

A HIGH STAKES GAME: THE REAL COST OF GAMBLING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

THE NEED

By any measure, Australia's remote communities are a very long way from the bright lights and buzz of our big cities. There's not a lot in the way of entertainment options, or employment for that matter. People haven't got enough to do. So they play a lot of cards, and have done, for decades. Card games have been a ubiquitous activity in Aboriginal communities for over 60 years.

But now, the stakes have changed. There's growing anecdotal evidence that the incidence of problem gambling is escalating out of control in remote communities. Large pots of money, delivered via mining royalties, are won and lost, and precious little of it stays in communities for any positive social end. It's the opposite in fact. In houses where gambling is an issue, it's correlated with poor child health, including higher rates of skin infections and ear disease. It co-occurs with compounding stressors such as alcohol and drug misuse, trouble with the police, witnessing violence, and being the victim of physical and verbal abuse. Like everywhere, when gamblers lose, it's their families that pay the price.

Problem gambling is adding a layer of disadvantage and dysfunction to communities already characterised by poor health, poverty and low educational attainment. The problem for policy makers however, and agencies like Menzies attempting to understand the social determinants of Aboriginal health, is that we really have very little knowledge about what exactly is going on.

THE PARTNERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

This project is a three-year study that will elucidate gambling issues in remote Aboriginal communities. It seeks to answer key questions such as:

What types of games are being played and for what amounts of money?

Chance makes for a spread of winners, whereas skill creates big winners. Are these games luck or skill?

Are some players more vulnerable than others? Are the elderly, mentally impaired and young players at particular risk? What are the different types of players – including skilled, committed, exploited, or social?

Where is the money ending up? What are the cash flows in and out of communities as a result of gambling, and what are the repercussions?

Are there any benefits associated with card games?

THE IMPACT

Problem gambling is a serious issue across Australia. In recent years, we have seen a raft of strategies and community education campaigns designed to ameliorate its incidence. This is based on an understanding of its harmful impact on individuals, families and communities. That we extend this work to remote communities, inhabited by some of our most severely disadvantaged citizens, is simply a matter of equity. That we do so in culturally appropriate ways, informed by an accurate understanding of its prevalence and characteristics is common sense.

The opportunity cost of monies squandered and time spent gambling is massive. This project is the starting point from which we can begin to address a problem that is crippling remote communities. It is a vital salve in efforts to address the problems of our remote Aboriginal communities, holistically and sustainably.

PARTNERSHIP SOUGHT: \$150,000

Because gambling is a sensitive topic in remote communities, Menzies requires support over three years, to enable a PhD candidate to invest the time required to build relationships in communities, to ensure that accurate information is being collected. Funds are also required for travel and accommodation costs, supervision and project administration.



FACTS AND STATS

- In a study of ten remote communities, between 10-74% of households experienced gambling problems
- It is well established that household gambling in Indigenous communities co-occurs with violence, alcohol and drug use and verbal and/or physical abuse
- It is suspected that card games and gambling are creating higher levels of movement into and out of communities, which may be creating changes in community cash flow and impacting the community as a whole
- Anecdotally, it's understood that gambling differs along gender lines – women are the more avid gamblers, and men play for higher stakes. In both cases, however, children are neglected.
- Evidence suggests that if children are exposed to gambling before 10 years of age, they're more likely to take up gambling
- If children gamble themselves at a young age, they're up to four times more likely to become a problem gambler in later life

Contact

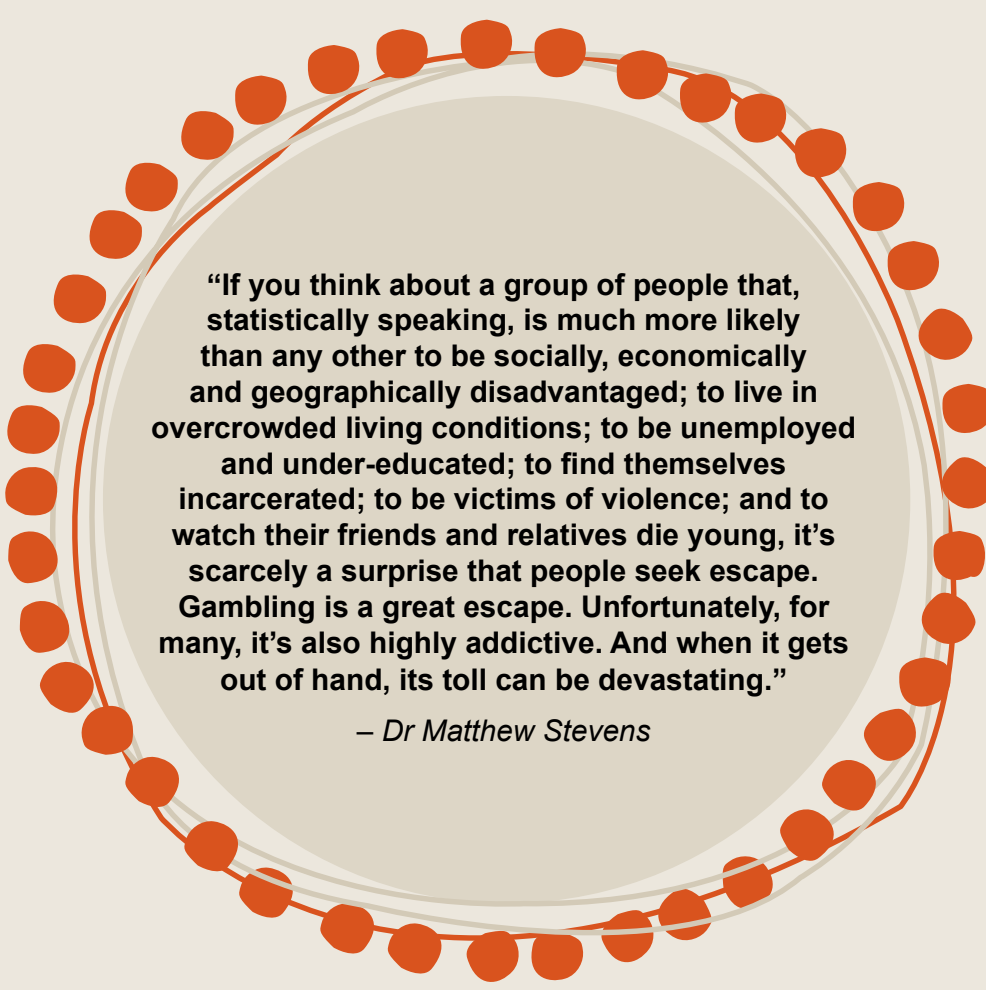
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“If you think about a group of people that, statistically speaking, is much more likely than any other to be socially, economically and geographically disadvantaged; to live in overcrowded living conditions; to be unemployed and under-educated; to find themselves incarcerated; to be victims of violence; and to watch their friends and relatives die young, it’s scarcely a surprise that people seek escape. Gambling is a great escape. Unfortunately, for many, it’s also highly addictive. And when it gets out of hand, its toll can be devastating.”

– Dr Matthew Stevens