

SAMHSA Advisory Committee for Women's Services: Problem Gambling Issues

May 11, 2009

The National Council on Problem Gambling respectfully urges the Advisory Committee for Women's Services, as part of its mandate to advise the SAMHSA Centers on services with respect to women's substance abuse and mental health services, to consider the following significant gender differences in gambling participation, prevalence, problems and co-occurring disorders:

1. Women are now just as likely as men to gamble at casinos and play the lottery—a significant increase in participation over the past two decades. Women remain generally more likely to play bingo and slot machines,¹ though less likely to gamble at the track, on sports, on cards or illegal gambling.²
2. Women problem gamblers generally start gambling later in life than men and progress to pathological gambling more quickly;^{1,3} however, girls who are impulsive or sensation seeking are as likely as boys to begin gambling in adolescence.⁴ Adolescent girls who gamble are about four-fold more likely than boys who gamble to experience symptoms of depression.⁵
3. Women pathological gamblers wager more often in response to gambling cues and advertisements than men pathological gamblers.⁶
4. Women are now equally represented in treatment, a significant change in the past decade as previously men were overrepresented in treatment.⁷
5. Problem gambling is more heavily stigmatized for women than for men because of sex role stereotypes.⁸
6. Problem gambling is more prevalent in minority communities,^{9,10} and African American, Hispanic and Native American women may be particularly vulnerable because of the role that some forms of gambling (i.e. bingo) plays in the social life of these communities.
7. There is a stronger association in women problem and at-risk gamblers with the following psychiatric disorders:
 - Nicotine dependence
 - Major depression
 - Dysthymia
 - Panic disorder
 - Generalized anxiety disorder
 - Social phobia¹¹

In addition, studies comparing male and female gamblers have reported that females were more likely to be African-American and either retired, unemployed or otherwise outside the workforce;¹ prefer lower denomination slot machines and longer sessions of play;¹² had fewer problems with drugs or gambling-related arrest;¹³ and higher rates of affective disorders¹⁴ and histories of physical abuse.¹⁵ Women with disabilities are also at greater risk for gambling problems.¹⁶

Overview of Problem Gambling

A majority of Americans, including women, gamble for entertainment. However, a percentage of those who gamble will experience adverse mental, physical, legal, and socio-economic consequences. A meta-analysis of prevalence studies in North America reported a past-year prevalence rates of pathological gambling in adults of 1.1% with an additional 2.8% of the population classified as problem gamblers in the past year.¹⁷ The American Psychiatric Association defines pathological gambling as: “Persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior” that meets at least five of ten criteria.¹⁸ The disorder is characterized by increasing preoccupation with gambling, a need to bet more money more frequently, restlessness or irritability when attempting to stop, "chasing" losses, and loss of control manifested by continuation of the gambling behavior in spite of mounting, serious, negative consequences.

In addition to the devastating financial losses adult problem gamblers face as a result of gambling, they are also five times more likely than non-problem gamblers to be alcohol dependent, four times more likely to abuse drugs, three times more likely to be depressed or to report an anxiety disorder and eight times more likely to have bipolar disorder.¹⁹ In addition, problem gamblers report significantly elevated rates of tachycardia, angina, and cirrhosis.²⁰ Between 17% and 24% of members of Gamblers Anonymous and individuals in professional treatment for pathological gambling have attempted suicide,²¹ and older adult problem gamblers cited a fear of suicide as a major reason for banning themselves from casinos.²²

Compared to non-gamblers and individuals who gamble for entertainment, problem and pathological gamblers have higher rates of past-year receipt of unemployment and welfare benefits, bankruptcy, arrest, incarceration, divorce, poor or fair physical health, and mental health treatment.²³ The National Council on Problem Gambling estimates the social cost of gambling problems was \$6.7 billion in 2008, including job loss, bankruptcy and criminal justice costs.

It is imperative that specific services to prevent and treat women’s gambling problems be incorporated into state health systems. Indeed, the strong association between problem gambling and multiple psychiatric disorders among women suggests that gambling problems are likely to impact the course and treatment of mood, anxiety and substance use disorders as well as the ability to sustain recovery over time. We therefore recommend that SAMHSA Centers develop problem gambling prevention and treatment services specifically for women.

The National Council on Problem Gambling is the advocate for programs and services to assist problem gamblers and their families. This brief compiled by NCPG Research Committee and staff.

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