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Encouraged to gamble their fortunes away

You can't turn on a television these days without seeing a slick ad filled with excited young people buying lottery tickets, whooping it up at the horse races or cheerfully playing casino games. Gambling promotion has become ubiquitous, and government revenue from gambling is soaring as a result. Only yesterday, it was reported that Alberta will soon lift a moratorium on the development of new casinos.

Little notice is being paid to the impact of all this encouragement to gamble. A new Ontario study – one of the most extensive and detailed undertaken in Canada – has concluded that 3.8 per cent of people in that province have moderate to severe gambling problems, and that this number almost doubles to 7 per cent among people between 18 and 24 years old. The implications of the latter statistic are particularly sobering.

The study by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and the Responsible Gambling Council (Ontario) used a telephone poll to question 5,000 people about details of their gambling behaviour and its impact on their lives. The survey measured gambling addiction using the newly developed Canadian Problem Gambling Index, which was created to measure gambling habits in the general public.

The index relies on nine indicators of gambling problems, asking about such behaviour as chasing losses with more betting, escalating bets to maintain excitement, borrowing money for gambling and experiencing household financial problems because of gambling.

The point of the study was to develop reliable statistics about the extent of problem gambling, and to provide a baseline to assess in the future whether addiction levels are growing. There is a wide anecdotal belief that gambling addiction is worsening as more outlets for gambling are legalized in Canada, and reliable research of this sort will be critical.

The study certainly confirms news reports that young people in particular have flocked to gambling as a pastime over the past 10 years. It found that most types of gambling involve a disproportionate number of young men. Young people are most likely to play instant-win scratch tickets, slot machines, video lottery terminals (VLTs), casino games, cards with friends, sport select, even bingo.

The survey also found that the more severe the gambling problem, the more likely the gambler is to hold false beliefs that the odds of winning a game change depending on previous outcomes – lucky streaks, for example. Many Ontarians (and, no doubt, Canadians elsewhere) misunderstand the real odds of winning, or don't understand the behaviour of randomness and probabilities in gambling. Problem gamblers are most likely to believe they can win by using a betting system.

Governments are raking in huge gambling revenues, totalling $18-billion in Canada last year and generating net profit of $5.5-billion after winnings were paid out and expenses covered. This enormous windfall means the provinces can and should spend more money on education and addiction prevention campaigns. The Ontario survey found many problem gamblers didn't even know there were addiction counselling services in most communities.

But governments have a responsibility to go even further. They should stop promoting gambling as harmless fun, and stop the slick ads aimed at young adults. They should publicize the odds of winning all games. And they should consider a moratorium on creating new outlets for gambling, including licensing more casinos and expanding the spread of VLTs, until there is time to assess the impacts of so many new gambling options.

Because the Ontario survey uses a new methodology, it cannot show yet whether gambling problems are increasing. But the Ontario statistics merit a broader look, and a national review should be launched to study the impact of gambling on individuals and communities across Canada. One in 14 young people is experiencing problems already in Ontario, and we can't simply gamble that those odds will improve.