Gambling Problems in Youth

Theoretical and
Applied Perspectives
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More than 20 years ago, I first noted that young people in North America were growing up in a context of legalized gambling for their entire lifetime. By the 1980s, for young people, gambling had become an average and expectable part of the social landscape. Amid legal opportunities to gamble in all but two of the United States and with illicit opportunities to gamble in every state, gambling is now ubiquitous in America. With few social sanctions to limit a young person’s interest in gambling—like their adult counterparts—young people now gamble in larger numbers and for seemingly higher stakes. Gradually, gambling-related problems became more visible for young people and the culture slowly but increasingly took notice. By the late 1990s, every sector of American and Canadian society had started to consider the effects of legalized gambling on youth. For different reasons, representatives of the gambling and health care industries led the movement to prevent youthful gambling and reconcile existing problems whenever possible. Scientists also recognized that there was much to be learned by studying young gamblers. Toward the end of the 20th century, there was a rapid increase in gambling research focusing on developmental issues; half of what is known about gambling emerged during the 1990s. This volume represents an important event in the continuing growth of a field.

We judge the quality and character of a society by how it cares for its young, old and sick. In contemporary cultures around the world, young people are confronted with opportunities to take risks (e.g., gambling, psychoactive drug taking, etc.). Concerns about these activities have encouraged public health workers to study the epidemiology of youthful risk-taking behaviors. These studies offer the opportunity to understand the
distribution, determinants and natural course of these risky behaviors among young people. The epidemiology of gambling helps us to understand who is doing what kind of gambling and where. More focused research with young people helps us to understand how risky behaviors begin, are sustained, and then transformed into patterns that are more mature and entrenched—both healthy and unhealthy. Because the vast majority of young people already have gambled by time they reach their last year in high school, it is vital to learn about the risk and protective factors that increase or decrease the likelihood that they will develop a gambling-related problem.

Gambling studies hold enormous potential to improve the human condition. For example, the study of gambling disorders in general and youthful gambling in particular holds the potential to teach us more about addictive behaviors (e.g., drug use disorders) than these substance use disorders can teach us about temerperate gambling. In its pure state, gambling is unfettered by intoxicant use. Consequently, it becomes possible to study the development, maintenance and resolution of addiction without the contaminating effects of psychoactive drug use. Although excessive gamblers often use alcohol and other psychoactive drugs, it is possible to study those who do not imbibe—particularly among youth. Recently, in a series of very important studies, neuroscientists have shown that central nervous system reward circuits for winning money parallel the reward mechanisms associated with the anticipation of cocaine use or the appreciation of female beauty by males. In addition, some gamblers experience blackouts while in action; some experience withdrawal when they try to stop gambling. All of this growing evidence seems to show that gambling has the capacity to mimic the subjective effects of ingesting psychoactive drugs and that this experience can change important characteristics of the central nervous system. Young people are most vulnerable to these changes because aspects of their neurobiology remain immature until about age 18. Powerful emotional experiences have the capacity to impact adversely a developing central nervous system. Consequently, we have a special duty to understand and protect young people from experiences that can compromise their development. After all, young people represent the future of society.

At first glance, the advances in neuroscience research amaze onlookers who are surprised to learn that gambling holds the potential to produce such powerful effects. Upon further inspection, however, it seems to me that the more interesting observation is that gambling might be informing us that traditional models of addiction have been less than accurate. Perhaps drugs are not as responsible for addiction as many once thought. If gambling can become an addictive pattern in the absence of drug use, with all of the sequelae typically associated with drug dependence, then maybe addiction does not simply rest upon the action of psychoactive drugs.
More likely, addiction emerges from an extraordinary relationship between a vulnerable user and the objects of interest in their environment. When this relationship stimulates a subjective shift that is sufficiently robust, reliable and desirable, the roots of addiction are propagated.

Research on the growth of knowledge reveals that, during the second half of the 20th century, as legalized gambling expanded around the world, gambling studies also exploded. For example, between 1999 and 2002, one third of all the gambling-related scholarly citations ever published were released in academic publications. It is remarkable indeed to think that much of what we know about gambling behavior has been learned during just the past five years.

This confusion derives from the fact that gambling is a proxy for many other activities and circumstances. For example, people who gamble tend to take more risks, in general, than people who do not gamble. Excessive and disordered gamblers have a disproportionate number of psychological and social problems—both before and after their gambling. Casual observers often think that gambling causes criminal activity; however, do criminals gamble or do gamblers become criminals? Does gambling lead to depression, or do depressed people find respite in gambling? Only prospective longitudinal research can answer these questions accurately—anything less is speculation.

As the field of gambling studies prepares to address these and other fundamental questions by conducting new and more theoretically driven research, even more central questions emerge. Does understanding adult gambling inform us about youthful gambling? Youthful gambling problems might be qualitatively different from adult problems. Our knowledge of adult gambling might not apply to young people. For example, treatments for young people need to consider their immature neurobiology as well as their developing personalities and cognitive skills. It is possible, then, that gambling and gambling disorders are different constructs for young people compared to their adult counterparts. If this is so, then we might not have an accurate index of the prevalence of youthful gambling. Like drug taking, the reported lifetime prevalence of adverse gambling-related activities tends to go down; this of course is impossible since the lifetime prevalence of any pattern can only increase as people age. Something important happens to the meaning of previous life events and experiences as people mature; the end result is uncertainty about the value of lifetime prevalence rates. President John F. Kennedy once noted that, “The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.”

Without an accurate understanding of youthful gambling, we risk accepting premature truths. Historical time and place influence the nature
of “truth” and its associated repository of facts. In large measure, the social setting determines conventional wisdom; in turn, ideological conventions shape the social setting. To illustrate, during the 1930s, it was widely thought that dance music (i.e., jazz), in general, and dance music on the radio in particular were objects of addiction; listening to jazz was responsible for the demise of young people and their American families. One front-page headline in the 1932 Oregonian warned, “The Great American Narcotic... The Great American Brain-Killer is Dance Music.” Another headline cautioned, “Jazz has Invaded College Life.” Still another claimed, “Radio, Rum, Jazz Blamed for Insanity.” These headlines serve to remind us that objects of “addiction” wax and wane. Each has its time; each has its cultural context. Gambling is now in the midst of a remarkable run of popularity that is fueling its expansion. However, as it has in the past, gambling opportunities eventually will recede—but, likely never disappear.

Careful study is required to determine which activities hold addiction risk because of novelty effects and which activities represent more enduring threats. For young people, both kinds of threats are very real and important, but derive from different sources. Similar to the trepidation surrounding youth, jazz and the radio, social observers now tout fears with respect to the influence of computers, video games and the Internet. Just as the development of the continuous still changed the manufacturing of gin and role of alcohol in society, the introduction of the hypodermic needle represented new technology that adversely shifted the use and effects of opioids during the 19th century. Similarly, contemporary technological advances might be shifting social priorities and, as a result, introducing new health risks, particularly to young people. However, it also might be that after a period of adaptation, people will learn to use these tools more responsibly—like the radio. Just as the English gradually adjusted to the gin craze of the 18th century, there is some evidence that young people in Nevada have adapted to their gambling surroundings and experience less than average levels of gambling-related problems. With every technological change, the important public policy issue to consider is whether a society can afford to wait for the inevitable adaptation—learning to enjoy jazz in moderation—or must intervene formally—like the 18th century Gin Acts.

These considerations lead to the matter of prevention. Any discussion of youthful gambling is incomplete without thinking about prevention. Preventing youthful risk taking is different from preventing adult risk taking. Therefore, education and awareness programs must target youth in a way that is effective and engaging. Effective messages that attract and influence adults can repel young people who might wonder what all the hollering is about, leaving them to do just the opposite of what the message intended. This book will stimulate many additional and equally important questions;
it also will help readers begin to formulate answers. In an effort to “do
good,” I urge that potential answers be carefully evaluated so that, despite
good intentions, we “do no harm.”

Avoiding harm is a tricky matter. And this brings us back to the begin-
nning. Gambling-related public policy must protect the young, elderly, and
otherwise vulnerable. Some people would develop policy that would pro-
hibit all gambling. I wonder if the absence of all gambling would make
the world a better place, where people would be less susceptible to harm.
Temptation can stimulate character development. Learning to say no to entic-
ing opportunities is an important part of human development and identity
formation. Young people need temptation to fully develop character and
facilitate the growth of a mature central nervous system. If all risks and temp-
tation were absent, character development might be compromised or, at
least, take a different direction yielding difficult to imagine consequences.

These kinds of considerations lead to my final thoughts. Too often,
the fundamental issues of human experience become political footballs.
Gambling is no different. Currently, gambling opponents and proponents
argue about the value of gambling. Both need gambling to sustain their
interests and activities. Both groups tend to select from the small but
rapidly growing body of scientific research only those results that support
their position. We should expect this kind of bias from stakeholders and
advocates in a political debate. As scientists and health care providers,
however, we must assure that our young people are guided by balanced,
even handed information.

As I mentioned earlier, the scientific literature is growing rapidly. Judg-
ing the quality of research results is another matter. To make use of science,
scientists, public policy makers and casual observers alike must classify the
strength of the evidence. Science has a tendency to undo itself. New find-
ings advance our understanding and change the way we view previous
research. This is how science and scientific knowledge evolves. Many years
ago, for example, my research (and others) revealed that college students
experienced gambling-related problems at a considerably higher rate than
their adult counterparts from the general population. More than twenty
years later, my new research (and others) shows that college students are
gambling at about the same rate as their adult counterparts and, contrary
to my expectations, likely experiencing similar rates of gambling disorders.
What has changed? Perhaps the rate of gambling has shifted among young
people (e.g., a period effect or a cohort effect). Perhaps the way we study
young people has changed. Perhaps young people’s interest has shifted.
Perhaps we aren’t really studying gambling at all but something more com-
plex for which gambling serves as a proxy. Only more research will
reveal the answers to these questions.
This book represents one of the very first building blocks upon which future gambling research and understanding will rest. There are many mysteries to solve and discoveries to make. It is likely that the keys to these puzzles are embedded in the discussions that are included in, and will be stimulated by, this book. Let us be certain that these discussions are open, honest and thorough. Young people deserve our best effort to prevent or correct any gambling-related harms that might befall them.
Editors

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Preface

Gambling and games of chance have been popular throughout history. While the globalization of gambling has passed through a number of cycles, its current status, in most cultures, as a socially acceptable form of entertainment suggests its continued growth and expansion. Gambling has undergone a profound transformation during the past two decades. Throughout the world more and more countries have begun to realize the enormous revenues generated from legalized gaming. This newfound source of revenue and its general acceptance by the public has fueled its expansion and massive growth.

Most individuals gamble for enjoyment and entertainment, to socialize, and tempt their luck without many negative repercussions. However, a small percentage of individuals have difficulty controlling their gambling participation, resulting in significant disruptions to many parts of their lives. For such individuals, their inability to set and maintain reasonable limits, their preoccupation with gambling, their apparent need to seek the action and excitement associated with their playing patterns, and their inability to stop in spite of their desire to do so results in serious harm to the individual, family members, peers and employers.

While the realization that certain individuals may suffer the negative consequences associated with excessive gambling is not new, the awareness that this could afflict young people in their teens has been largely ignored. The study of issues pertaining to youth problem gambling began in earnest in the early 1980's; concentrating primarily on the prevalence rates of gambling and the types of activities in which youth were engaged. These early studies were followed by research examining the correlates

1. We would like to thank the staff at the International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviors for their many contributions. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Tanya Bergevin and Meredith Gillespie who provided outstanding assistance in helping bring this project to fruition.
associated with youth gambling and problem gambling and their relationship to other high-risk behaviors and addictive disorders. This type of research continued into the mid 1990’s when researchers began reaching farther into uncovering the etiology and risk factors involved in the development of gambling problems among young people. These studies expanded what was currently known about the correlates of gambling problems and researchers began to try to integrate this knowledge into some basic theoretical frameworks. Concomitant with the knowledge that youth were not only gambling but that some were experiencing a number of significant negative gambling-related problems, a number of clinical researchers began trying to provide therapeutic interventions using alternative models predicated upon their beliefs as to the underlying issues surrounding disordered gambling. Simultaneously, prevention initiatives, although limited, were being developed and implemented in order to help prevent gambling-related problems from arising.

The focus on youth remains very important for a multitude of reasons. As young minds are forming from childhood through the teen years, important developmental stages are crystallizing. Healthy childhood development increases the likelihood that these individuals will mature into well-adjusted adults in their personal, social, and professional lives. Constructs such as one’s identity, sense of self, social skills, personality, and vision for the future are partially formed through experiences during one’s childhood and adolescent years. The consequences for youth who are sidetracked by any number of major traumatic events, addictive behaviors, or repeated negative experiences that interfere with this development can be long-lasting.

Gambling participation falls on both ends of the spectrum, from healthy, normal levels of involvement, to more problematic levels. Most adolescents will engage in gambling activities as part of their normal behavior and will not be adversely affected. However, those adolescents who are preoccupied with gambling and who perceive themselves as incapable of controlling their gambling often experience long-lasting negative consequences in terms of their academic standing, interpersonal relationships, their psychological development, general mental health, as well as the consequences often arising from criminal behaviors. While the actual prevalence rates of youth with significant gambling problems are somewhat contentious, there remains a need to explore ways to best protect and minimize the harm that can result from excessive playing.

Over the past decade the adversarial relationship once apparent between the gambling/gaming industry and researchers and treatment providers has dissipated. The industry has now begun to accept that with widespread proliferation of gambling a number of individuals will experience negative
problems. Similarly, many professionals have come to realize that in spite of the industry’s desire to maximize profits, they have begun working in earnest together to help minimize problems associated with youth gambling problems. Such examples include staff training, the development of joint public service announcements, the prohibition of specific licensed products attractive to youth, and the sponsorship of school-based curriculum and research.

Recent national commissions held in many countries have concluded that adolescents and young adults remain particularly high-risk and vulnerable to new gaming-related technologies and to developing gambling-related problems. Together, governmental regulators, the industry, researchers and treatment providers have begun to explore ways of minimizing the harm resulting from excessive gambling. Such collaborative efforts have provided a solid platform for the development of responsible social policies and standards of care that will serve to minimize the occurrence of gambling problems and better address the needs of those who gamble excessively.

The past decade has seen a surge in research in the field of youth gambling, yet our knowledge still remains in its infancy. Large sample, longitudinal studies are non-existent. Many questions remain unanswered. Yet, following models linked to adolescent risky behaviors, resiliency, risk-taking, risk and protective factors, and knowledge acquired from research on other addictions, great strides have been accomplished in our understanding of adolescent gambling behavior and problem gambling. Clearly, many of our ideas, programs and initiatives need careful scientific evaluation. We have yet to reach the standards associated with Best Practice set forth in treatment and prevention efficacy studies. Yet, as a discipline we need to be held to the highest scientific standards.

Gambling has recently been viewed from a public health perspective. The use of a public health lens remains important in addressing the multiplicity of issues related to youth problem gambling as it recognizes the severity of the problem and helps to mobilize community and governmental resources in its process. The potential mental health, economic, social, legal and physical problems associated with excessive gambling require the development of responsible social polices and a concerted effort by professionals. More knowledge is needed, and ongoing research is imperative to address issues such as developmental trajectories through longitudinal designs, safety standards that would best protect our young populations, neurological bases of gambling addictions, treatment and prevention efficacy, and the development of instruments to best identify those at-risk as well as those who are pathological gamblers.

There is substantial reason to suggest that disordered gambling amongst youth, similar to other addictive behaviors, is a multidimensional condition
involving bio-psycho-social determinants including a physiological predisposition, environmental stressors, social and familial influences, psychological processes, and individual personality characteristics. This book provides the most current empirical findings and theoretical frameworks in the field of youth gambling and serves as a comprehensive resource for those wishing to better understand the current state of knowledge concerning youth gambling problems. The contributing authors will challenge some beliefs, provide recommendations and directions for future basic and applied research, and raise provocative questions surrounding some of our current practices.

We anticipate that the information provided will help to inspire future research, the refinement and development of new screening tools, and promote more science-based treatment, prevention, and social policy efforts. Yet in our search for the Holy Grail, let us not underestimate the accomplishments made to date. Our current research and knowledge must guide our understanding and the development of responsible social policies. Such concerns cannot be overstated as we have a generation of youth that will spend their entire lives in state owned and/or regulated gambling. Should the prevailing adolescent prevalence rates continue into adulthood, serious social consequences will ensue.

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