

Electronic Gaming Machines and Problem Gambling: In Brief

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Responsible Gambling Council

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RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING COUNCIL

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On behalf of the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority (SLGA), the Responsible Gambling Council (RGC) conducted a study on the relationship between EGMs and problem gambling, and the modifications most likely to reduce the risk of problem gambling among EGM users. The study reviewed the available literature in these areas and brought together the opinions of a cross-section of 42 Key Informants, including Researchers in the field, Gaming and Problem Gambling Specialists (i.e., health and problem gambling professionals, regulators, operators), problem gambling Counsellors, and EGM Problem Gamblers themselves.

Overall, the study showed that the current knowledge base, as found in the literature review, regarding ways to reduce EGM-related problem gambling is limited and incomplete. While most in the field would agree that a strong relationship exists between problem gambling and EGMs, the nature and extent of this relationship is far from clear. Even less clear, particularly for policy makers, is the question of how best to address the relationship. While experimental studies examining the mechanics of EGMs provide insight into machine dynamics and player behaviour, they often tell us little about what can be done in actual practice. This study gathered the opinion of those who have helped to define the field and knowledge base, in order to elicit information that is concrete and practical, and, ultimately, to provide assistance to policy-makers in responding to the dilemmas posed by EGMs. However, it should be noted that in order for this study to have real utility, findings must be interpreted within a jurisdiction's socio-political, geographic, and economic context.ⁱ

ⁱ For example, if a given jurisdiction has many community EGM sites which cannot be readily centralized, other modifications, such as reducing EGM site operation hours, might be warranted (at least in the interim). This might be the case even if the latter modification does not receive the strongest endorsement by Key Informants.

The framework for this report, derived from the literature, focused on three main areas: EGM features, venue features, and community accessibility features. Key Informant opinion was collected through in-depth questionnaires and focus groups. Researchers, Specialists, and Problem Gamblers were asked for their opinions about the importance of various features in contributing to problem gambling; all Key Informants were asked for their views on the potential effectiveness of select modifications to reduce the risk of problem gambling. Questionnaire data were analyzed by ranking mean item scores and conducting thematic analyses to determine if certain clusters of items were seen to be more important and/or effective than others. Focus group data were assessed for common themes. Results showed a remarkable level of agreement among all Key Informant groups regarding the most important contributors to problem gambling. There was less agreement regarding the modifications that would reduce problem gambling, although consensus was observed across a number of them.

In a broad sense, Key Informants believed that certain features intrinsic to EGMs contribute to the risk of problem gambling, such as speed of play and the appearance of near-misses. Other intrinsic features, such as the number of games that can be played on the machines, their payout schedules, and the house advantage were seen as less important. When considering potential modifications, all Key Informant groups supported changes that did not involve the core operation of EGMs or the player's experience of them. The changes that were supported include the management of money, pre-commitment, the use of smart card technology, and restricting community access. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

The Management of Money

Throughout the study, the management of money emerged as an important issue related to problem gambling. Many of the highest ranked items and the thematic analysis focused on the on-screen display of money (i.e., the provision of running cash totals), access to money (through ATMs, cheque-cashing, and direct electronic fund transfers), and the setting of spending limits. At the least intrusive level, Key Informants endorsed displaying dollars as opposed to credits on EGMs. Interestingly, the issue of payouts in tickets versus tokens or cash did not emerge as one of the most important items.

One of the most consistent opinions about effective modifications across the Key Informant groups related to the restriction of player access to funds; that is, restricting direct electronic fund transfers that involve any use of credit or deb-

it cards—either on EGMs or on portable machines that can be used right at the EGM or gaming table. Although there is currently little research available on ATM access as it relates to problem gambling, there was a clear consensus among the Key Informants that removing ATMs from the gaming floor or from the premises completely would help reduce the risk of players developing gambling problems.

While removing bill acceptors altogether or removing large denomination bill acceptors from EGMs were rated highly as effective modifications by the Researchers and Specialists, these items did not receive as much endorsement from the Counsellors or Problem Gamblers. These modifications may be of decreasing concern as TITO (Ticket-in Ticket-out) systems become a larger part of the EGM landscape.

Pre-commitment

The concept of pre-commitment was pioneered by Mark Dickerson in Australia and has been adopted in a variety of ways in recent years. The core of pre-commitment is the creation of pre-set spending or time limits prior to the actual gambling session. There was considerable Key Informant support in the present study for the general creation of pre-commitment initiatives for gamblers. However, while there was support for all initiatives, the Key Informants tended to see money limits as more effective than time limits. They also tended to prefer mandatory requirements over optional ones.

The Use of Smart Card Technology

The use of smart cards was one of the most highly endorsed modifications to reduce problem gambling risk found in this study. The questionnaire, however, did not provide a definition of smart card technology, nor did it provide an extensive opportunity for Key Informants to elaborate on the type of smart card system that they had in mind. Nevertheless, at a very minimum, the Key Informants seemed to understand that it involved a universal registration system and a requirement to have a card for machine access. Given that smart card systems can vary significantly on a number of characteristics (e.g., time and money spending limits, optional/mandatory features, type and level of enforcement), Key Informants would, undoubtedly, have varying views on the breadth and comprehensiveness of such systems.

Restricting Community Access

While there was no consensus amongst the study's Key Informants as to what might constitute the most effective community accessibility modification, restricting the number

of EGM venues within a given community and concentrating machines in centralized locations seems to be the preferred options for reducing the risk of problem gambling. The Key Informants rated the effectiveness of all the community accessibility modifications relatively high, though, making it difficult to clearly identify a single modification as being notably more effective than the others.

Other Notable Observations

Strength of Evidence

Both the Researchers and Specialists were asked to assess the strength of evidence for each modification item within the three framework areas. While the Specialists were more optimistic than the Researchers were regarding such evidence, overall, there appeared to be low levels of confidence in the strength of the current evidence base. Moreover, there was little connection between Key Informant *perception* of evidence strength and the *actual* strength of evidence uncovered in the literature review.

EGM-based Inducements

There are many features that can be programmed into EGMs to promote further play, such as prize advertisements and free games. While these features were mentioned many times in the focus groups and questionnaire as contributors to problem gambling, they did not get enough attention as modifications to be considered top priorities. However, the frequency of their mention suggests that many Key Informants believed that this area warrants further consideration and study.

Responsible Gambling Messages

Rankings related to responsible gambling messages on machines or in venues appeared in the mid-range of the thematic rankings. This would suggest that there is reasonable support for such messages, but little confidence that they would have a large influence on problem gambling.

Conclusion

Taken together, the literature and opinions from this study's Key Informants suggest a strong relationship between EGMs and problem gambling; however, the nature of this relationship is unclear. Many modifications to EGM features, venue features, and community accessibility features were readily endorsed by Key Informants. There is now a need for further research to assess the impact and effectiveness of these modifications in practical application that takes into account jurisdictional social, political, economic, and geographical dynamics.

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The Responsible Gambling Council (RGC) is an independent, non-profit organization committed to problem gambling prevention. RGC designs and delivers highly effective awareness programs and promotes the identification and adoption of best practices in problem gambling prevention through research and information dissemination.

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