The WAGER Vol. 7(29) – A Rising Tide?

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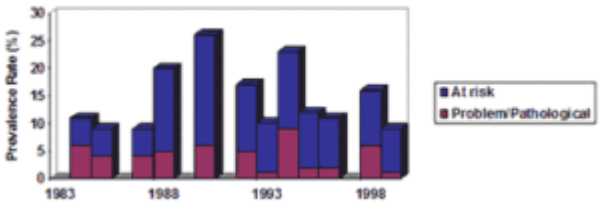
It is beneficial to step back periodically and take stock of the state of scientific research. The accumulation of knowledge takes time and research frequently lags behind need and desire for answers. For example, conventional wisdom suggests that along with the growing legalization and social acceptance of gambling, there is a similar growth in problem gambling among adolescents. But does research reflect this suggestion? A growing body of research now exists on youth gambling with which to test this hypothesis. Drawing on prevalence studies from the past two decades, Jacobs (2000) attempts to offer insights into long-term trends in youth gambling.

Jacobs examined 20 studies of underage gambling conducted in North America between 1984 and 1999. Figure 1 presents 12 United States problem gambling prevalence studies that were included in Jacobs' analysis. The median prevalence level of youth with serious gambling-related problems was 10% for the period 1984-1988. This climbed to 20% for the first half of the 1990s before declining to a median level of 12% for the later half of the decade. This evidence might represent an overall increase in gambling problems among youth since 1984; however, the prevalence rates in Figure 1 are quite variable and it is unclear whether the United States is still experiencing an upward swing or whether the prevalence of gambling problems among youth has already peaked.

Figure 1: Serious Gambling-Related Problems among Adolescents in the United States (1984 to 1999)



Note: Studies included in this figure are: Jacobs, 1989; Kuley & Jacobs, 1987, 1989; Lesieur & Klein, 1987; Shaffer, LaBrie, Scanlan, & Cummings, 1994; Steinberg, 1988; Volberg, 1993, 1996; Volberg & Moore, 1999; Wallisch, 1993, 1995; Westphal, Rush, Stevens, & Johnson, 1998; Winters, Stinchfield, &

Fulkerson, 1990.

Jacobs' paper has four important limitations. First, Jacobs did not report on the instruments used in the studies; however, as reflected in recent research, the use of different screening instruments could contribute to the variability observed (Volberg, 2002). Second, it is unclear whether or not the use of different definitions and differences in methodological quality could also have contributed to variability; reporting and weighting by a study's methodological quality might result in more stable cumulative estimates. Third, variation among studies could also reflect untested regional differences in gambling availability and behavior; each study reported prevalence for specific states. Fourth, many researchers have questioned the measurement of youth gambling problems itself (Ladouceur et al., 2000); the validity of the measurement tools and the veracity of adolescent self-reports are unknown.

Unfortunately, the identified scientific literature does not seem to reveal any predictable increase or decrease in problem gambling prevalence for adolescents. A longitudinal study in Minnesota (Winters, Stinchfield, & Kim, 1995) and studies in Texas (Wallisch, 1993, 1996) suggested that the prevalence of adolescents with gambling disorders either remained steady or may actually have diminished over time. The most recent study of problem gambling in adolescents found a prevalence rate between 2-3% (Volberg, 2002). Given the preponderance of evidence, perhaps the most careful opinion on this matter was offered by the National Research Council when they concluded that variation in methods, instrumentation, and conceptualization might influence findings and therefore it is not yet possible to draw confident conclusions about the rate of gambling disorders among youth (National Research Council, 1999). However, well-planned statistical meta-analyses of many studies done by different investigators with various methodologies might attenuate these limitations. Researchers have begun publishing such analyses (Shaffer & Hall, 1996; Shaffer, Hall, & Vander Bilt, 1997; Shaffer, Hall, & Vander Bilt, 1999) and it is important to continue this effort.

Despite methodological concerns, Jacobs work is conceptually very important. His work has reminded us to keep a focus on young people; they are our future. He also reminds us to step back and examine any trends that might be emerging and require public policy interventions. In addition to this effort, we also need to remember that science occasionally reveals that some social trends might not be

what they appear.

Comments on this article can be addressed to Rachel Kidman.

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