



Responsible Gambling Programs and Tools

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Introduction

Responsible gambling (RG) involves the use of programs/policies and tools that aim to provide a fair and safe gambling environment and experience, as well as to prevent or minimize gambling-related harm (1). This whitepaper offers a summary of the current state of evidence on such RG strategies. First, it presents a brief overview of RG programs and tools available in Canada. The second section describes the current state of knowledge on RG. It concludes with the limits and future directions for RG initiatives.

Available programs and tools in Canada

Between 2014 and 2015, the Canadian gambling industry distributed from 0.41% in British Columbia to 3.50% in Ontario of the total gross government gaming revenues in problem gambling initiatives, including in RG (2). Between \$214K in Newfoundland and \$16.3M in Ontario were distributed to operators' own RG programs. Canadian state operators have framed their initiatives within their corporate social responsibility as responsible gaming or responsible gambling, using overarching programs to ensure consistency between strategies.

Gambling behaviour tracking systems are being used for operators to track and respond to gamblers experiencing problems, such as in the iCare card based system in Saskatchewan (3). Tracking systems added to pop-up messages help gamblers monitor their own behaviours or respect their self-imposed limits. Discussion and support forums are also being screened to potentially identify problems and provide support. In addition, retailers and casino staff are receiving training on how to identify or respond adequately to gamblers presenting problematic play.

Self-exclusion (SE) programs are also available across Canada with varying duration from limited terms of three months to indefinite subscriptions (4). Renewal of the participation to a SE is possible. Reinstatement into a venue is granted with or without additional requirements imposed on the gambler in certain regions, while other jurisdiction will allow it solely at the end of the term. In some provinces, reinstatement will require an active

Key Message

Canadian provinces have invested in a wide variety of responsible gambling (RG) strategies. Thus far, only a few have shown promising results in changing gambling practices, while others have the potential to support self-awareness and self-control, as well as counteract misconceptions and erroneous cognitions. Overall, research on RG has yet to reach consensus and to fully address contextual factors in order to find effective ways to ensure a safe gambling environment.

request from the gambler. Revocation of the ban can be possible after a fixed period, while other programs will require a waiting period or full respect of the terms as dictated in the SE contract.

Most provinces will deliver youth prevention programs, as well as distribute material and tools (e.g., video documentaries, docudrama, board games) targeting students and teachers, administrators, guidance counsellors, and principals. These programs aim to prevent minors from gambling and address risks and consequences associated with underage gambling, prevention and treatment. Series of onstage performances have also been performed in schools.

All provincial state operators offer responsible gambling terminals and onsite resource centres, as well as kiosks and displays offering readily available information and promotional materials to patrons in casino, lottery

retailers or bingo halls. Gambling awareness weeks or programs and advertising campaigns (e.g., open-houses, conferences, media campaigns), as well as community outreach (e.g., website, brochures, posters) are carried out in all provinces. Such RG advertising aims at educating the public on common misconception and myths, on gambling mechanics and odds, on potential risks and responsible gambling practices, as well as on services available. Each province has its helpline to support players in distress or help them regain control over their gambling.

Our state of knowledge on RG

Scientific evidence can be found on the effectiveness of enforced breaks in play, automatic informative messages, limit settings, behavioural tracking tools, self-exclusion programs, staff training and marketing of responsible gambling. Some strategies have shown promising results, while others require further research before stronger conclusions can be made.

Enforced breaks in play

Enforced breaks in play used on its own have yet to be shown as an effective RG strategy. Some studies suggest they may be harmful by increasing the cravings and leading to continued play (5). The optimal length of play before a break should be introduced has yet to be determined (1). It is also unclear how differences between individual gambling patterns should be accounted for. Most research has occurred in a laboratory setting, therefore further research is required in real-world gambling environments.

Automatic display of informative messages

Dynamic messaging (i.e., pop-up messages interrupting play to deliver content) may be effective in supporting self-awareness and self-control, and to counteract misconceptions and erroneous cognitions (6; 7). However, it is unclear if the messaging actually impacts gambling behaviour (6). Importantly, dynamic messaging does not impact gambling enjoyment (7).

Studies have also addressed the type of content as well as the frequency and format of message display. Research suggest that the messages should contain self-appraisal messages, personalized normative feedbacks, or time/monetary reminders (8-15). The frequency, the

positioning on the screen and animation, as well as the colours of display also have an impact on recalling the message and short-term behaviour change (1;10;15-18). It is unclear if it is the message or the break in play, or the combination of both that contribute to the effectiveness of dynamic messaging (1). In addition, it is unknown what should be the optimal frequency of these messages (19). Since most studies were conducted in a laboratory setting, further research is needed in naturalistic settings where additional environmental factors may intervene on the effectiveness of this tool (20).

Limit settings of duration and spending

Limit-settings allow online or electronic gaming machine (EGM) players to automatically set time and spending limits. These limits are often supported by reminders and/or animation videos discussed above, and have been shown to support RG (8;9; 21;22). These limits may be especially effective if prompted before engaging in a gambling session (22;23) and if set by the gamblers themselves, as opposed to being determined by operators (24). There may be opportunities to change the way limits are presented to help facilitate adherence to limit settings by focussing on winning limits or adding novel features to optimize the interactions between the player and the machine (25;26).

Limit-setting also has its limitations. For example, problem gamblers are less likely to adhere to limit settings (27). Gamblers who reach their limit may simply switch to a different machine or (online) venue (1). It is also possible that time-limits may lead gamblers to bet larger sums to compensate for shorter sessions. Finally, it's unclear if limits work when/if emotions are running high or a person is in a negative mood.

Behavioural tracking tools

Behavioural tracking tools aim at identifying behavioural markers to profile gamblers, assess behavioural changes that may indicate problematic practices, and offer, when necessary, personalized feedback or track subsequent interventions by trained employees (3). These tools are showing positive but small and short-termed effects on behaviour change (1). Information for behavioural tracking tools are often extracted from administrative datasets on gambling activities. However, there may be

other ways to track players. For example, analysis of emails to customer services may be one way to track at-risk gamblers (28;29). In addition, social medias may offer opportunities to promote RG (30).

It is currently unclear which elements of these tools are effective in promoting changes at different levels of risk. Tracking tools appear more effective for those at-risk of problem gambling, with minimal effect on gamblers already showing signs of problematic play (1). Thus it is recommended to be used as a preventative measure rather than for intervention with problem gamblers. Finally, further research needs to refine detection of gambling problems severity as identified by tracking tools with validated screening scales.

Self-exclusion programs

Self-exclusion (SE) programs offer the possibility for gamblers to adhere to a program that excludes them from a gambling venue or website (31). Potential benefits, especially in the short-term, have been found (32) such as reduction in gambling expenditure, gambling frequency and duration (31). SE allows gamblers to control their gambling (31) and support abstinence (33), thereby contributing to the reduction of problem gambling severity and other psychological difficulties (31). However, these programs could be improved by providing clear information on the programs and accessibility onsite or outside of gambling venues, although onsite registration has been disputed (4;31). In addition, offering support from trained professionals would help improve SE programs. Furthermore, those enrolled in SE should be excluded from promotional material, credit and loyalty programs, as well as mailing lists.

Important limitations have been identified in SE programs. Indeed, a considerable proportion of SE participants will breach their contract (up to 33-59%) or gamble at other venues (31; 34-37). Given insufficient training, staff have had limited ability to identify or respond to breaches (i.e., those trying to re-enter the casino after excluding). It also remains unclear what would be the optimal length of the exclusion program (4;31). While those who self-exclude should be able to renew or extend the length of their exclusion, there is little evidence that revocation of a contract (i.e., when a gambler senses s/he has regained control) has value (31).

Staff training to respond to problem gambling

Retailers and casino staff training provide the necessary information to help employees better identify and respond to signs of problem gambling and related distress (39). Staff training has shown to increase understanding and identification of problem gambling and to provide the basic skills to intervene with excessive gamblers (39-41). Future training may need to focus on how to cope with negative feelings expressed by clients (40;42;43). In addition, staff training needs to take into account staff's gender, status, and job satisfaction (42). Further research on the effectiveness of staff training is warranted.

Promotion and marketing of responsible gambling

Although well received in general, promotion and marketing of RG has had little effect on behavioural change (44). However, onsite casino information centres can contribute to modify misconception about randomness in gambling (45). Ideally, RG messaging would include information on the social consequences of gambling and emotions related to familial or long term financial situations (46;47). Further studies of responsible gambling promotions and marketing are needed in order to determine how to improve advertisements.

Limits and future directions for RG

The extent of our knowledge on problem gambling is relatively extensive, but the state of evidence on how to prevent it needs improvement (48). Various RG strategies have shown some potential in reducing gambling-related harms. However, the operationalization of RG has received some criticism from gambling experts. Scholars have highlighted how responsible gambling strategies have been overly driven by consumer approach. Indeed, they argue that the management of risk has been guided by notions of individual responsibility, freedom of choice and deregulation of markets (49), which emphasizes the players' responsibility in maintaining safe gambling practices. It therefore ignores environmental risk factors such as the limitations in the regulation of supply, distribution, availability, and accessibility of gambling as potential contributors to problem gambling.

Criticism further underlines two inherent contradictions in the application of RG. First, there is a focus on

findings ways to help problem gamblers to control/ manage their expenditures in a rational manner. However, this contradicts with the loss of control experienced in problem gamblers. Consequently, it is argued that RG should focus on at-risk and non-problem gamblers. The second incoherency refers to operators' dependency on gamblers' losses for revenues (49-53). Such a situation puts State-owned enterprises in conflict with governments' responsibility to oversee the wellbeing of their citizens. Conflicted interest may limit the implementation of RG (54;55).

The promotion of a culture of RG would benefit from a collaborative approach between governments, the industry and gamblers (55-4). In addition, the convergence of regulations and continuous monitoring of compliance to such policies, in particular from an independent regulation authority, may further help ensure a safe gambling environment (56;57). Such recommendations would allow for a more balanced distribution of the responsibility in reducing gambling-related harms.

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