

CHAPTER 5: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF GAMBLING

5.1 A better understanding of the potential impact of gambling, social and economic, may assist the community's consideration of how a balance could be struck. This chapter examines measures that may be adopted in Hong Kong to minimize the negative impact of gambling.

Understanding the Impact of Gambling

5.2 In order that concrete measures to address the impact of gambling can be devised and implemented, we need to assess the nature and seriousness of the gambling-related problems in Hong Kong. So far there have been few attempts in either the public or private sector to conduct in-depth research into this area. In this respect, **pathological gambling** and **underage gambling** deserve special attention.

Pathological gambling

5.3 Experience shows that most adults gamble in a controlled manner. However, some punters have difficulties in controlling their gambling desire and behaviour and as a result, they gamble frequently and often beyond their means. This could lead to accumulation of debts, emotional problems and loss of employment. Some of them may even resort to criminal activities or commit suicide as a result.

5.4 The traditional view towards heavy gamblers has been a moral one. In recent decades and particularly in some experienced jurisdictions, gamblers' problems have been studied from a psychological and psychiatric perspective. People encountering such problems are usually characterized as "pathological", "problem" or "compulsive" gamblers. The terms have different definitions but are usually used interchangeably.

5.5 Research suggests that among the various forms of gambling, **Internet gambling**, **convenience gambling** (e.g. slot machines and electronic gambling devices in street shops) and **casino gambling** are most conducive to pathological gambling, largely due to their "non-stop" nature. Those patronizing **illegal or unauthorized bookmakers** are also more

prone to pathological gambling because of the variety of the games offered, the absence of a time limit, the active promotion and the availability of credit betting and easy loans.

5.6 Apart from behavioral and financial problems, pathological gamblers may adversely affect people around them. Their immediate families are more prone to financial difficulties, indebtedness and other family problems. Their friends and relatives may also be affected, often as a result of the gamblers' indebtedness. Pathological gamblers are likely to be less productive at workplace. It is also possible that pathological gamblers and their families may have to rely on welfare support.

5.7 However, one of the difficulties in determining the net costs of pathological gambling is that it often co-exists with other behavioural problems, including substance (e.g. drug, alcohol) abuse and mood disorder such as depression. It is thus difficult to attribute a particular problem (e.g. suicide) solely to pathological gambling, or to determine the net effects of pathological gambling on a particular problem (e.g. divorce, domestic violence).

Underage gambling

5.8 It is generally accepted that underage persons should not be allowed to take part in gambling activities as they are less capable of controlling their gambling behaviour. Indeed, some overseas studies reveal that adolescent gamblers are more likely to develop pathological gambling behaviour and run into financial difficulties than adults. This may in turn affect their studies and pursuit of other interests. While authorized gambling operators normally prevent participation by underage persons, minors are vulnerable to the attractions offered by unauthorized bookmakers as they are not subject to any control.

5.9 It is generally acknowledged that the negative impact of gambling are usually more serious and prominent where illegal gambling is rampant and where the authorized gambling operations are poorly regulated and controlled. The actual impact vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. It is thus necessary to ascertain the prevalence of gambling-related problems in

Hong Kong, their correlation with various forms of gambling and their impact on individuals, families and the society. As a first step in this direction, HAB has recently commissioned a **study of gambling behaviour and pathological gambling in Hong Kong**. Results of the study will enable us to better understand the gambling-related problems in Hong Kong and to devise appropriate measures to address them. Pending the availability of the results, it may be useful to look at the measures that may be adopted to prevent and address gambling-related problems in Hong Kong.

Preventive and Educational Measures

(a) Public Education

5.10 It may be more effective to foster among the public, in particular the youth, a responsible attitude towards gambling and to explain to them its risks and consequences, than to present it simply as a “social evil” and keep the public away from gambling. A sustained **public education programme** is recommended, aimed at enhancing public understanding about gambling, including the possible financial, psychological and social consequences.

5.11 In view of the vulnerability of young people to the negative impact of gambling, the messages suggested in paragraph 5.10 above, suitably adapted for youth’s consumption, should be disseminated to students through **school education programmes**, following the examples of the anti-drug and anti-corruption education. Indeed, the recent curriculum reform, which places emphasis on the development of positive attitudes such as rationality and self-discipline, provides a useful platform for fostering among students a rational and responsible attitude towards gambling and a better understanding of its impact. In addition, the Education Department (ED) has undertaken to implement the following measures to promote the messages:

- (a) ED has commissioned the Radio Television Hong Kong to produce a series of TV programmes with a view to building positive values amongst students. One of the programmes will focus on understanding the possible consequences of and risks involved in participating in gambling. The programme

is tentatively scheduled for broadcast in early 2002. The programme will later be developed into moral education reference materials for school use;

- (b) a series of moral education workshops will be organized for teachers and students and the issue of gambling will be included in the moral education programmes for the 2001-2002 school year;
- (c) schools applying for the 2001-2002 school year civic education grant will be recommended to include the issue of gambling in designing their civic education programmes; and
- (d) posters on the negative impact of gambling will be produced by ED for all primary and secondary schools in September 2001.

(b) Information for Gamblers

5.12 The better informed a gambler is about the nature and possible consequences of gambling, the less likely he would develop problematic gambling behaviour, and vice versa. Hence, in some jurisdictions such as the US and Australia, gambling operators (mainly casinos and electronic gambling devices) are required to display at gambling establishments and machines notices warning gamblers of the risks of gambling and informing them of the odds of winning and the services available (e.g. telephone help line, treatment and counselling services) if they wish to seek help regarding pathological gambling. Although there is a significant difference in the gambling landscape between Hong Kong and the overseas jurisdictions, we feel that consideration should be given on how best the practices mentioned above should be adopted in the authorized gambling outlets in Hong Kong.

(c) Promotion of the Use of Internet Filtering Tools

5.13 Filtering tools enable Internet users to screen out undesirable materials including gambling and pornographic websites. Although the use of filtering tools, being a voluntary practice, could not stop determined

punters from taking part in Internet gambling, it would to a large extent help protect casual Internet users and minors from gaining access to gambling information and opportunities on the Internet. We will consult the Internet industry and professional organizations on how best to make this easily accessible, especially in the home environment.

Treatment for Pathological Gamblers

5.14 **Professional counselling** for pathological gamblers is available in some countries although there has not yet been any universally practised approach to treatment and counselling. In Hong Kong, pathological gamblers and their family members may at present seek help from SWD and welfare agencies in the context of family counselling services and from the Hospital Authority in the context of psychological and psychiatric treatment. Social workers in family services centres are equipped with knowledge and skills to deal with problems associated with gambling. Services including counselling and other forms of assistance are offered to individuals and families affected by pathological gambling. For gamblers who require intensive intervention, referral to clinical psychology and psychiatric services will be made. That said, at present no **targeted** treatment or **tailor-made** counselling programmes are provided to pathological gamblers or their relatives and friends. Indeed, there is a limited supply of **professional** gambling counsellors in Hong Kong and the services provided by them are not widely known to the public. We consider that the provision of treatment and counselling services for pathological gambling should be strengthened through collaboration among the Hospital Authority, SWD and NGOs. In developing such services, the Government will get in touch with overseas organizations providing such services (e.g. Gamblers' Anonymous in the US) and study their experience.

Further Researches and Studies

5.15 To monitor the impact of gambling on the society and to ensure that the services provided for pathological gamblers and the preventive and educational measures would meet the changing circumstances of the society, gambling-related researches should be undertaken on a regular basis. Areas for further research include topics such as gambling

behaviour, pathological gambling, socio-economic impact of gambling, its effects on family life and the youth, gambling regulation, cost-effectiveness of law enforcement, etc.

5.16 Through regular monitoring of the trend and detailed analysis of the relevant aspects of gambling, the Government and the community as a whole could attain a better understanding of the subject, which would in turn enable us to formulate more effective measures to tackle gambling-related problems. Such researches and studies will be particularly useful for the purpose of monitoring the impact of new forms of authorized gambling if such is to be introduced.

Conclusion

5.17 It is acknowledged that under certain circumstances gambling may give rise to social and behavioural problems. Assistance should be provided to people who are prone to or suffered from such problems through strengthening the treatment and services provided to pathological gamblers, launching public education and implementing preventive measures. Government should take the lead on this front, involving the non-Government sectors closely in the process.