

Behavioural Indicators and Player Characteristics of Frequent VLT Players

Summary Report for the Manitoba Gambling Research Program

Investigator:

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Research Priority:

Examine what constitutes normative gambling (i.e. no risk or low risk) and what key factors keep gambling at a non-problem or low risk level.

Significance

Lots of people like to play slot machines and VLTs. But how much is too much? Just like one can eat too much or drink too much, a person can also gamble too much and get in over their head. The goal of this project was to learn how much machine gambling is likely to be safe for most people. Knowing this can help reduce problem gambling by letting people know what is safe gambling and the kinds of machine gambling that may be less safe.

Research Questions

We aimed to discover what is safe and what is not so safe for most people who play slots and VLTs. The gambling behaviors that we looked at were how often people play machines, how much money they spend on them, and how much time they spend playing them. We then compared these simple indicators of gambling behavior to a standard measure problem gambling to see if we could figure out just how much is too much.

Methodology

To find out what is safe and unsafe, we got together a group of 250 people from Brandon Manitoba to do an anonymous survey about their gambling. They were given a long questionnaire to tell us about their gambling habits. They also did a measure called the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) that tells us how likely it is that each of them is a problem gambler by the effects they say their gambling has been having on their lives and the people around them. For example, one question on the PGSI is "Have you borrowed money or sold anything to get money to gamble?" and a person who says that they have done that in the past year is much more likely to be a problem gambler than another person who has not borrowed money or sold things to get money to gamble. Answering 'yes' to a question like that does not automatically mean he or she is a problem gambler, but it does mean that the chance is higher than if they said 'no'.

We also asked them some multiple choice questions about how much they play gambling machines. We asked them "Roughly how many times do you go out to play VLTs or slots in a typical month? "with some choices like "just about every day", "about once a week", "about once a month" and so on. We also asked them "On a typical day when you play VLTs or slots, about how much time do you spend playing them?" and "On a typical day when you play VLTs or slots, about how much money do you spend playing them?", again with some multiple choices they could select.

We then compared the people's PGSI scores with how much they said they play the machines. We compared PGSI to how often they play, much money they spend, and how much time they spend. We also included some other measures to look at as well, such as a personality test and some questionnaires about their beliefs about gambling and their motives for gambling.

Key Findings

What we found is that more machine gambling is a good indicator that a person is a problem gambler. More machine gambling means more problems. It is true that there are some people who only play a little but it causes big problems for them, and it is also true that there are some other people who play quite a lot but have no problems at all. But for the most part, the people who play more have more problems and the people who play less have less problems. That relationship between playing machines and problem gambling is true for most of the people most of the time.

We were able to figure out the behaviors that seem to have the biggest impact on the likelihood that a person has problems from their gambling. One of these is how often a person plays slots or VLTs. It turns out that if a person plays them every week there is a much bigger chance that they are a problem gambler than if they play less than once a week. So we could say that a good guideline for people to play machines and avoid getting into trouble with it is to have fun playing them once in a while, but not every weekend. Find something else to do, like go to a movie or sports or whatever you like to do. There are lots of ways that people can have fun other than playing slots and VLTs all the time.

Another good indicator was how much money a person spends. It seems that a person is at worse risk of having gambling problems if you spend more than \$50 each time you play. So one way a person might lower the chance of having problems is to set a firm limit of \$50 and don't go over your limit for any reason. Maybe leave your ATM card at home and tell your friends not to lend you any money when you are going out. One of the things that often happens when we gamble is that we get so caught up in the excitement that we make bad decisions, and this is especially so when we are drinking too. But if you take some steps to make it so that you can't do things that you know are bad for you, then you won't be able to do those unwise things and hopefully you can gamble safely and keep yourself from spending too much of your money and causing all kinds of problems for yourself.

The last thing we learned was that the chance of being a problem gambler is worse if a person plays the machines for a long time when they play them. If you spend an hour or more you are more likely to be a problem gambler than if you play for a shorter time. So another way to reduce the risk of harm from machine gambling is to only play for a short time. Take a break and do something else.

Conclusions

We found that a combination of simple gambling behaviors can be used to predict the likelihood of problem gambling with quite good accuracy. Knowing how often a person gambles, how much money they spend, and how long they play can tell us with about 90% certainty whether he or she is a problem gambler. We figured out what is safe and what is not so safe for most of the people most of the time.

Implications

Knowing safe gambling limits can be used in a number of ways. One of these is public awareness campaigns that tell people what the safety limits are, with some suggestions as to how they can use this knowledge to take control of their gambling. Another possibility is to use this knowledge as a way for government and industry to work together to maintain a healthy gambling sector that meets the needs of players, government and industry stakeholders but that does so in a way that has minimal negative impact on some players. This could mean monitoring market trends to see if many people are playing often, spending a lot, and playing for long periods of time. If it is found that a lot of people seem to be playing excessively, even with the public awareness campaigns and their own best efforts to limit themselves, then steps might be taken to reduce the availability and content of electronic gambling machines in order to reduce the risk to players, their families and communities.



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