effects of gambling on local Indigenous individuals and families.
Any other negative consequences of gambling?

Potential Interventions:

What are the barriers for Indigenous people to seek help or counselling for gambling problems?
What are the facilitators that assist Indigenous people to seek help or counselling for gambling problems?
What could Indigenous communities do to reduce negative impacts and encourage responsible gambling in Indigenous communities?
What could the gambling industry do to reduce negative impacts and encourage responsible gambling in Indigenous communities?
What could the State Government do to reduce negative impacts and encourage responsible gambling in Indigenous communities?
What could community services, welfare & health agencies do to reduce negative impacts and encourage responsible gambling in Indigenous communities?

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to this research and the subsequent paper produced here. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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