

What is Problem Gambling?

Definitions of Problem Gambling

Whilst undertaking a lengthy study of gambling and gambling industries, the Productivity Commission did not provide any authoritative definition of problem gambling, admitting that there is a "lack of precision in the definition of problem gambling"¹.

The Commission viewed problem gambling as a continuum – recognising that some members of the community may experience moderate difficulties with their gambling behaviours and others more severe problems.

Despite the variety of definitions available and utilised in the report, the Commission found that some principles were commonly recognised, chiefly –

A lack of control by the gambler over his or her gambling behaviour; and/or

Adverse personal, economic and social impacts which result from a gambler's actions - particularly the financial losses (relative to the gambler's means).

Problem gambling has, and continues to be, defined through many varied approaches, including the addiction (disease model), public health, behavioural, cognitive and biological models. These models result in a range of diverse behaviour definitions, including "problem", "pathological", "compulsive", "disordered", "neurotic" and "excessive".

In 2004, Australian and State/Territory Government Ministers agreed to the implementation of a National Gambling Research Program. One priority within the program was to develop a national approach to definitions of problem gambling. The first research project to be commissioned by Gambling Research Australia - *Problem Gambling and Harm: Towards a National Definition* - was undertaken by the South Australian Centre for Economic Studies jointly with the Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide. The project involved a literature review of definitions of problem gambling and gambling-related harm and gambling screens and measurement instruments and the compilation of feedback on the material developed in the literature review.

This report recommended that the following definition of problem gambling be adopted as the national definition:

“Problem gambling is characterised by difficulties in limiting money and/or time spent on gambling which leads to adverse consequences for the gambler, others, or for the community.”

The authors state that there is a general consensus that there is a need for a consistent measurement tool in Australia to allow comparisons across States and Territories in Australia and across time.

It was recommended that the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI), with refinements to clarify the cut-off points, be the preferred measurement tool for population-level research. The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) may also need to be used to allow for comparisons with previous studies and both the SOGS and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Criteria (DSM-IV) are accepted as useful tools for counselling and assessment purposes.

Problem Gambling Screens

There are numerous screens worldwide that have been developed to assess the severity of an individual's gambling problem. These include:

- South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS)
- Gamblers Anonymous 20 questions (GA-20)
- Massachusetts Gambling screen (MAGS)
- Diagnostic Interview for Gambling Schedule (DIGS)
- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM - IV)
- Gambling Treatment Outcome Monitoring system (GAMTOMS)
- National Opinion Research Center DSM IV Screen for gambling Problems (NODS)
- Lie/Bet
- Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI)
- Gambling Behaviour Interview (GBI)
- Structured Clinical Interview for Pathological Gambling (SCIP)
- Victorian Gambling Screen (VGS)
- The Maroondah Assessment Profile for Problem Gambling (G-MAP)
- Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS)
- HARM
- Gambling Symptoms Assessment Screen
- Gambling Severity Index

The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS)

The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) was developed by Dr Henry Lesieur and Dr Sheila Blume in 1987. It was first developed to screen clinical populations of alcoholics and drug abusers, as well as general populations, for pathological gambling². The prime focus of this measurement is on the financial aspects of gambling, such as whether gamblers 'chase' losses, have problems controlling their gambling, feel guilty about gambling and believe they have a problem.

The SOGS instrument consists of 20 questions on gambling behaviours, concentrating on those occurring in the last 12 months. The response

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categories used are “never”, “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often” and “always”. There is also an additional question which asks whether the respondent feels that they have a problem with gambling.³

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Another screen to determine problem gambling is contained in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association, which characterises problem gambling as an impulse control disorder. It was developed in a clinical setting in response to ‘empirical research that linked pathological gambling to other addictive disorders like alcohol and drug dependence’ (American Psychiatric Association 1994).

In developing the DSM-IV criteria, 222 self-identified pathological gamblers and 104 substance abusers who gambled socially tested the individual items (Lesieur & Rosenthal 1991) and items that best differentiated between pathological and non-pathological gamblers were analysed.⁴

Canadian Problem Gambling Index

The Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI) was developed to measure the extent of problem gambling in general population surveys and makes a distinction between non-problem gambling, those at risk of developing serious problems, those with moderate gambling problems and those with severe problems.⁵ It also provides more indicators of the social and environmental context of gambling and problem gambling⁶.

Victorian Gambling Screen

The Victorian Gambling Screen (VGS), commissioned by the Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority (VCGA) was developed by Ben-Tovim et al in association with Flinders University. According to the authors, the aim was to “develop a new instrument that could be used in surveys of the general population to assess the extent of problem gambling and for people presenting for problem gambling treatment or assistance in a clinical setting”. Moreover, the VGS represented a “departure from existing models that equated pathological gambling with a gambling addiction and dependence syndrome”.⁷

1 Productivity Commission (1999). Australia's Gambling Industries, Report No. 10, 1999

2 Lesieur, H.R. and Blume S.B. (1987) The South Oaks Gambling Screen: A New Instrument for the Identification of Pathological Gamblers. *Am J Psychiatry*, 1987 Sep; 144 (9): 1184-8.

3 Taylor A., Dal Grande E., Gill T., Delfabbro P., Glenn V., Goulding S., Weston H., Barton S., Rogers N., Stanley A., Blandy R., Tolchard B. and Kingston R. (2001) Gambling Patterns of South Australians and Associated Health Indicators, A Report commissioned by the Department of Human Services, May 2001.

4 Gerstein, D., Murphy, S., Toce, M., Hoffmann, J., Palmer, A., Johnson, R., Larison, C., Chuchro, L., Bard, A., Engelman, L., Hill, M. A., Buie, T., Volberg, R., Harwood, H., Tucker, A., Christiansen, E., Cummings, W., & Sinclair, S. (1999) Gambling Impact and Behavior Study:

Report to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center.

5 Wiebe, J., Single, E. and Falkowski-Ham A. (2001) Measuring Gambling and Problem Gambling in Ontario, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse Responsible Gambling Council (Ontario), November 30.

6 Ferris, J., and Wynne, H. (2001) The Canadian Problem Gambling Index: The Canadian Problem Gambling Index: Draft – User Manual, January 28, 2001.

7 Ben-Tovim, D., Esterman, A., Tolchard, B., Battersby, M. in association with Flinders Technologies Pty Ltd. (2001) The Victorian Gambling Screen Project Report, A Report commissioned by the Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, October 2001.