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Young people and gambling problems

Mark Griffiths and Alison Linsey lay out the ground

There is no UK law preventing children and adolescents gambling on fruit machines in seaside arcades and family leisure centres.

However, there are many studies all showing that a small but significant minority of children and adolescents in the UK have a gambling problem.

Legislation

The most recent legislation is the Gambling Act 2005,¹ which will replace existing law on gambling in England, Scotland and Wales. This Act will not be fully implemented until 1 September 2007. Under 18s will be able to play gaming machines but only for a maximum prize of £5 (in cash or in kind), and a maximum stake of 10p (or 30p if the prize is not cash). The Act contains a provision for the Secretary of State to create an age limit for gaming machines and associated offences, after consultation with relevant bodies.

The 2005 Act also establishes a new independent Gambling Commission to license and regulate commercial gambling through casinos, bingo, betting, pool betting, larger charity lotteries and remote technologies such as the internet.

Prevalence of gambling

In 2000, successive surveys were commissioned by the National Lottery Commission² as part of an ongoing tracking survey to monitor young people's gambling behaviour.

The latest round of research found that 22 per cent had gambled weekly on fruit machines (55 per cent in the previous year), nine per cent had gambled weekly on National Lottery scratch cards (36 per cent in the previous year), and 7.6 per cent weekly on the National Lottery draw (26 per cent in the previous year). As with adult forms of National Lottery products, the prevalence of weekly play has decreased as the 'novelty' factor of playing has worn off. However, the prevalence of problem gambling among adolescents showed no significant decrease.

Problem gambling

The survey was also designed to identify the prevalence of 'problem gambling' by under-16s on the National Lottery, scratch cards and fruit machines.

There are many definitions of problem gambling, although most agree that the

consequences disrupt or damage family life, as well as work and leisure. The 2000 British Gambling Prevalence Survey³ found that just under one per cent of the UK adult population are problem gamblers (approximately 275,000-325,000 people). However, the proportion of problem gamblers is higher amongst 16-24 year-olds (1.7 per cent) than for over-25s (0.5 per cent). The problem gambling rate is two to three times higher in adolescents, particularly as a result of problematic fruit machine gambling.

The National Lottery Commission survey reported that 4.9 per cent of the sample were problem gamblers (3.2 per cent fruit machines, 0.5 per cent scratch cards, and 1.2 per cent fruit machines and scratch cards combined) which showed no significant difference from the previous survey (just over 5 per cent). These data suggest that although the prevalence of adolescent gambling decreased significantly between national surveys, the prevalence of problem gambling remained relatively constant and is a cause for concern.

Profiles of problem gamblers

The National Lottery Commission survey also found that problem gamblers were more likely than other children to have other addictive behaviours (for example, to have smoked cigarettes, drunk alcohol and taken illegal drugs in the past week). These are not necessarily causal factors of problem gambling, however.

Further research has shown that adolescent problem gamblers are also more likely to be male, have begun gambling at an early age, have had a big win early on, and to be from a lower social class. This research has also indicated that the most addictive gambling activities are those in which the time gap between gambles is very short (for example, slot machines), and there are short intervals between stake and payout, near misses, and a combination of very high prizes and frequent winning of small prizes.

Work for the Gambling Commission

Following the full implementation of the Gambling Act 2005, the newly established Gambling Commission will need to further monitor young people's gambling behaviours.

This should help to identify whether age



Young problem gamblers are more likely to be male

restrictions should be imposed on gaming machines, and examine the extent to which the gambling offences in relation to young people have been used. Further research is also needed into the adequacy of treatment and support for young people who are problem gamblers, as very few adolescent problem gamblers turn up for treatment.

References

1. *Gambling Act 2005*. London: TSO See www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2005/20050019.htm
2. J Ashworth, N Doyle and N Howat (2000). *Under 16s and the National Lottery: Tracking survey July 2000*. London: National Lottery Commission
3. K Sproston, B Erens and J Orford (2000). *Gambling Behaviour in Britain: Results from the British Gambling Prevalence Survey*. London: National Centre for Social Research

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