

Problem gambling getting serious

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MACAU -- The trend of problem gambling in Macau is growing comparing to other neighbouring gaming jurisdictions. Scholars call for more research in order to identify pathological gamblers before setting any policies.

The latest survey of the Institute of Commercial Gaming of the University of Macau (UM) and the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ) found that this year the prevalence rate of problem gambling is close to three percent, which is much higher than other gambling jurisdictions in the region. In 2003, 1.7 percent of the residents between 15 and 64 years old were handling a gambling addiction problem.

In 2007, the prevalence rate increased to 2.6 percent. However, it looks like most of the problem gamblers are not from Macau, but tourists from mainland China and Hong Kong.

“Mainlanders come to Macau, get involved in problem gambling and bring the problem back home. That means pressure for the Government and we want to study the problem and figure out the solutions,” director of the China Centre for Lottery Studies from the Peking University, Shen Ming-ming, told reporters.

He was speaking on the sidelines of the Cross-Strait Responsible Gambling Summit held yesterday by the UM, an activity included in the Responsible Gambling Awareness Week 2010.

One of the keynote speakers of the summit, co-director of the University of Sydney’s Gambling Research Unit, Alex Blaszczynski, expressed that the problem gambling is getting serious in Macau, but there is a lack of research to figure out what is really happening.

“As the majority of the problem gamblers come from China and Hong Kong, it becomes difficult to identify the true depth of the problem,” he pointed out.

‘A lot to improve’

The Australian professor acknowledges that Macau still has a lot to improve in its responsible gambling. “There are very minimal signs informing self-exclusion programs, requesting to gamble with affordable limits or information about the nature of gambling,” he noted.

According to Blaszczynski, local policy makers must foot programs on a clear basis, but there is a lack of research and scientific data. “What is important is to identify which populations are most vulnerable to developing gambling problems and then to target those specific populations in order to make sure there are appropriate treatment services provided for them,” he stressed.

As the Asian gaming hub, Macau faces a lot of challenges concerning its responsible gambling policies. “The main challenge is to balance between the market and relying on gambling as a hospitality industry tourism with significant revenues that go to the Government through taxation and, at the same time, try to reduce people’s gambling behaviour,” he said.

‘If tourists see that the culture in Macau is exploitation and take as much money as they can from gamblers, they would go to alternative venues where there is responsible gambling,’ Alex Blaszczynski warned. Blaszczynski stressed that actually the industry can take advantage of responsible gambling policies. “If tourists see that the culture in Macau is exploitation and take as much money as they can from gamblers, they would go to alternative venues where there is responsible gambling. For example, in Singapore, which is a very strong social responsible gambling policy,” he warned.

Gambling is fun

Paul Smith, British Columbia Lottery Corporation’s representative on the Canadian Partnership for Responsible Gambling, shares Blaszczynski’s views. According to the second keynote speaker of yesterday’s summit, in Canada, not only regulators, but also casino operators are interested in a long-term sustainable business by openly promoting the products they are offering.

“According to my experience in Canada casinos are quite anxious to create a more sustainable business that could be around for the next 20 or 30 years, instead of exploit the population and all of a sudden there isn’t business anymore,” he said.

Apart from that, the Canadian's approach is promoting awareness and publicity, engaging people in a way that shows gambling as entertainment and fun. "It doesn't have to be creating negative methods around gambling or a stigma. In fact, that's probably more dangerous, because in the stigma way the less people will want and need the information," he advised.

Still yesterday, the Institute of Commercial Gaming inked a Memorandum of Understanding between the Peking University and the Faculty of Business Administration of the UM. The goals are the cooperation between China and Macau regarding the problem gambling issue, as well as studying the feasibility of promoting responsible gambling in the Mainland.

