

## Underage Gambling Associated with At Risk Behaviour in Youth

A new study completed in April 2001 by the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba (AFM) revealed that half of high school students engage in some form of gambling. Even more significantly, 7% of all high school students under the age of 17 are playing either VLTs or slot machines. "When we talk about underage gambling, we are referring to kids who play VLTs and slots," says AFM researcher David Patton, who conducted the study with colleague David Brown. "These are not the same as the kids who buy the occasional lottery ticket or play bingo at the community club."

Brown and Patton surveyed 4,680 randomly-selected students (2,354 males and 2,311 females) from 32 schools across the province. The researchers measured attitudes and behaviours using a survey developed by the AFM and Proactive Information Services Inc. Students were asked whether they had gambled or bet on something in the last twelve months. Responses ranged from informal betting on sports games to organized gaming, such as lotteries, bingos and VLTs.

Data gathered by the researchers indicated that young males are more likely to gamble than young females. An

increase in gambling occurs in the last year of high school; otherwise, the rates of gambling are comparable from Senior 1 to Senior 4. About 3% of students reported that their gambling has been a moderate or serious problem for them, a similar rate to problems identified by the adult population.



### AT RISK

In analyzing the data, the researchers compared "real" gamblers – VLT and slot machine users – with other students. They concluded that underage gamblers are "at risk" for a variety of problems, including difficulties at school. Those students missed more school and attained lower marks. The study found

that, of the male students surveyed, 40% of those with an F grade are underage gamblers.

There was also a correlation between underage gambling and drinking, smoking and drug use. While 10% of female non-smokers and 20% of male non-smokers said they gambled, the numbers rose to 15% and 25% respectively among the smoking high school students. The discrepancy was even greater between those who smoked more than 60 cigarettes a week, with 20% engaging in gambling as compared to 5% for the lighter smokers.

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Underage gamblers were more than three times as likely as those who did not gamble at VLTs or slots to drink alcohol more than once a week. And while 36% of non-VLT or slot-users reported smoking cannabis more than monthly, the number rose to 52% for gamblers.

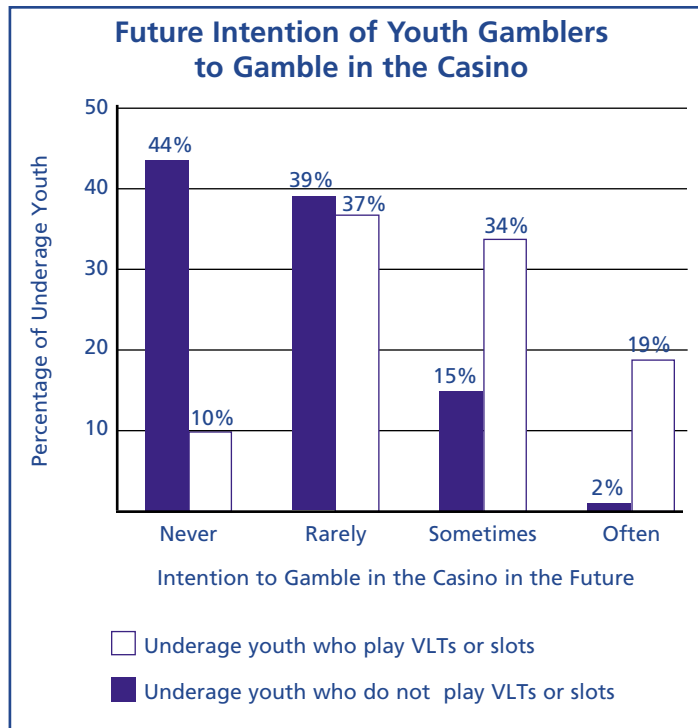
"Gambling is just one of the number of choices kids now face along with cigarettes, alcohol and other drugs," says Patton. "It puts them at risk for getting into trouble as adults, especially when their intentions are to continue gambling in the future."

### FUTURE INTENTIONS

Approximately 20% of underage gamblers stated that, in the future, they intended to gamble often in a casino and continue to frequently play VLTs, as compared to 2% for the group of high school students who do not presently engage in playing VLTs or slots. The numbers were 23% and 7% respectively in relation to future intentions to use drugs other than cannabis.

"The earlier you begin to become involved with that type of behaviour, the more likely you may be to develop a problem with it," says Laura Goossen of AFM's Youth Community-Based Prevention Education Services. "This has certainly been demonstrated with regards to alcohol and other drugs, and it holds true for gambling." She notes that a fourteen-year-old adolescent who has learned to make friends by participating in gambling may have fewer opportunities to learn how to make friends in other ways.

Despite widespread social acceptance, gambling carries the risk of unintended consequences. Some people are unable to control their gambling and eventually place themselves and their families under great financial strain. With the increased availability of gambling and possible gaps in enforcing a minimum age of 18 for participation, teenagers are one of the groups at risk. As well, the study found that most underage gamblers did not see their behaviour as a problem.



### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AFM

"The results of the study have implications for topics and age levels that should be addressed with our prevention efforts," says Goossen. Since problem gambling behaviour is already apparent among high school students, education efforts need to target middle year schools. Goossen points out that one of the roles of the AFM is also to share information with the larger community, including schools and parents.

The study is also an important tool for intervention and treatment. By being able to predict who is in a higher risk category, the AFM not only can target those most at risk, but can also offer early intervention to youth already experiencing problems with gambling who may not have the ability to reach out and ask for assistance.