
E Gambling in indigenous communities

As noted in chapter 6, the apparent levels of problem gambling are much higher among indigenous people of Australia — a pattern that is repeated also for New Zealand.

The word ‘apparent’ is appropriate because patterns of gambling and its social and personal consequences are very different in Aboriginal communities (Goodale 1987). Card games, such as *Kuns* and *Cuncan*, dominate and are organised usually by the communities themselves (Hunter 1993; Hunter and Spargo 1988). These games may involve nearly the whole community in gambling for money — and may sometimes include children. Such games have important social value:

Many activities have become organised around it, such as drinking and the patterns of re-distribution of credit and obligation within the community. It ... has powerful integrative functions for certain sub-groups (Hunter 1993, p. 250).

In non-Aboriginal communities, large losses are usually accompanied by distress, whereas in Aboriginal communities it is claimed that ‘subjective distress is generally not a feature of indebtedness per se’ but that gamblers feel anxious if they are not able to continue playing because they have no money. There is no significant difference in the prevalence of depression among Aboriginal gamblers versus non-gamblers. However, there is evidence that gamblers have higher average levels of anxiety, especially amongst males (Hunter 1993, p. 249).

Foote (1996 p. 7) says that in community games:

If one is not successful, one is assisted by others ... there is ... no shame to being unsuccessful or losing, except when the loss is the result of foolishness ... With no shame attached to losing there is no need to cover up one’s gambling behaviour ... The individual, as a result, does not suffer post gambling session anxiety. There is a ready source of assistance from all around one.

Altman (1987, p. 167ff) has shown that gambling has a redistributive function in Aboriginal communities, which explains why gambling bouts can go on and on. Indeed, because the games are typically games of chance, rather than of skill, and because there are no taxes or gambling production costs to siphon off money, they operate to randomly redistribute money throughout the community. Such gambling can be a source for small scale accumulation, as a person playing a card game will at

times accumulate enough to purchase something of personal or social value that could not otherwise be afforded:

ATSI community controlled gambling is noted to a large degree to utilise gambling activity as a vehicle to build ... capital and redistribute this capital to community members who would otherwise be unable to achieve such capital accumulation. Goods purchased with the proceeds at times become socially utilised commodities. The majority of the money gambled is redistributed to players ... community gambling is described as being conducted largely in an atmosphere of and in the spirit of reciprocal social responsibility. Gambling also is used for the purposes of social interaction, to facilitate information exchange and to have fun as a group ... Reference to protocols of conduct that actively discourages personal disadvantage are a prominent feature. This includes steps to prevent people playing if impaired by alcohol and steps to prohibit destitution and or disadvantage as a result of incurring losses. This is not to say that this form of gambling is free of negative impacts (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. 106, p. 9).

However, while losses from such games appear initially to stay in the community, they can be dissipated if winnings are spent on capital and luxury items or alcohol (Hunter 1993, p. 248). This in turn reduces the community budget for essentials, such as nutritious food.¹ Social pressures to hand over unspent money may militate against *large* scale financial accumulation (Hunter 1993). Hunter concludes that:

For those communities where gambling is pervasive, it is the conduit for a major drain on resources and energy, contributing to patterns of indebtedness and rapid expenditure that undermine personal and community development (p. 252).

Nunkuwarrin Yunti (sub. D214, p. 1) emphasise that it is important not to overstate the protective function of gambling with peers:

It is critical to state that the 'no impact' of community gambling is not universal to all communities ... A worrisome finding in a gambling study in Canada (n=1821), stated that some probable pathological gamblers were found to have played cards or board games for money with family or friends as their first experience.

Coinciding with the proliferation of modern gambling products, indigenous people have broadened the types of gambling in which they participate and in some indigenous communities card games are no longer the predominant form of gambling:

There are a number of Aboriginal communities where cards are no longer the principle form of gambling activity. TAB and Pokies have impacted on drawing people away from communities to participate in these alternative forms of gambling. This has proved to have far more serious implications on individuals and families especially when people leave communities to travel miles to be close to the gambling venue, be it a pub or casino (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. D214, p. 2).

¹ However, there is apparently little evidence that gambling is counterproductive to gathering bush food (Altman 1987, p. 165).

The pattern of institutionally-based gambling amongst indigenous peoples differs from community-run gambling in that it is demarcated along gender lines, and has included former non-gamblers:

Information ... suggests a pattern of ATSI community gambling largely demarcated along gender lines when engaged with industry business orientated gambling. A more equal ratio of involvement along gender lines exists in ATSI community operated gambling such as card games. Prior to the introduction of gaming machines in South Australia, TAB gambling has been very popular and continues to be popular with ATSI men. Bingo, bingo tickets and scratchies were more popular with ATSI women ... while there has been some migration towards gaming machine gambling by ATSI men, the racing codes still account for the main form of gambling. ATSI women to a larger degree have moved and stayed with gaming machines as the preferred code ... In ... Queensland ... 29% of ATSI people gambling on the pokies reported that prior to their introduction in Queensland, they did not gamble at all (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. 106, p. 8).

Foote (1996) has confirmed that ATSI women tend to be far more frequent users of poker machines in the Darwin casino than men.

While there are concerns about adverse outcomes for Aboriginal communities from community based gambling, these are more pronounced for commercially oriented gambling:

... the radically different social meanings and functions which surround gambling in traditional Aboriginal societies ... suggest that any transfer of cognitive style, of mindset ... could be very disruptive, not to say catastrophic when these are translated into an urban culture in which the 'casino culture' is emergent ... (Tyler 1996, p. 9).

Indigenous communities perceive some severe problems in relation to institutionally based gambling:

When people leave communities with the intention of "winning big bucks" at the casino they have no realistic ideas of their chances of doing so ... They would have saved big money or collected money from relatives ... Once in town the enticement and entrapment of the gambling venue eventually drains all the individuals financial resources. The individual is then stranded in town with no money to get back home ... If the person does not have family or friends to support them while in town they are very vulnerable. This can lead on to all kinds of problems or trauma.

The other obvious negative affects of poker machines on Aboriginal people and the community is that it alleviates the social interaction of card games and the money gambled has left the community and reaped by the gambling institution (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. D214, pp. 2–3).

Indeed, in the Nundroo case (chapter 22) South Australia's Liquor and Gaming Commissioner refused to grant a gaming licence to a hotel located on the Eyre

Highway because of its potential detrimental impact on surrounding indigenous communities. The Gaming Commissioner commented:

I do accept that the machines have the potential to drain a substantial amount of money from communities that are already hurt by money spent on alcohol.

The result of this could be a significant increase in anti social behaviour in and around Nundroo Caused by Yalata and Oak Valley residents.

I am concerned that gaming machines would result in an increase in violence in and around Nundroo (cited in sub. D214, p. 2).

Further, there is a perception that the web of reciprocal social responsibilities and brakes on extreme adverse outcomes are weakened when indigenous people gamble in a commercial setting:

Profiteering forms the primary focus of business oriented gambling. These operations derive benefit from the misfortune of others to a small group or individual who is generally not part of the community. The rules and decisions about profits are not a shared community responsibility (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. 106, p. 8).

A further concern for indigenous communities, cited by some participants, is the link between alcohol and institutionally-based gambling:

Alcohol related problems are reported by the indigenous community to be significant. 58 % of Indigenous people aged over 13 years of age nominated alcohol as a major health problem in their local area. While indigenous Australians are less likely to consume alcohol in comparison to non-indigenous Australians, consumption levels in harmful quantities are statistically higher than that of non-indigenous Australians. 79% of indigenous Australians who drink at least weekly were found to be consuming at harmful levels in comparison to 12% in the general community who consume alcohol at least weekly.

The enmeshment of alcohol and gambling opportunities under the same roof seem to be a trend far more common today than ever before. Pub/TABs are far more common than stand alone agencies in South Australia. Gaming licences are always linked to licensed premises, preventing the setting up of alcohol free venues. Any steps to minimise the opportunity to consume alcohol and gambling in the same venue is supported as a step to minimise associated harm (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. D203, p. 4).

There is some evidence that people from ATSI communities tend to be heavier gamblers than other Australians:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community experiences disproportionate harmful consequences ... While not adequately researched, the ATSI community gambling profiles that exist describe greater participation rates in the percentage of people gambling and average expenditure to that of non-indigenous Australians. This situation may in part be explained by ATSI people continuing to endure disproportionate social disadvantage ... This in our view creates a predisposition to

chase the “miracles” offered by gambling enterprises to achieve some equity (Nunkuwarrin Yunti, sub. 106, p. 1).

A survey of 128 members of the ATSI community in gambling venues in Queensland found that average weekly gambling expenditure was \$60 (comprising 20 per cent of average income), of which half was spent on gaming machines (AIGR/LIRU 1995 p. 5). This is far higher than found among Queensland gamblers in general. However, as noted by the study, the method used to recruit indigenous respondents is likely to have imparted a significant upward bias to spending estimates.²

Respondents to this survey reported a range of problems related to their gambling. Eight per cent needed family assistance to help pay gambling debts and 6 per cent said that gambling had put important relationships at risk.

A case study of the Yarrabah community found that around 50 per cent of indigenous people were heavy or weekly gamblers, compared to the general population where this is 4 to 6 per cent of players (AIGR/LIRU 1995 and sub. 106, p. 8). The average gambling expenditure of a group of indigenous gamblers regularly using the newly introduced PubTAB was about \$70 per week — around 25 per cent of their income. The introduction of PubTAB to this community was associated with a significant reduction in local card games, and to the withdrawal from the community of funds that would otherwise circulate repeatedly as part of community gambling. On the other hand, it was also associated with a reduction in apparent alcohol consumption and alcohol-related community violence.

Studies of other indigenous peoples in similar disadvantaged circumstances have found similarly high rates of regular and heavy play (for example, Abbott and Volberg 1992 for Maori and Pacific Islanders in New Zealand; Wynne, Smith and Volberg 1994 and the National Council of Welfare 1996³ for Canadian Aboriginal gamblers; and Volberg 1993 and Elia and Jacobs 1993 for native Americans).

It has also been found that Torres Strait Islanders are disproportionately represented amongst problem gamblers seeking help from counselling services.

² Heavy spenders tend to play more frequently and for longer than the average. This means that random selection of gamblers in a venue will give too high a weight to heavy (and problem) gamblers.

³ A Canadian (Alberta) study cited by the National Council of Welfare found that the Aboriginal sample of problem gamblers spent nearly three times as much on gambling as their non-Aboriginal problem gambling peers. The extent to which this is also true for ATSI problem gamblers is unknown in Australia.

There is much to be learned, both in relation to community and institutionally based gambling in indigenous communities:

Anthropological research has focused on card games which continue to be very popular in Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. However, with few exceptions there is little in the social science literature about Aboriginal participation in commercial gambling such as machine gambling, TAB, bingo or lotteries. The limited research into casino gambling by Aboriginal people has methodological flaws and does not satisfy basic standards of reliability and validity.

Preliminary research ... has shown that Aboriginal people do gamble on these forms of gambling when it is available to them — but the extent of that participation, the types of gambling preferred by Aboriginal people, and the nature of commercial gambling impacts on Aboriginal communities have yet to be investigated systematically in any state.

Of particular concern is the extent to which commercial gambling (TAB betting, gaming machines) impact on Aboriginal communities, including the impacts on ‘traditional’ community based gambling (such as card games) The association between gambling and drinking also merits research attention (McMillen, sub. D274 p.6).