

The WAGER, Vol. 19(2) - Violent tilt: Gambling and family violence

February 5, 2014

Problem gambling can lead to financial hardship and stress, affecting interpersonal relationships, job performance, and family dynamics. This means that problem gambling not only affects the gambler, but also family members, co-workers, and friends. This week's WAGER looks at the association between problem gambling and family violence (Suomi et al., 2013), as part of our [Special Series on Addiction within Relationships](#).

Methods

- The researchers surveyed 1,030 consecutively admitted clients at 11 treatment agencies across three provinces in Australia. Clients were seeking gambling-specific counseling or family counseling/family violence services.
- To screen the clients for problem gambling within the family, staff members at the agencies asked each new client, "In the last 12 months, has a family member had an issue with their gambling?"
- To screen for family violence, the researchers used a modified version of the Hurt-Insulted-Threaten-Screamed (HITS; Sherin et al. 1998) scale.
 - To measure **perpetration of family violence**, participants were asked, "In the past twelve months, have you physically hurt, insulted or talked down to, threatened with harm, or screamed or cursed at a family member?"
 - To measure **victimization**, participants were asked, "In the past 12 months, has a family member physically hurt you, insulted or talked down to you, threatened you with harm, or screamed or cursed at you?"

Results

- About 12% (120) of participants reported problem gambling within the family.
 - Of these, 52.5% reported some form of family violence in the past 12 months:

- 20.0% reported only victimization,
- 10.8% reported only perpetration,
- 21.6% reported both victimization and perpetration.
- By comparison, estimates for the twelve-month prevalence rate for partner abuse in Australia range from 2.1% to 28.0% (Hegarty & Roberts 2008).
- As the Figure shows, reports of family violence among participants who reported problem gambling within the family were different between male clients and female clients
 - The percentage of women in the “only victimization” category was larger than the percentage of men.

	Gender			
Violence Type	Male	Female	Did not answer	Total
No victimization	34 (62%)	20 (33%)	3	57
Only victimization	4 (7%)	19 (33%)	0	24
Only perpetration	6 (11%)	6 (10%)	1	13
Both victimization and perpetration	11 (20%)	15 (25%)	1	26
Total	55	60	5	120

Figure. Family violence among individuals who reported past year problem gambling problems in their family by the client by gender (adapted from Suomi et al., 2013).

Limitations

- The small sample size is small and the data contain potential self-report measurement errors.
- All of the clients were help-seeking people, looking for either gambling-specific counseling services or family violence or family counseling

services. Therefore the sample does not cover problem gamblers (or their family members) who did not seek help.

Conclusion

Problem gambling is not just a problem for the gambler. There is often collateral damage that affects family members and loved ones. In over half of the problem gambling cases in this study, some form of family violence was reported. It cannot be determined from this study whether problem gambling or family violence came first. The stresses that come from problem gambling could have led to the family violence, or family violence could have led people to use gambling as an escape. It also does not have to be one or the other exclusively. Regardless, increasing awareness about the high co-occurrence of family violence and gambling-related problems is a public health imperative worthy of more attention.

– Matthew Tom

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback on this article.

References

- Hegarty, K., & Roberts, G. (1998). How common is domestic violence against women? The definition of partner abuse in prevalence studies. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 22(1), 49-54. doi:10.1111/j.1467-842X.1998.tb01144.x
- Sherin, K. M., Sinacore, J. M., Li, X. Q., Zitter, R. E., & Shakil, A. (1998). HITS: a short domestic violence screening tool for use in a family practice setting. *Family Medicine*, 30(7), 508-512.
- Suomi, A., Jackson, A. C., Dowling, N. A., Lavis, T., Patford, J., Thomas, S. A., ... Cockman, S. (2013). Problem gambling and family violence: family member reports of prevalence, family impacts and family coping. *Asian Journal of Gambling Issues and Public Health*, 3(1), 13. doi:10.1186/2195-3007-3-13.