

Potential Impact of Coronavirus on People with Gambling Problems

Revised Wednesday, April 1, 2020

Individuals with gambling problems may be impacted more severely by the coronavirus pandemic due to increased individual health risks, shifting gambling preferences and cuts in funding for services.

Individual health risks for people associated with higher rates of gambling problems include depression, loneliness/social isolation, anxiety, all of which may be exacerbated the current coronavirus pandemic. Job loss and economic pressures may lead some gamblers to play more in an effort to make money. These factors may also trigger relapse among gamblers in recovery. In addition, limited access to health care places people with addiction at greater risk for many illnesses, and people with gambling problems have higher levels of physical illness. If clinics and counselors are pushed to their capacity, it could be that people with addiction—who are already stigmatized and underserved by the healthcare system—will experience even greater barriers to treatment. People with gambling problems are much more likely than the public to be homeless or incarcerated, which can expose people to environments where they are in close contact with others who might also be at higher risk for infections. Self-quarantine and other vital public health measures also disrupt access to counseling, self-help group meetings and other support needed by people with gambling addiction.

While overall gambling participation has likely significantly decreased, spikes have been seen in online gambling as some gamblers shift their preferences. In general, online gambling is associated with higher risk for problems, particularly among young, males with high rates of gambling involvement but low responsible gambling literacy. While some sites have adopted NCPG's best practice Internet Responsible Gambling Standards and have even passed our Internet Compliance Assessment Program (iCAP), most online gambling operators in the US have not. It is important to note that when individual health risks are higher due to the pandemic, some of the new and existing online gambling customers are more likely to have problems. The gambling industry is urged to increase responsible gambling programs and advertising during the pandemic.

Problem gambling services are likely to face cuts since many states allocate funding based on a percentage of gambling revenue. Economic downturns lead to drops in individual and corporate charitable giving, another major source of support for problem gambling services. As overall state tax revenues decline yet COVID 19-related

healthcare costs skyrocket, health budgets will be under considerable pressure. Behavioral health services are often the last funded and first cut, and problem gambling is usually the least funded behavioral health program. In 2016 only \$72 million in public funds was allocated for all problem gambling programs, 230 times less per capita than public funding for substance abuse treatment alone. Nine states still do not provide any public funding for prevention, treatment or research of problem gambling.

Closures & quarantines may exacerbate existing gambling problems, shift gambling to higher risk forms and devastate budgets for problem gambling services—which are already severely strained—just when they are needed the most. Therefore NCPG urges the public to recognize the disproportionate impact on people with gambling problems, the gambling industry to increase responsible gambling protections, and that services for people with gambling problems must be adequately funded.