



Gambling Position Statement

Published December 2012

**Australian Association of
Social Workers (AASW)**

Incorporated in the ACT
ACN 008 576 010
ABN 93 008 576 010

National Office – Canberra

Level 4, 33-35 Ainslie Place
Canberra City, ACT 2600

PO Box 4956
Kingston, ACT 2604
T 02 6323 3900
F 02 6230 4399
E advocacy@asw.asn.au
www.aasw.asn.au

Approved by the AASW National Social Policy Committee:
15 October 2012
Approved by the AASW Board:
13 December

Introduction: The Social Work Platform

The social work profession is committed to maximising the well being of individuals and society. It considers that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities which emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights, including the right to freedom from intimidation and terror. Minimum standards of human rights also include the right to adequate housing, income, employment, education and health care.

Role of Social Workers

The AASW is the only national organisation for social workers in Australia, with over 6,800 members, many of whom are involved in the delivery of problem gambling services in a range of fields of practice.

Social workers work within community health, counselling, family support, youth work, financial counselling, social welfare, emergency relief and legal services that provide direct assistance to problem gamblers and their families. Social workers are also engaged in gambling related policy and research.

Policy Context

In its most recent report on the socioeconomic effects of gambling, The Australian Productivity Commissionⁱ (The Productivity Commission) estimated that 80 per cent of all Australians engage in gambling activities each year, and that up to 510,000 Australians are active problem gamblers or are at risk. The Productivity Commissionⁱⁱ defines problem gambling as gambling activity which results in moderate to significant harm to those who engage in it, and highlights that the social costs of problem gambling cost the Australian community \$4.7 billion each year.

According to major studies produced by The Productivity Commission in 1999ⁱⁱⁱ and 2010^{iv}, most problem gambling relates to electronic gambling machines (EGMs), and these machines are inherently unsafe for gamblers. The later research found that 60 per cent of EGM revenue comes from people who have a gambling problem or are at risk, and about a third of regular EGM gamblers have a problem or are at risk. These are conservative figures, as this research also found that gambling problems are grossly under-reported.

The Productivity Commission explained that harm from the machines stretches far beyond the gambler and up to 10 others may be directly affected by a problem gambler, including partners, children, friends, colleagues and employers. The consequences are often sad and tragic and include divorce, family breakdown, job loss, fraud, homelessness, poverty, depression and even suicide^v. Numerous studies (The Productivity Commission in 1999^{vi} and Monash University^{vii}) have found that EGM losses are much higher in communities with lower incomes. Those who are already marginalised are especially vulnerable to EGM related gambling problems.

In addition to low income, these vulnerabilities include mental illness, disability, new retirement, single parenthood and being a migrant.

The International Federation of Social Workers^{viii} considers that problem gambling poses a significant threat to family and community cohesion. Research evidence suggests a direct correlation exists between the increasing availability of legal gambling opportunities and greater problem gambling prevalence^{ix}, particularly EGMs and, increasingly, other forms that are easily accessible and enable continuous 'staking' (or betting) such as sports betting. The evidence indicates that problem gambling and its high prevalence is a systemic and structural issue that has escalated over the last two decades due to the design and easy accessibility of EGMs, which not only profit from harmful gambling but generate it^x, as well as enabling regulation wherein state governments share in the revenue through taxation regimes^{xi}.

Rising international recognition^{xii} of the myriad negative effects of problem gambling upon individuals, families, communities, and the economy has increasingly enabled it to be perceived as rather more of a structural than an individual problem, which requires a robust policy response. To this end, The Productivity Commission^{xiii} has urged Australian policy makers to take a

comprehensive public health approach to problem gambling, with a keen focus on harm minimisation and prevention strategies. This approach has been endorsed by The Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform^{xiv}, whose October 2012 report recommended gambling become a National Health Priority Area for research, and that a national independent research institute on gambling be created.

Role of Government

The recommendations emanating from The Productivity Commission's^{xv} most recent public inquiry into the socioeconomic impacts of gambling were wide ranging, and included key recommendations that:

- Regulatory processes and harm minimisation strategies in the gambling industry should be enhanced (Recommendation 17);
- Gambling pre-commitment strategies and self-exclusion options should be increased in order to give problem gamblers greater control over their gambling behaviour, with a comprehensive pre-commitment system for EGMs to be introduced in each State and Territory by 2016 (Recommendation 10);
- All governments should support the introduction of fully featured gambling pre-commitment trials by 2013 (Recommendation 19);
- By 2016, the maximum single bet on each EGM should be reduced to \$1, the maximum amount of cash that can be inserted into an EGM should be reduced to \$20, and research into the effect of jackpots upon problem gamblers should be conducted (Recommendation 11);
- Restrictions on automatic teller machines (ATMs), EFTPOS and credit facilities in gambling establishments should be considered, and by 2016 gambling wins of over \$300 should be paid by direct credit or cheque (Recommendation 13);
- EGM shutdown periods should be reconsidered (Recommendation 14);
- Harm minimisation strategies in gambling venues should be boosted, and staff training enhanced to improve gambling establishments' identification of and responsiveness to problem gamblers; (Recommendation 12); and
- Gambling policy research and evaluation strategies should be streamlined and increased (Recommendation 18).

The Productivity Commission's recommendation of key reforms designed to reduce the risk of harm to problem gamblers, including a mandatory pre-commitment system and minimum bets, have received the support of community groups including the NSW Council of Service Services (NCOSS)^{xvi}, Anglicare, Catholic Social Services, The St Vincent De Paul Society, The Salvation Army, Uniting Care Australia and the Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce, amongst others^{xvii}.

However, since The Productivity Commission's 2010 Gambling Inquiry report was released, its findings and recommendations have remained the source of significant political contestation and resistance from the gambling industries^{xviii}. Concrete policy change has proved slow, despite a Parliamentary Joint Select Committee Inquiry having produced a follow up report into the design and implementation of a mandatory pre-commitment system for EGMs^{xix}, which all Australian governments agreed to implement^{xx}.

In May 2012, The Commonwealth Government released for comment two proposed bills on gambling reform – *The National Gambling Reform Bill 2012* and *The National Gambling Reform (Related Matters) Bill 2012*^{xxi}. These bills require that in 2013, mandatory pre-commitment technology be introduced to every EGM in Australia, and withdrawal limits of \$250 per day apply to all ATMs installed in gambling venues. The Commonwealth Government has also increased its funding of financial counselling and web based counselling services to problem gamblers^{xxii}.

The proposed legislation does not, however, appear to reflect many of

The Productivity Commission's key recommendations which focus on prevention, including its call for the introduction of \$1 maximum bets on EGMs.

The AASW calls for

The AASW recognises that problem gambling carries a significant human and financial cost for up to 5 million Australians^{xxiii}. Given the evidence of harm, the AASW supports a 'precautionary approach' to gambling policy as recommended by The Productivity Commission in 2010^{xxiv}. Within this approach we err on the side of caution in the interests of public safety and well being, even when the evidence is contested. The Productivity Commission highlighted that we cannot always know in advance the full effects of a policy before it is enacted, and reliance on an excessively high standard of proof would cause policy paralysis in an area where the costs of inaction are unacceptably high^{xxv}.

The AASW endorses the key findings and recommendations made by The Productivity Commission in its 2010 Gambling Inquiry, and calls upon the Australian Government to prevent and minimise the harms caused by problem gambling through:

- Adopting a precautionary approach in directing gambling policy;
- Introducing mandatory pre-commitment technology to EGMs as a matter of urgency, and in accordance with the recommendations in The Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform's first report into the design and implementation of a mandatory pre-commitment system for EGMs^{xxvi};
- Addressing the significant risk of harm posed to problem gamblers by high intensity EGMs by reducing maximum bets to \$1 per play;
- Introducing stronger community consultation processes when new EGM licences are sought;
- Funding increased public education on the harmful effects of problem gambling, with the central warning being that EGMs constitute a harmful product and it is not safe to gamble on them on a regular basis;
- Funding increased support and treatment options for problem gamblers and their families, including options for community and peer support;
- Funding increased research into both the prevention and treatment of problem gambling behaviours, while acknowledging the solid body of research already conducted that places the main problem with the EGM product and its inadequate regulation rather than individual pathology; and
- Committing future gambling policy to be directed by continuous research which is independent of commercial interests, as recommended in The Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform's third report^{xxvii}.

Talking Points

- The AASW recognise that gambling carries a significant human and financial cost for up to 5 million Australians^{xxviii}, and concurs with the view of the International Federation of Social Workers that gambling constitutes a significant threat to family and community cohesion^{xxix}.
- The AASW understand that disadvantaged and marginalised Australians are particularly vulnerable to the development of gambling problems, and that the effects of problem gambling include divorce, family breakdown, job loss, fraud, homelessness, poverty, depression and even suicide^{xxx}.
- The AASW observe that research evidence demonstrates the chief causes of problem gambling are systemic and structural, and do not lie with individual problem gamblers alone^{xxxi}.
- The AASW acknowledge that most problem gambling relates to the use of EGMs (and, potentially, other forms of gambling that are easily accessible and enable continuous staking), which are inherently unsafe and known to induce gambling problems^{xxxii}.
- The AASW supports a uniform and enforceable national standard of product safety for EGMs that includes harm prevention and consumer protection measures.
- The AASW urges the Australian government to pursue a comprehensive public health approach to gambling^{xxxiii}, which seeks to prevent and minimise the harms associated with it.

References

- ⁱ Australian Productivity Commission (2010). *Gambling, Report No. 50*, Canberra. Retrieved 3 June 2012 from <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/gambling-2009/report>.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ Australian Productivity Commission (1999). *Australia's Gambling Industries, Report No. 10*, Canberra. Retrieved 3 June 2012 from <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/gambling/docs/finalreport>.
- ^{iv} Australian Productivity Commission (2010). *Op. cit.*
- ^v Kate Dempsey & Associates (2002). *Striking a Balance: The Impact of Gaming in the City of Kingston*. Retrieved 25 August 2012 from http://www.kingston.vic.gov.au/page/page.asp?Page_Id=138&h=0.
- ^{vi} Australian Productivity Commission (1999). *Op. cit.*
- ^{vii} Livingstone, C., Kipsaina, C. & Rintoul, A. (2012). Assessment of poker machine expenditure and community benefit claims in selected Commonwealth Electoral Divisions. Retrieved 22 August 2012 from http://www.unitingcare.org.au/images/stories/resources/120412_research_poker_machine_expenditure_and_community_benefit.pdf.
- ^{viii} International Federation of Social Workers (2003). *Poverty, Health & Families – Global Concerns: Message to the 20th Social Work Day at the UN-New York 2003*. Retrieved 30 June 2012 from <http://ifsw.org/statements/social-work-day-at-the-un-7-april-2003/>.
- ^{ix} Dowling, N., Jackson, A. & Thomas, S. (2008). Behavioural Interventions in the Treatment of Pathological Gambling: A Review of Activity Scheduling and Desensitization. *International Journal of Behavioural Consultation and Therapy*, 4(2), pp. 172-187. Retrieved 1 July 2012 from http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/problemgambling/docs/Publications/2008_Dowling_et_al_IJBCT.pdf.
- ^x Four Corners - ABC Television (2003). Reporter Jonathan Holmes interviews Mark Dickerson, Tattersall's Chair of Psychology at the University of Western Sydney, on 7 October, 2003. Retrieved 26 August 2012 from http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2003/20031013_georges_gold/int_dickerson.htm.
- ^{xi} Livingstone, C., Woolley, R., Zazryn, T., Bakacs, L. & Shami, R. (2008). *The Relevance and Role of Gaming Machine Games and Game Features on the Play of Problem Gamblers – Report*. Retrieved 25 August 2012 from <http://www.iga.sa.gov.au/pdf/0801/Final%20report.Print.Feb08.pdf>.
- ^{xii} Hing, N. (2002). The emergence of problem gambling as a corporate social issue in Australia. *International Gambling Studies*, 2(1), pp. 101-122.
- ^{xiii} Australian Productivity Commission (2010). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xiv} Commonwealth of Australia (2012). *Third Report: The prevention and treatment of problem gambling. Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform*. Retrieved 15 October 2012 from http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Committees?url=gamblingreform_cte/prevention_treatment/index.htm.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*
- ^{xvi} NSW Council Of Social Services (2012). *NCOSS Resources: Gambling Policy*. Retrieved 6 August 2012 from http://www.ncoss.org.au/component/option,com_docman/task,cat_view/gid,60/Itemid,78/.
- ^{xvii} The Australian Churches Gambling Taskforce (2011). Retrieved 6 August 2012 from <http://gamblingreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/111104-Advocacy-Pack-Poker-Machine-Safety.pdf>.
- ^{xviii} Cummings, T. (2012) Labor is gambling on politics not principles. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 January 2012. Retrieved 6 August 2012 from <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/labor-is-gambling-on-politics-not-principles-20120116-1q2f6.html>.

-
- ^{xix} Commonwealth of Australia (2011). First Report: The design and implementation of a mandatory pre-commitment system for electronic gaming machines. Retrieved 6 August 2012 from http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/gamblingreform_ctte/precommitment_scheme/report/index.htm.
- ^{xx} Commonwealth of Australia (2012a). Problem Gambling: Pre-Commitment Technology. Retrieved 6 August 2012 from http://www.problemgambling.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/pre-commitment_v3-lo.pdf.
- ^{xxi} FaHCSIA (2012). National Gambling Reform Bills. Retrieved 6 August 2012 from <http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/communities-and-vulnerable-people/programs-services/problem-gambling/national-gambling-reform-bills>.
- ^{xxii} Commonwealth of Australia (2012b). Problem Gambling: Boosting counselling and support services. Retrieved 6 August 2012 from http://www.problemgambling.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/factsheet-counselling_support_services2.pdf.
- ^{xxiii} Commonwealth of Australia (2012c). Problem Gambling: The Facts. Retrieved 26 May 2012 from <http://www.problemgambling.gov.au/facts>.
- ^{xxiv} Australian Productivity Commission (2010). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxv} Borrell, J. (2012). Cave in by PM puts us all at risk. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 2012. Retrieved 25 August 2012 from <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/cavein-by-pm-puts-us-all-at-risk-20120122-1qc2q.html>.
- ^{xxvi} Commonwealth of Australia (2011). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxvii} Commonwealth of Australia (2012). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxviii} Commonwealth of Australia (2012c). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxix} International Federation of Social Workers (2003). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxx} Australian Productivity Commission (1999). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxxi} Monash University (2012). Gambling and Public Health. Retrieved 25 August 2012 from <http://www.med.monash.edu.au/healthsci/research/gamblpubhlth.html>.
- ^{xxxii} Borrell, J. (2012). *Op. cit.*
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*