

30th March, 2009

Gambling Inquiry
Productivity Commission
gambling@pc.gov.au

Re: Submission for Productivity Commission Inquiry into Gambling

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the public inquiry into gambling. I am a Doctoral research scholar at Charles Darwin University studying the impacts of gambling on remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. The research is focused on informal card games played in remote Indigenous communities as well as exploring the context of remote Indigenous peoples' experiences of regulated gambling, in a large urban gaming venue in the Northern Territory. The research, which has been conducted over the last three years, included an intensive 15 month anthropological study in a remote Indigenous community. For this submission I have chosen to present a few important findings from the research, however, I am happy to provide more information should that be required.

The issue of 'problem' gambling

My research has focused on Indigenous people living in remote areas of the Northern Territory. One of the major findings of the project is that Indigenous people have different understandings to non-Indigenous people of when gambling actually becomes a 'problem'. Problem gambling was found to be not so much about financial imperatives and/or time, rather, it is about people neglecting, rejecting or threatening social relationships and obligations. That is, for remote Indigenous people 'problem gambling' is characterized by gambling becoming individuated.

This concept of 'problem gambling' was observed at both community card games and a formal gaming venue. Some examples of this concept of problem gambling include:

- Individuals attending card games by themselves, particularly night games
- Individuals that played with particular groups that perhaps their family would not normally play with.
- Individuals that take winnings out of a game immediately after winning without giving people a chance to win at least some of it back.

All of these behaviours were consistently seen by respondents in the research as problematic.

Similarly, poker machine play in the gaming venue was only viewed as problematic when the gambling became individuated. Despite the individuated nature of poker

machines, this is a collective activity to many remote Indigenous people. In the majority of cases there may be two or three people playing or watching the one machine, or there could be 2,3,4 people all sitting beside each other playing machines, chatting and engaged in each other's play. However, when an individual attends a venue by themselves, or they isolate themselves from the group and attempt to hide from the rest of their family by finding a machine in an out of the way part of the venue, people begin to worry that the individual may have a problem, particularly if this behaviour is repeated regularly.

This differing understanding of when gambling becomes a problem has major implications for harm-minimization strategies, in particular education and awareness programs and counseling and treatment services.

Not only do these services and programs define themselves within Euro-centric understandings of gambling and 'problem' gambling, they are also targeted at those people living in urban centres, neglecting the fact that this research has found that perhaps as many as 80% of Indigenous gamblers in venues in the Northern Territory are remote Indigenous people. Current programs and services also assume that people can read, speak and understand English. Many of the hotline counseling services available rely on people having access to a phone, and privacy to talk on a phone. These are just a few of the issues that need to be overcome if appropriate messages and support are to reach Indigenous people living in remote areas.

Gambling Screens

This research has found that gambling screens used in mainstream Australia, in particular the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) and the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) bare little resemblance to remote Indigenous peoples' understandings of gambling and 'problem' gambling. These screens and the methodologies used to collect the data ignore the different context in which the gambling occurs for remote Indigenous people. The screens are based on Euro-centric understandings of 'problem' gambling and harm from gambling. For example, questions that relate to non-Indigenous understandings of money and borrowing money for gambling are highly problematic, as complex exchange systems exist within the social relationships of remote Indigenous people that render responses to such questions nonsensical.

Interpreting results from such surveys and developing policy based on these surveys is highly problematic as a serious disjuncture occurs between what the questions actually ask and how Indigenous people may interpret the questions being asked. As I have briefly outlined above, understandings of gambling and 'problem' gambling are different for many Indigenous people. Unfortunately, in Australia much of the current research on Indigenous gambling neglects these differences and assumes a commonality in understandings. As a result the possibilities and opportunities that are present in remote communities to draw from localised strengths to provide sustainable and appropriate harm minimisation strategies to gambling are seriously overlooked.

Mobility

After 15 months fieldwork in both a remote community and a gaming venue, the research has found that despite the extremely high mobility of remote Indigenous people, gambling is not a driver for such mobility. In every case observed of both people leaving the community and people attending the gaming venue, there was a significant other reason for them being in town, most often for hospital visits, meetings and appointments. Gambling may very well have impacted upon the length of time people spent in the urban centre, however, data on this is inconclusive. This point has quite serious policy implications in the light of the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention. Current policy is designed to encourage remote Indigenous people to access job markets in urban centers, access services in urban centers and access quarantined money in urban centers, therefore it is highly likely that the number of remote Indigenous people in urban gaming venues will increase. For example, this research found that in one large venue, the vast majority of Indigenous people attending were from remote areas. It is possible that this data collected is already registering an increase as a result of the Intervention, however, unfortunately due to a lack of any baseline data this has been difficult to measure.

Alcohol and Gambling

Another major finding of my research is the stark separation of drinking and gambling. The card games played in the community were taken very seriously and there was no tolerance for people who had been drinking or taking drugs. This resulted in quite clear distinctions at any one time between people in the community who gamble and people who drink alcohol or kava or smoke gunja. This particular rule worked to significantly minimize fights around the games.

For many remote Indigenous people these distinctions exist in the gaming venues in town centres too. Just as in the community where alcohol was strongly discouraged around games, a similar thing happens in the gaming venue. Those people that were gambling on a regular basis were generally not drinking in the venue. In contrast, those people that came in on a Friday, Saturday night for example, have different motivations (as with the non-Indigenous population) to the regular gamblers. They attend the venue for the social outing, for drinks and gambling.

The research also found that in many cases the men that played regularly at the gaming venue were reformed drinkers, that is, it was explained to me that they didn't drink anymore, instead they now come to the venue to play with their wives. Gambling was viewed by some people as an alternative, and in some cases women explained to me, a much safer alternative to drinking.

Gender

Another factor that has major implications in terms of policy and/or harm-minimization is gender. Gambling, whether its on poker machines or in card games, for remote Indigenous people, appears to be very much a female dominated activity. Data I collected from the gaming venue shows that 81% of Indigenous people at machines were female. This data is very similar to the data collected from fieldwork carried out in the remote community which found that 87% of the players were female. Time of day or particular day of the week appears to have no impact on these numbers at all. This data is very different to data collected on the situation in

mainstream Australia, which points to a much more equal split in the gender of players.

Although the points above are brief, I hope that they outline some of the complexities surrounding the issue of Indigenous gambling. I am happy to offer more information about the research at a later date if needed.

Regards,

Marisa Fogarty.