

Gambling Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City ACT 2601

2 April 2009

To the members of the Productivity Commission

It is a pleasure to us to send you following submission for your important inquiry into gambling. This submission is the result of our observations and many interactions of people who frequently gamble(d).

The Exodus Foundation is a charity for homeless and disadvantaged persons. Working at the Exodus Foundation in Ashfield we have met hundreds of gamblers over the past five years. Every day there are new calls for help and new referrals of individuals and families who seriously have been affected by gambling. Next to these we see on a daily basis tens of individuals who - partly as a consequence of their long term gambling problems - rely on support from Exodus in food or otherwise. As part of our support we have set up regular meetings for men who suffer from gambling and other problems. Also we organise public forums to bring more awareness regarding the gambling issue and to give a voice to those who have become disempowered and bitter through their devastating experiences with the products of the gambling industry.

On behalf of our clients we would like to ask your attention for the following issues:

1. For lonely people living in boarding houses it is extremely hard to find alternatives for spending time and money in pubs and clubs. Many of them have a working background in which visits to the local pub always has been an important pastime and complain that they, as it were, have lost their safe haven through the introduction of the poker machines. Persons with a gambling problem can't find safe entertainment where they are not tempted to gamble and that for them is socially appropriate. The machines are everywhere and are located in such a way that they cannot be avoided.

2. People, who go through difficult times, be it through a family break up, the loss of a loved one, unemployment or other traumatic event, tend to become emotionally vulnerable and to have less natural protection against excessive risk taking. We see many clients whose gambling problem started in a period of emotional problems. Left without the protection and respect that they need they became the victim of friendly sounding machines that have been designed to efficiently strip them of their funds.
3. Through their sounds and movements gaming machines have a hypnotising effect. Playing the pokies is very attractive for people who, for whatever reason, want to escape the burden of reality. The machine fully offers this escape but at the same time evokes a lowered presence of mind in the gambler in which they easily are lured into actions they afterwards regret. If a hypnotist would take advantage of a hypnotised patient he would face serious consequences; the owner of the gaming machine designed to hypnotise gamblers does not.
4. A rather large group of gambling victims we meet are people who suffer from a mental illness and who have developed a gambling addiction that is closely linked to their mental state and difficulties.
5. The consumption of alcohol often goes hand in hand with gambling. Through the use of alcohol a person's self control weakens and the gambler starts to take risks that he normally would not take. "Drink driving" is dangerous and so is "drink gambling". The combination of alcohol consumption and gambling should be discouraged instead of encouraged.
6. We can state that gambling is linked to many broken marriages and suicides. Shame often prevents that such connections become public.
7. The practice of starving the reels as described by Tim Falkiner should be prohibited and made punishable.
8. It causes great concern that the Australian State and Federal Governments have become so dependent on the poker machines tax. It is doubtful that new gambling regulation and legislation will be guided in the first place by the need to protect individuals. Since 10% of the income of the NSW Government comes from gambling it is very unlikely that this Government will be morally strong enough to take steps that threatens this income source. Yet these steps are urgently needed.
9. The subsidised help for gamblers in NSW is provided by G-Line and gambling counsellors, paid out of the "Responsible Gambling Fund". It can be questioned whether G-Line and the other subsidised organisations have sufficient distance from the Government and its interest in the gambling business. One can wonder how it comes that there is so little input from these organisations in the gambling debate and that there is so little professional support for the growth of self organisation and mutual support amongst gamblers.

10. There is great anger and loss of respect and trust amongst people who seriously have been affected by gambling. These emotions are to be addressed through the design of better gambling legislation and regulation and through the provision of legal protection for gamblers against inappropriate practices of gambling venue operators.

11. Use of the terminology of “responsible gambling” should be stopped as for problem gamblers there is no safe level of gambling at all. To suggest that there is safe gambling for them is dangerous and may make those who make this claim liable for negative consequences.

This submission is the product of many discussions in the Exodus Men’s Group and other groups. The following persons are eager to attach their name to this submission and declare through that that they are more than happy to come to a meeting of your commission to inform you first hand of the devastation caused by the gambling industry.

Yours faithfully,

Hans Timmers, Counsellor and contact person for this submission

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