

Problem gambling worse than thought

The National Council on Problem Gambling kicked off an education campaign this week by noting that 2 percent to 3 percent of Americans – or about 6 to 9 million adults – have gambling problems.

Numbers can be worth a thousand words. They also can have political and social implications. That's why the National Council's estimate is bad news for the casino industry – it's two or three times as high as the 1 percent rate often cited by the industry.

The greater the percentage of problem gamblers, the tougher it is for the gaming industry to persuade states without casinos that the economic effect of gambling – jobs, tourism, and especially taxes – more than offsets the social cost of increased exposure to casino gambling.

And in states that already allow casino gambling, such as Nevada, bigger numbers make the industry seem less like a good corporate citizen, one that pays taxes, employs folks and promotes good, clean fun, and more like the tobacco and distilling industries, which sells cigarettes and liquor that can lead to cancer, alcoholism and other social ills.

The National Council's estimate is based on the most recent original research available on gambling problems nationwide, Executive Director Keith Whyte said.

The 1 percent rate often cited by the casino industry represents only a narrow category of people defined by treatment experts as „pathological gamblers,“ he said. „It's a fairly limited number that doesn't represent the full scope of people with gambling problems.“

The industry-cited number is taken from a 1997 study that collected and extrapolated from much of the previous available research on the subject. The study was co-authored by Howard Shaffer, director of the Division on Addictions at Harvard Medical School.

The Harvard division received a \$ 2.4 million grant from the casino industry in 2000 to establish the Institute for Research on Pathological Gambling and Related Disorders, which has distributed grant money to research institutes worldwide and has funded a large chunk of the available research on problem gambling.

The 2 percent to 3 percent estimate cited by the National Council is based on a more representative group of people who showed signs of problem gambling behavior in the past year, not just „pathological gamblers“ who exhibited the most severe problems, Whyte said.

In Nevada, the prevalence of problem gamblers is believed to be at least twice as high as the national rate. But the state's data is widely regarded as outdated.

The most thorough study on problem gambling rates in Nevada was conducted in 2000 and published in 2002. The state-funded study found that 5 percent to 8 percent of the state's population were problem or pathological gamblers.

Those figures came from adding up two groups: pathological gamblers, who made up 2.7 percent to 4.3 percent of Nevada's population, and problem gamblers, who accounted for 2.2 percent to 3.6 percent.

Carol O'Hare, executive director of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling, said it's time to update the research.

„Doing one research study just gives you a snapshot,“ O'Hare said. „If we don't start taking a more longitudinal approach to this we miss an opportunity to study the real long-term

impact of this disorder.”

The 2002 study helped kick-start attempts to pass legislation to fund problem gambling treatment and education. After several failed attempts, such legislation passed in 2005 – earmarking grant money from slot machine taxes.

„If we didn’t have that first study I don’t think we’d be where we are now,” O’Hare said. „But research is not concrete and it’s not stagnant. Prevalence studies are based on people – and the population changes.”

About half a dozen treatment centers across the state recently received portions of an estimated \$ 2.5 million in grant money from the state Advisory Committee on Problem Gambling. The committee is expected to distribute some of that money to education and research groups before the end of March.

Problem gambling expert Rachel Volberg, president of Massachusetts-based Gemini Research and the author of the Nevada prevalence study, also says the state’s research is due for an update.

„The issue is whether there are questions that are raised that can’t be answered using data that’s five years old,” Volberg said. „Presumably it’s time.

„You didn’t have Internet gambling available to the extent you have now,” she said. „You didn’t have the poker phenomenon you have now. Nevada has the highest immigration rate in the United States, so the population may be changing demographically in a way that can affect the numbers.”

One gaming executive says such research – which is often used for political ends – should be secondary to treating people who most need help.

„These studies end up becoming too divisive and inevitably they’re not as complete as they should be,” said Glenn

Christenson, chief financial officer of Station Casinos and chairman of the Advisory Committee on Problem Gaming. „In my own opinion we should be focusing on treatment and education.“

But Volberg said the studies are „a vital tool for designing programs“ to help problem gamblers. „It’s a way to figure out how to divvy up the dollars that are available in ways that will be most effective.“

For example, the Nevada study showed that older Hispanic men showed significantly more signs of gambling problems than young Hispanic women.

„If you want to prevent younger Hispanic women from developing gambling problems, you might have certain messages in the community that are different from (those directed at) older Hispanic men, where a significant proportion already have gambling problems,“ she said.

Bo Bernhard, director of gambling research at UNLV’s International Gaming Institute, said outdated research does a disservice to the state.

„In an area as dynamic and as rapidly evolving as Las Vegas is, you need to keep your finger on the pulse of what’s going on,“ said Bernhard, a sociology professor at UNLV. „The gambling landscape has changed dramatically since that study was done.“