



MDAS
MALLEE DISTRICT ABORIGINAL SERVICES

Gambling in the Sunraysia Aboriginal Community



AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Kathleen Maltzahn, Richard Vaughan, Tiffany Griffin, Darlene Thomas,
Raelene Stephens, Mary Whiteside and Sarah MacLean



LA TROBE
UNIVERSITY

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	2
Terminology	2
Report Summary and Recommendations	3
Why This Research?	6
This Research	6
Extent and Kinds of Gambling in the Sunraysia Aboriginal Community	6
Why Do People Gamble?	7
Is Gambling Causing Harm?	9
What Needs to be Done?	10
Personal Strategies	11
Barriers to Getting Help	12
Other Points	12
Conclusion	13
List of References	14

Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation. Thank you to the Foundation for their support.

This report was commissioned by the Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS), and we acknowledge the generous help of the MDAS Social & Emotional WellBeing Team, as well as staff and residents at the Wiimpatja Healing Centre and the Meminar Ngangg Gimba service. Many community members and professional staff have participated in interviews for the study. Thank you too to Oliver Wise for his powerful artwork, which illustrates this report. We are grateful to everyone involved for sharing their experiences.

Terminology

In this report we use the term 'Aboriginal' to refer to all Australian First Peoples, both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal.

Report Summary and Recommendations

While gambling is widespread in the Aboriginal community (as it is in the wider population) (Breen et al., 2013; Hare, 2015), there is little research about the Victorian Aboriginal community's experiences of gambling, or which interventions might strengthen positive impacts of gambling and reduce harms.

We report here on a collaborative qualitative research project designed to explore the Sunraysia Aboriginal community's experiences and understandings of gambling, both positive and negative. The study was carried out in partnership with Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS), through interviews with Sunraysia Aboriginal community members (n=26), including MDAS workers (n=11). The interviews were conducted by MDAS and La Trobe University staff in late 2016 and early 2017, and were analysed thematically.

In the interviews, gambling was identified as a popular and often pleasurable activity that provides the possibility of money and goods, which has become an important site of social life, and offers respite from depression, loneliness, stress and sadness. At the same time, participants identified gambling, particularly on poker machines, as a cause of significant harm. In contrast, participants' accounts suggested that bingo, when run by a community organisation rather than commercially, was associated with relatively few harms.

People told us that the popularity of gambling is due to people's desire to win money, including in the context of low incomes, the accessibility and social centrality of gambling venues, people's pressing need for respite from deep hardship, disinhibition caused by alcohol and drugs and, finally, the fun gambling offers. Importantly, people's accounts showed that gambling often provides a temporary respite from weighty problems that are beyond the power of individuals to fix alone.

There was strong agreement that gambling harms, while little discussed, were common, corrosive and costly. These harms may include: poverty and financial insecurity; conflict, family violence and relationship breakdown; neglect of children; greater drug and alcohol use; addiction and deteriorating health; crime; loss of community; and stereotyping of Aboriginal people.

To address the negative impacts of gambling, people wanted responses that are non-judgmental, and recognise problem gambling as a health problem or addiction. There was a strong sense that for interventions to work, more open discussion about gambling is needed, in part to address shame, one of the greatest barriers identified to addressing harm. People wanted greater regulation of gambling, culturally appropriate education, more support and therapeutic options, and options to replace gambling, including community gatherings. At the same time, many people deployed personal or family strategies to manage potential risks from gambling.

This report aims to provide MDAS, other parts of the Sunraysia Aboriginal community and other services and government agencies with evidence to better respond to gambling and address gambling harm in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community. While this study was conducted solely in Sunraysia, we believe it will be relevant to other communities in Victoria and Australia.

Recommendations

The following recommendations reflect the views of the research participants and have been written to inform MDAS' work on reducing harm from gambling.

1. Greater Regulation

Rationale: Community members interviewed for the study argued that many of the harms caused by gambling, particularly poker machines, are best addressed through regulation. They suggested that neither individuals nor their communities alone can make poker machines less harmful. The changes that they believed would most significantly minimise gambling harm include changing poker machines to discourage long sessions, limiting the availability of poker machines and other forms of gambling, and tightening regulations on advertising that encourages people to gamble. There is strong support in the Sunraysia Aboriginal Community for such changes. These would require government action.

Recommendation: Meet with the Mildura Rural City Council and state and federal members of parliament representing Sunraysia to advise them of these research findings, and ask them to advocate for stricter controls on poker machines and gambling venues, including shorter operating hours and fewer poker machines, and oppose any extension of gambling, whether through the introduction of a casino, longer operating hours or more poker machines.

2. Reorient Services

Rationale: At present, despite indications that many people in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community experience gambling harm, there is limited take up of gambling support services. Having a shared understanding of why people gamble, the impacts of gambling harm and strategies to avoid harm is an important pre-requisite to addressing the negative impacts of gambling in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community. Open discussion, both individual and group-based, helps to build shared understandings.

One important reason why people gamble is that it is often a respite from other problems, and is compelling in the context of grief and loss experienced disproportionately by Aboriginal people. It is important that service delivery recognises this role. For this reason, gambling workers and programs should link in closely with other workers, programs and services in other areas.

At present, it is difficult for gambling services to reach gamblers to discuss gambling harm. Community education, including community gatherings, are an important way to reach out to gamblers and other members of the community.

Self-evidently, gamblers are likely to come to gambling-like events. Bingo plays an important social role in people's lives, but is costly. A free bingo activity in a community setting, offered in partnership with MDAS and other organisations, with no entry costs and prizes, would give bingo players entertainment, a place to socialise with the Koori community and the wider community and allow community members to build rapport and discuss gambling and other issues.

Recommendation: Reorient gambling services to a holistic model of service delivery that integrates individual support into group-based activities which facilitate discussion, strengthen social connectedness and enable advocacy. Such a model should address the root causes of problems (such as loss and poverty) that people seek to alleviate by gambling, as well as the harm caused by gambling. Recognising community reluctance to seek help about gambling, consider not labelling such services gambling programs. While this requires significant planning, in the short term, concrete initiatives could include:

- exploring ways to encourage discussion about gambling, including through developing a physical space for a yarnning circle.
- involving gambling workers in non-gambling programs and services, so they can build relationships and rapport, prompt discussions about gambling and continue to build their understanding of people's lives.
- exploring the feasibility of running alternative bingo, to provide the positive aspects of bingo, ameliorate costs and facilitate discussions about gambling and other issues with gamblers. Explore partnerships with other community groups to deliver this.
- sharing the findings of this research with MDAS workers, so they can incorporate discussion about gambling into their work.
- conducting sensitive community education by developing visual material and running face-to-face events such as information sessions or community days, eg mini Family Days.

3. Research Organised Bingo

Rationale: While bingo provides entertainment and a social hub for many people, it is also costly, particularly for people on fixed incomes. Legally, bingo is supposed to be not-for-profit; bingo operators should not be charging excessive prices for bingo, including for bingo players who play more than once a week.

Recommendation: Call for investigation of bingo operators' profits in the context of costs to players and the legal requirement that bingo be not-for-profit, and work with community members to advocate for cheaper bingo.

4. Research New Interventions

Rationale: There is very limited research on effective ways of addressing gambling in Aboriginal communities, and as a consequence, there is limited information for services to draw on developing interventions.

Recommendation: Research new interventions, as ongoing research is important to determine what works.

Why This Research?

This research aims to explore something that was puzzling Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) workers. They were seeing two contradictory things. While people came to MDAS asking for financial help, and workers believed clients may have been short of money because they had lost on poker machines or spent more than they could afford at bingo, few people sought help about gambling itself.

The evidence suggested that gambling levels were high in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community. The many pubs and clubs in their region were full of people gambling, and official figures showed that people lost over \$25 million on poker machines alone last financial year in the Mildura City Rural Council area (Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation, 2017). It seemed unlikely that these losses were only coming from the non-Aboriginal community. Statewide figures show that Aboriginal people are more likely to gamble and around 10 times more likely to be problem gamblers than the rest of the community (Hare, 2015). However, very few people came to MDAS asking for help to deal with gambling problems.

Faced with this contradiction, MDAS asked La Trobe University to help find out more about how the Sunraysia Aboriginal community felt about gambling, both the positive and negative aspects.

This Research

We set out to find out five things: 1) people's understanding of the extent of gambling in the Sunraysia Aboriginal Community 2) what kinds of gambling are popular and why 3) whether there are any harms associated with gambling 4) if there were, to describe them and 5) what people believe needs to be done. La Trobe University and MDAS staff interviewed twenty-six Aboriginal people in Sunraysia, including 11 MDAS workers. All of the interviews were conducted in Sunraysia during late 2016 and early 2017, and were analysed thematically. The following report outlines key insights and findings from the interviews.

Extent and Kinds of Gambling in the Sunraysia Aboriginal Community

Almost everyone we interviewed gambled, many regularly: it appears that gambling in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community is extremely widespread. This parallels research findings for Victoria. While statistics are not available for Sunraysia, research indicates that Aboriginal people are more likely to gamble than non-Aboriginal people, gamble more and are up to ten per cent more likely to be 'problem gamblers' (around 8.7 per cent of Victorian Aboriginal people, compared to 0.81 per cent of the wider community) (Hare, 2015).

Our interviews suggested that playing the poker machines is most common, across a range of ages. Bingo is also widespread, but is more popular with older people and with women. While fewer people talked about their own experiences with online or phone gambling, this approach to gambling appeared to be becoming more common. Card gambling was prevalent in the past, but despite declining considerably still exists, sometimes in tandem with home bingo games. Fewer people appeared to bet regularly on horses or dogs, although a number placed a bet on big event days like the Melbourne Cup. Other forms of gambling such as Keno, Lotto and sports betting were mentioned, but not discussed as much.

Why Do People Gamble?

There are nine main reasons interviewees gave for why people gambled.

1. Winning: Across all forms of gambling, people play for the chance of winning, most often money, and ‘that bit of a thrill when you win’, as one person put it. For people on low incomes, this was one of the few ways they could make money, but it was an attraction for people on larger disposable incomes too. A win allowed people to treat their families and friends. In turn, the chance of winning kept people coming back, even when they kept losing. ‘Everyone knows that the machines do not work, but it’s hope, it’s hope that you’re going to make that quick amount of money’, one person said.

- Bingo: Most club-based bingo games are part of a state-wide network where jackpots can be over \$100,000, a sum of money that many people have no other means of accessing.

2. Venue Access and Treatment: Venues are easy to get to as they are near public transport and offer courtesy buses to transport people. They are open very long hours, some until 3 am. Venues are clean, and offer free drink and sometimes food. Importantly, staff members make people feel valued – they greet people by name and are welcoming and friendly. ‘They roll out the red carpet and treat you like one of the family’, one person said. Many venues offer a range of gambling, such as bingo, keno and poker machines (pokies), making it easy for people to move between different types of gambling.

- Poker machines: Venues encourage people to stay at poker machines for extended periods of time, for example, installing buzzers to call staff when people on machines want a drink. Clubs also offer free bingo, which draws people in. Two people argued that free bingo was a pathway to playing poker machines. One said: ‘That’s how my [relative] ended up playing the pokies from bingo. She was going to free bingo, and ended up playing the pokies, now she’s hooked’.

3. Nature of the Game: Different types of gambling had different inherent qualities that led to people gambling.

- Bingo: Bingo is regular and predictable, with set prices and a clear end; it allows a ‘controlled spend’. Some people described bingo as like paying for entertainment, similar to going to the movies; many people did not think of bingo as gambling at all.
- Cards: people’s descriptions suggested that cards are inherently social, bringing people together, usually in a domestic rather than commercial space. One person described poker as requiring skill, and so giving the gambler more control than poker machines or bingo.
- Horse betting: most people who described betting on the horses did so as part of a big event such as the Melbourne Cup, and enjoy the atmosphere and sense of occasion; the betting itself is not the main focus of the experience.
- Online and phone gambling: These ways to gamble are even easier to access than venues, as most people have a phone or computer. People said that money gambled this way does not feel like real money, and people often do not realise how much they have lost. Like the pokies, people said it was easy to lose a lot quickly.
- Poker machines: People said consistently that poker machines are designed both to make you lose a lot of money quickly and to get you hooked. There is no built-in end to a session at a poker machine, unlike bingo or a card game. Several people observed that poker machines had changed over time, and that it is now harder to win.

4. Socialising: People meet up in venues, often with their families; they are places to dress up and have an outing.

- Bingo in particular is a social hub, particularly for women. Often several generations of women (and sometimes men) attend. One person said, ‘For me, apart from funerals, that’s pretty much where you get the

most amount of Koori people together, socializing, having a laugh, at bingo.’ People described bingo as ‘a gathering place’, ‘a place to yarn’, and as providing ‘a sense of belonging’. One person described bingo as where stories started:

‘You gather with all your friends and family and your community... and all yarn about this and that... You catch up with people you haven’t seen for ages and then you go home to your family and then the story goes from there: “I spoke to ra, ra, they said to say hi”, and then I’ll catch up with them in the next couple of days, that sort of thing. Pokie machines and other sorts of gambling, lot different because it is not about what’s happening, it’s about you and what’s right in front of you.’

Bingo also allows people to socialise beyond the Koori community, including with people with less hardship in their life, which provided respite. Several people contrasted bingo with the pokies, which they saw as isolating.

5. Normalisation: Gambling is considered a normal thing to do. Flowing from this, children grow up seeing gambling as normal, something now reinforced by online games which incorporate gambling. One participant said, ‘You grow up with it and it sort of becomes like a normal thing that the next generation does.’

6. Illegal Drugs and Alcohol: One consistent theme was that illicit drugs and alcohol lead to gambling losses, particularly on poker machines, because their use disinhibits behaviours. Also, if people are awake late at night because of drug use, venues are one of the only places open. Ice was particularly emphasised. As one person explained: ‘Everyone I’ve known that touches drugs or alcohol always ends up gambling’. In contrast, for some people, gambling is an alternative to drinking or drugs.

- Bingo: Bingo, particularly when played at church venues that did not serve alcohol, gives people time away from alcohol and drugs. For some people, bingo replaces addictions, giving them something regular and predictable to do. One woman who had given up drinking described bingo as ‘my therapy’.
- Poker machines: Some people thought drug sellers used poker machines to launder money.

7. Time Out and Stress Release: People explained that depression, loneliness, stress and sadness lead to gambling. This is important in the context of significant grief and loss, and where people’s lives are stressful – many people described gamblers who had lost a great deal in life, or who are caring for people with substance abuse problems or mental illnesses. One person told us: ‘A lot of people do it when they’re depressed. They need an escape, and they feel like the pokies just zones them out...I can just pick up on the body language when someone is just sitting there like this, like a zombie, and you’re just like, yeah, they’re trying not to think about things.’

One worker talked about the ‘cultural load’ in the Aboriginal community, where people faced higher levels of loss, including death, are often caring for people in complex situations, and have little respite. She explained that gambling was:

‘a temporary solution to a lifetime of heartache, so it is a space and place where someone is happy, they can be happy without feeling guilty, they can socialize with people they would not normally socialize with, they can listen to other people’s gossip and laugh at that rather than listening to problems and thinking, “what the fuck am I going to do now”’.

One person told us his older relative would tell him that gambling was her ‘only comfort’.

- Bingo: Playing bingo provides time when older people in particular can take a break, in a context where many people are caring full-time for grandchildren or adult children. Bingo gives older people a chance to get together and talk about their problems. As an added bonus, phones are banned in bingo, so players cannot be contacted. For many older people, bingo is the only time they get out of the house for recreation.
- Poker machines: People described playing the pokies as ‘time out’, ‘time alone’, ‘me time’, somewhere to ‘zone out’ or ‘ease the mind’, and relaxation away from stress, as well as a place where people left you alone.

As one person said,

‘some people go down there... to get away from... stress and stuff in the community or in their family... just to ease their mind a bit’.

8. Safety: One person told us that the clubs are a respite for women experiencing family violence; another person suggested that women might gamble to try to make money to pacify a violent partner.

9. Enjoyment: Finally, for many of the reasons above, people found gambling fun, and it is the main way many people experience pleasure. People said, ‘it’s my joy’, ‘that’s the only bit of enjoyment that I get’, ‘I love it’.

Is Gambling Causing Harm?

While people were very clear about the positive side of gambling, they told us again and again that gambling is causing significant harm. Almost everyone we interviewed described at least one person, often a family member, who had been seriously harmed by gambling, most often through using poker machines. People had many negative descriptions of gambling, particularly poker machines, including ‘grief’, ‘drama and trouble’, ‘heart ache’ and ‘poison to the community, poison to the world’. Overwhelmingly, people saw the pokies as the biggest problem, although some people also saw bingo and online and phone gambling as problems. The harm inflicted by gambling is widely experienced and recognised.

Not everyone experiences harm from gambling, and people who are harmed are not harmed every time or from every sort of gambling. Where people are harmed, interviewees identified ten main types of harm. People said that:

1. Gambling often leads to addiction, with many harmful physical and health impacts. One person told us, ‘You feel like you cannot wait till payday... It will make you physically sick after a while’. People described many negative mental health impacts, including feeling ‘depressed’, ‘stressed’ and ‘lousy’, mostly after losing. This in turn led some people to use drugs and alcohol in ways that they saw as damaging (see below).
2. Gambling leads to lost time and money. People saw gambling, particularly poker machines, as a waste of time and money. They described people ‘chasing losses’, and it was clear some people were losing significantly more than they could afford. As a result, people described having to borrow money and other people talked about being harassed by friends and family to lend them money or cigarettes. The loss of time and money in turn leads to other harms.
3. Loss of money means people are living in poverty or are financially precarious, even when they are employed. People are unable to buy food and other essentials, pay bills and rent, or save. One person described his experience as a child:

‘There were times like with my mum, my sister would give her \$50. Sometimes she would come back with nothing. She was supposed to be going to the supermarket, not anywhere else. And then there was another time she gave her money and my mum pulled into the pokies on the way home and then came home with about \$300 worth of food. “How did you do that?” “Oh, I won up at the pokies.” “But you had no money before you left.” So she risked what we had... So you know, it was lucky, but there were more times it was unlucky than lucky.’
4. Arguments over losses sometimes lead to family violence and relationship breakdown, particularly when the gambler has lost food or rent money. People described family violence, where men with gambling losses are physically, financially and psychologically violent to their partners. One person talked about a long-standing relationship that broke up because the woman was addicted to poker machines.
5. Children sometimes go without food and other necessities, miss meals and family time because their parents or grandparents are out gambling, and are exposed to family violence triggered by conflict over gambling losses.

6. Gambling can lead to increased drug and alcohol use. As well as leading to gambling, people reported that use of drugs and alcohol flowed from gambling, both when people won and when they lost. Some people use illegal drugs or get drunk when they win, often in a group, and some drink or use illegal drugs in a way seen as harmful when they are depressed or stressed after losing.
7. Some people steal to finance gambling. People described theft at venues and theft in the community, as people tried to get money to gamble or to make up for gambling losses.
8. Community organisations are under strain as gamblers need financial help and material aid to cover food, rent or other expenses.
9. Community is undermined, as people do not want to go to gatherings without gambling, or cannot afford to go out because they have lost money. This in turn leads to a perceived loss of culture. One person said, 'You know, we are having a battle with culture stuff getting lost, we're not practicing our cultural things as much as what we used to...and that's dying, whereas that's where we used to get our enjoyment out of life...I think that's one of the impacts [of gambling], loss of culture.'
10. Non-Aboriginal people might stereotype Aboriginal people as gambling addicts. While most people thought the impact of gambling was the same on the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, one person thought gambling leads to stereotyping of Aboriginal people as gambling addicts. Linking back to loss of culture, another person said: 'it is sad to watch our culture sort of spiral down due to gambling, and to me, that's what starts the stereotyping crap about...“that's all black fellas do is gamble”.'

What Needs to be Done?

Suggestions about what should be done to reduce harm were remarkably consistent across interviewees. People want responses that reduce harm, are non-judgmental and recognise problem gambling as a health problem or an addiction.

There were five common sets of suggestions, most addressing poker machine harm.

1. Better Regulation by Government: There is extremely strong support for more effective regulation of gambling. Again and again, people said there needed to be greater limits on poker machines and more broadly on clubs. Several people wanted to close down pokies (and some people bingo). In one person's words: 'I reckon they should get rid of them to be honest... Poison to the community, poison to the world.' Other people advocated shorter opening hours for gambling venues and time limits for individual players for the pokies, fewer machines, making it harder to get in to venues (e.g. through membership or age requirements), and face recognition technology and pre-commitment cards for poker machines. Several people identified television advertisements as triggers that made them want to gamble, and implied that ads should be limited. People recognised that politicians and gambling corporations would resist these changes.

2. More Open Conversations: There was a strong sense that for any intervention to work well, there needed to be what one person described as 'more open and free discussion'. Many people acknowledged that the negative impacts of gambling are not easily discussed in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community, because people feel shame or do not recognise the harm. People wanted both one-on-one and group discussions, and many people recommended yarning circles as a powerful way to open up discussions. They said that more discussion could do three things. First, it would help people better understand their situation, for example, by working out how much they are losing and/or identifying the harms they are experiencing. Second, non-judgmental discussions about gambling would help address the shame people feel, and make it easier for them to share their concerns about gambling without fearing they would be met with blame and disapproval. Finally, discussions would allow people to talk about strategies to address gambling harm. As one person said, 'Gambling itself has become so normalised, so let's make it normalised [to talk] about strategies to combat it.'

3. More Community Education: Many people called for more community education, although there was some divergence. A notable minority thought there is adequate information available, but that people are resistant to changing their behaviour. A greater number, however, felt more and better education is needed. They suggested education on three topics: a) the negative consequences of gambling, and in particular the harms of poker machines; b) where to get help and what help is available, including showing local people who had successfully sought help; and c) the importance of not feeling shame. To spread these messages, they emphasised culturally appropriate education with strong visual elements (such as posters, t-shirts, signage and videos) and face-to-face interaction such as information sessions or community days. Several people suggested short self-identification surveys to help people assess if they had a gambling problem.

4. Better Support and More Therapy: Many people asked for more support and therapeutic options, including both individual counselling and groups such as Gamblers Anonymous. At the same time, they recognised the barriers to seeking help, and said that it may continue to be difficult for people to access services. They said it is essential to build rapport with people first; some people suggested home-based outreach could help break down barriers.

5. Replacement Activities and 'Feel Goods': Crucially, people explained how difficult it is to give up gambling without a replacement, as they understood it to be a way to cope with the heavy weight of grief, loss, stress and hardship. In one person's words about an older relative: 'She's lost so much, and then she even says to us all, "that's my only happiness, [my only] feel good in life, I need it."' Recognising this, people suggested providing community get-togethers, particularly to offer older people a social activity. One person advocated for more jobs for young people, to take their minds of gambling.

Personal Strategies

Many people also described personal strategies they and other people use to avoid or manage gambling harm, including self-exclusion (that is, formally requested to be banned from using poker machines). It is common for people to successfully set limits for themselves, including through family support. This includes paying for essentials first (such as buying groceries and paying bills), and only gambling with what is left over; taking a set amount of cash to the venue, and leaving other money or bank cards at home; and ringing a family member to come and take any winnings, so they are not gambled and lost. One person sat down with her mother and worked out with her how much she was losing, and suggested instead that her mother save the money to go on holiday, which she successfully did.

Barriers to Getting Help

In addition to stating that there is not enough support options available, people recognised that there are four main barriers for Aboriginal people in Sunraysia accessing the help that is available.

First, many people do not think gambling is leading to harm. For some, this is because gambling is normal and seems different from substance abuse harms. As two people said:

‘It’s normal, and because you’re not walking around scattered, it’s not an issue – forget the fact that your bank is empty or you have no money to buy this or that. Somehow they just adapt.’

‘It is because it is so addictive, so addictive...you’re physically not doing anything wrong and you’re not harming anyone and all you’re doing is spending money. Until you start harming, hurting someone, I think that’s when...you just need to know where to draw the line...’

Other people simply do not realise how much money they have lost, noticing the wins but not how much money they spend to get that ‘win’. This individual mindset is reinforced by peer pressure, where some people are encouraged not to question the impact of gambling.

Second, even when people do believe they are being harmed, shame is an overwhelming barrier, and something mentioned by many people. People cited shame, embarrassment, and people feeling bad about themselves and fearing they will be judged. This in turn meant they do not like talking about gambling problems and do not want people to find out they are having problems. One person said this is particularly so for Aboriginal men, who do not want people to know they have a problem.

Third, some people felt that there is a lack of rapport with service providers, and this discourages people from seeking help.

Finally, and simply, people do not seek help because gambling, particularly on poker machines, is so addictive, and the overpowering need to play is difficult to combat.

Importantly, as outlined above, for many people, gambling is a way of coping with the heavy weight of grief, loss, stress and hardship. Giving up gambling without having something as effective to replace it is difficult. One non-gambler described the power of needing some form of relief and happiness in life: ‘You’ve got to have that enjoyment, “feel-good” in life, and if that makes you feel good, do it, at all cost.’

Other Points

Three other pertinent points were made. Two people mentioned the likely negative impacts if a casino were approved in Mildura. A number of people described experiences of racial discrimination in venues. Almost everyone felt that gambling is the same whether people were Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, saying things such as: ‘not just Kooris have problems’, ‘all in it to win it’.

Conclusion

As in the broader population, gambling is common in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community. Reflecting this, gambling is considered normal by many people, and gambling venues are a central site of social connectedness. In this context, there are barriers to people talking openly about both the negative and positive aspects of gambling, and participants in this research told us there was limited discussion, particularly about gambling harms, in the community. Despite this, participants in this research articulated clear views about gambling, and, taken together, their perspectives showed a nuanced understanding of the often compelling nature of gambling, the reasons why gambling can provide so much pleasure and release, and a deep appreciation of and concern about harm.

This report shows that gambling, particularly on poker machines and bingo, promises solace, entertainment and hope of financial reward in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community, in a context where many people have less access to wealth than the broader community, carry heavy responsibilities, live with deep pain, and do not have access to the resources they need to easily address the problems they and their family members face. Whether fleetingly or in an enduring way, gambling promises something people are looking for. It is doubly unjust, then, when the gambling products through which people seek pleasure, release and solace in fact make their situation worse. Through this research, people eloquently described the high price many people in the Sunraysia Aboriginal community pay through gambling, and it is clear that gambling imposes real harm on the community.

Action is needed across a number of levels. Participants in this research articulated convincingly the need to open up community discussion about gambling, intentionally address people's shame and isolation, conduct accessible and culturally-appropriate community education, provide integrated services that can reach gamblers where they are, address the factors that push people towards gambling and place greater limits on gambling products and venues. This necessitates a reorientation of community services, ensuring that gambling is not addressed in isolation from other issues and opening the way for services to experiment with non-traditional interventions, such as running non-commercial bingo as a way to reach gamblers, provide alternatives to gambling and replicate the positives gambling provides in a safer way.

Two further pieces of research would build usefully on this report: investigating the regulatory framework for bingo and mechanisms for limiting the costs of bingo for players; and evaluating the impact of interventions aimed to address gambling harm in the Aboriginal community, including interventions such as those identified in the paragraph above.

This research is an important early step in better learning from and with the Sunraysia Aboriginal community about their experiences and understandings of gambling, and provides evidence for redeploying resources and reorienting services to better meet the needs of Aboriginal people experiencing gambling harm.

List of References

- Breen H, Hing N, Gordon A, et al. (2013) Indigenous Australian gamblers and their help-seeking behavior. *Psychology of gaming*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers; US, 93-120.
- Hare S. (2015) *Study of Gambling and Health in Victoria*. Victoria, Australia: Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation and Victorian Department of Justice and Regulation.
- Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation. (2017) *Monthly LGA EGM Statistics*.



Cover Artwork by Oliver Wise



LA TROBE

UNIVERSITY



MDAS

MALLEE DISTRICT ABORIGINAL SERVICES