

# Dares to Addiction

## Youth Definitions and Perspectives on Gambling

Harvey Skinner, PhD

Sherry Biscope, MHSc

Martha Murray, MA

David Korn, MD, CAS

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Over the past decade, there has been a rapid growth of gambling in Canada and internationally. Although youth are a potentially vulnerable group, little is known about what they understand and if they are being affected by the recent increase in gambling.

**Methods:** This study examined how youth view gambling using an inductive qualitative research design and analysis based on grounded theory principles. Twelve focus groups were conducted comprising 103 participants (median age = 15 years) with diverse representation of Ontario youth. Focus-group questions were designed to capture youth's experiences and opinions about gambling.

**Results:** Youth participants defined a spectrum of gambling from a dare and friendly betting to legalized forms of gambling (lotteries, casinos) and addiction. Their opinions varied according to age and gambling type. For example, daring and friendly betting were identified as positive activities used by younger adolescents to relieve boredom and establish social relationships. Gambling was separate from daring because of its association with money. Many participants had minimal awareness of the potential negative impact of gambling. Information technology (Internet) was seen as an attractive medium for playing games and gambling where no money was involved.

**Conclusion:** Lack of awareness of gambling among youth and its consequences underscores the need for public education. The diverse range of gambling behaviour and age-dependent access to money need careful consideration in defining youth gambling "problems" and in designing public health interventions.

*La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.*

Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

**Correspondence:** Dr. Harvey Skinner, Professor and Chair, Department of Public Health Sciences, McMurrich Building, Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON M5S 1A8, E-mail: harvey.skinner@utoronto.ca

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Legalized gambling in Canada has experienced rapid growth over the past 10 years.<sup>1</sup> During this time, youth have been exposed to high levels of gambling-positive advertising.<sup>2</sup> Society's representation of gambling can have a profound impact on youth, affecting their personal characteristics, social relationships and early gambling experiences. These elements can be predictive of youth developing gambling problems later in their lives.<sup>3-5</sup> Although youth gambling is common,<sup>6</sup> of particular concern is the estimate of "problem gambling" being 2-4 times higher among youth than among the adult population.<sup>7</sup> Since gambling affects not only individuals but also society as a whole, a public health approach is called for that balances gambling's positive and negative aspects.<sup>8,9</sup>

This article explored youth perspectives and experiences with gambling. The aim was to provide a better understanding about how gambling is viewed by youth, their personal and social concerns about gambling, and the role of information technology, especially the Internet. Study findings can help inform a more comprehensive definition of the spectrum of gambling behaviour and appropriate public health responses.

### METHOD

Qualitative research methods were used to explore youth's experiences and opinions of gambling.<sup>10</sup> Focus groups are an effective way to engage youth from diverse cultural, geographic and socio-economic backgrounds, and allow them to talk about the role of gambling in their lives.

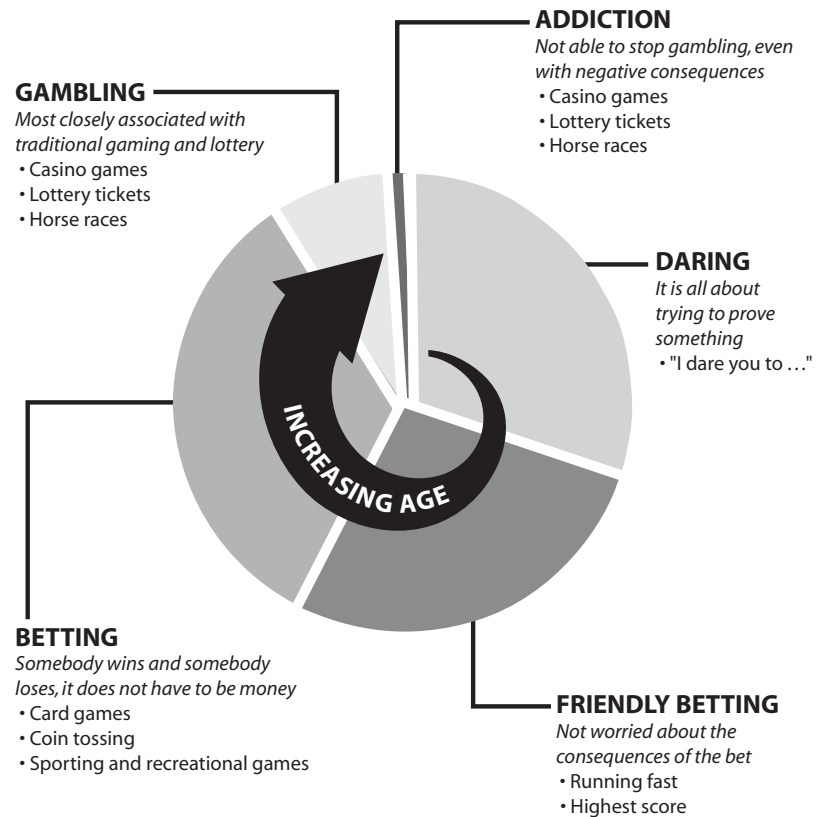
Twelve focus groups were conducted with 103 youth from across Ontario during the year 2001. Consistent with maximum variation sampling, a framework was developed to ensure diversity in terms of age, sex, geographic location, socio-economic status and ethno-racial identity.<sup>11</sup> Stratified sampling allowed for the inclusion of traditionally under-represented youth, specifically street-involved youth, Aboriginal youth, first generation and newly arrived Canadians. The convenience sampling based on interest enabled the participation by both young and older youth. Fifty-seven percent of participants were female, 43% were male. Youth ranged in age from 10-20 years old with a median age of 15.

The focus groups were, on average, 60 minutes in duration. A warm-up exercise and four discussion topics were used. Pilot work indicated that most youth did not initially identify with the word “gambling”. The goal of the brainstorming exercise was to bring gambling into the forefront of youth’s minds. The warm-up exercise had three parts: 1) youth listed gambling activities, 2) they identified common elements in the activities, and 3) they reflected if there were other unlisted activities that also contained the common elements. Once youth were centred on gambling, the discussions followed these topic areas: a) perceptions of gambling, b) gambling in youth’s lives, c) gambling access and availability, and d) gambling resource development. To provide consistency, one researcher (not known by the participants (SB)) facilitated all groups. Also, each site provided a known co-facilitator to enhance participants’ comfort, and translate the study into terms uniquely understandable to each group.

All focus-group discussions were audio tape-recorded and transcribed. To ensure quality transcriptions, the same transcriber was used throughout. Verification of the accuracy of the transcriptions was achieved by randomly cross checking the transcripts against the tapes.<sup>12</sup> Analysis followed a modified grounded theory approach.<sup>13</sup> A selective coding template was developed based on major data themes.<sup>14</sup> The template was refined and extended following trial application to a cross-section of transcripts. The coding framework was peer reviewed and applied to all 12 group transcripts using QSR Nud\*ist4™ qualitative data analysis software.<sup>15,16</sup> Final nodes were reviewed by a group of three researchers for consistency. The nodes were analyzed for categories, themes and issues. These were summarized into tables and figures with participant quotes used to illustrate the youth’s voices. The data were positively member-checked at a youth gambling roundtable.<sup>17</sup>

The study protocol underwent review and approval by the Human Subjects Ethical Review Committee, University of Toronto. Standard procedures were employed for obtaining informed consent. To reinforce the safety and confidentiality of focus group members, topics discussed in the group remained confidential unless they impacted on an individual’s immediate safety.

## Youth Definitions of Gambling



**Figure 1.** The spectrum and relative frequency of behaviour that youth associate with gambling

### RESULTS

Most youth did not immediately relate to the word “gambling”. The warm-up exercise helped participants connect gambling with activities in their daily lives and environment, for example: coin toss, scratch tickets, cards, video games. Key results are presented according to four major themes that emerged from the inductive qualitative analysis.

#### How youth define gambling

Participants organized gambling activities according to a range of categories from daring to addiction (Figure 1). Daring was described as a positive social activity integral to youth’s daily lives. The social aspect is evident in this statement by one study participant: “Not only do you win the money but you get to brag and the rest of stuff”. Participants reported a high rate of daring, friendly betting and betting in their lives. Youth commented on frequently seeing

younger siblings making a dare or friendly bet. The biggest progression for youth was moving from non-monetary daring and friendly betting to money-based bets. Betting tended to be grouped with older youth because of its association with money or material goods. Participants’ experiences had males and females equally betting.

Youth saw gambling as separate from daring and betting because of its association with lotteries, casinos and money. All these items have age-related restrictions. However, study participants reported that age restrictions in lotteries did not stop them from gambling – only from collecting winnings. Most of the study youth were too young to consistently play gambling-related games. Addiction was seen as an adult issue because of its connection with money-based gambling and major losses. Study participants always viewed addiction negatively.

Figure 1 depicts the relative frequency of gambling activities among study partici-

TABLE I

**Youth Perspectives on Gambling**

- I. Social Concerns
  - Social Image: hard to be concerned about something that is positively reinforced.
  - Family: gaming and gambling activities are fun and important to how families relate to each other (e.g., giving lottery tickets as gifts).
  - Access: youth feel that the environment has changed, with gambling being more common now than in their parents' generation.
  - Future Generations: expect their children to gamble at least as much as they do, but are concerned about the consequences.
  - Government Sanctioned: government promotes and profits from gambling (advertising uses imagery of lottery ticket winners).
- II. Money
  - Stakes: most commonly put social status at risk in gambling, followed by material goods (e.g., shoes, jewellery) and finally money.
  - Accessibility: money for betting and gambling is age-dependent; youth have greater access to money as they get older.
  - Debt: concerned about serious repercussions (loss, violence) when gambling with money.
- III. Information Technology
  - Entertainment: video and online games are popular; easy to gamble when no money involved.
  - Identity: anonymity is a key attraction of the Internet; create a new identity when playing games and gambling.
  - Availability: most online games have non-money stakes.

pants. Daring and betting were most common. However, daring tended to taper off as youth progressed into older adolescence. Betting became more popular the older youth were. The motivators for daring, friendly betting and betting were the same – to alleviate boredom. Money was a motivator, but it was more likely to be material goods or social status that actually prompted youth to bet. Mostly, the excitement of gambling was a bigger draw than the stakes. According to one youth, “You’re just having fun. It’s all fun.”

**Social perspectives on gambling**

In their opinion, youth betting and gambling were facilitated by the fact that it was a non-issue within their social and educational networks (Table I). One participant stated that, “Gambling...it’s not seen as something as serious as drinking before nineteen or smoking before whenever...”. Interestingly, youth perceived the odds of most betting and gambling activities to be 50:50. Some youth thought that the 50:50 odds could be improved if there were skills that could be mastered. According to one youth, perception of odds was not an inhibitor: “Some people do things like that to prove that they’re a risk taker or whatever.” Betting and gambling are accepted activities in youths’ lives – for example, 50/50 draws at school, and lottery tickets from family members at Christmas. “Those little scratchers are everywhere. You don’t have to be eighteen.” Youth saw these activities as regular reminders that gambling behaviour is normal and expected.

Most youth thought gambling was more common and socially acceptable now than when their parents were young (Table I). According to one participant, “People in general, I think, these days are more exposed to gambling.” Participants expressed feeling pressure to be a winner and worried about the costs of losing. Governments were seen as the big winners. For example, one youth commented that, “like the government and stuff is so crazy like, because they are making a whole bunch of gambling houses...so that people can lose their money and they can gain money.”

Few youth wanted their own children to gamble. Some thought that if they explained the logic behind gambling, their children would decide not to gamble. Despite this, their predictions about the future had their children gambling at least as much as they do. Some youth did have hope that the impression of gambling would turn negative: “Society is actually gonna start smartening up.”

Youth were aware that the overall motivator for gambling is money. They expressed consistent concerns that state-sponsored gambling (e.g., lotteries and casinos) was taking money from people who could least afford to lose it. A few youth saw a connection between gambling and social issues like poverty and employment. For these youth, the solution to reducing the impact of gambling was to address broader social problems: “People are suffering, they’re [government] still taking money.”

**Gambling and money**

Money was a sensitive issue with youth in this study (Table I). Youth have a limited ability to earn or acquire money. Participants expressed concern about losing more money than they could cover. One participant pointed out that, “Kids our age don’t have access to money.”

Losing was a difficult experience to cope with. Losing more money than a youth could afford was a particularly scary scenario. Debt was feared by the majority of study youth. When participants discussed issues of debt and payment of losses, stories of cheating and violence emerged. One youth put it this way: “You always win because they’ll [other youth] get theirs and you win.” “They beat us and we just ran away.”

**Gambling and information technology**

Youth had good access to the Internet. They used it for many reasons but predominantly for entertainment (Table I). Gaming websites (card and casino-like games) and video games were commonly used by youth. A small handful had direct experience with Internet gambling, but most youth in the focus groups did not go to money-based gambling websites. Underage participants admitted to gambling online. One youth stated, “I fooled them.” A larger barrier to participants’ gambling online was that very few youth were eligible for credit cards. Despite the lack of formal credit, youth were using technology to bet. One way was to bet on a video game with friends. Or, they played online games that had money substitutes (points, bananas...etc). Some youth considered the online games as ‘training’ for real gambling: “...like if you get good at it and you feel confident, you might wanna go and play it for money.” Other youth were concerned that online winning was too easy and that it was skewing perceptions about odds.

When asked about using the Internet for gambling health promotion, youth had strong opinions about design elements they would like to see (quizzes, real-life scenarios). Interestingly, participants were reluctant to commit to voluntarily visiting an education website. According to one participant, “I’d go if it were for school or something.” The primary reason why youth would seek out a gambling educa-

tion website was for homework. Since the majority of youth did not see gambling as an issue, they did not see themselves looking for gambling information.

## DISCUSSION

This is the first generation of youth in Canada exposed to wide-scale publicly sanctioned gambling. Although several studies indicate that gambling activities are integral components of youth's lives,<sup>18</sup> our findings suggest that many youth have minimal awareness of the potential impact of regular gambling behaviour. Dares, betting and gambling were identified as social activities that youth use to relieve boredom as well as to establish roles in their social networks. The images youth identified with gambling were generally positive. Only addiction was viewed negatively. But the connection of how a person could go from healthy dares, betting and gambling to addiction was uninformed.

The Internet offers great potential for health education regarding youth gambling.<sup>19,20</sup> Youth identified the need to provide tools for information gathering and personal reflection about gambling. The Internet is a natural vehicle for this sort of intervention due to its 24/7 availability. The findings from this study helped inform the TeenNet research team in its development of a gambling website called YouthBet.net ([www.youthbet.net](http://www.youthbet.net)). The YouthBet website integrates health promotion, harm reduction, and problem prevention strategies ([www.TeenNetProject.org](http://www.TeenNetProject.org)).

Public health initiatives can help bring healthy and problem gambling into youth's awareness.<sup>21</sup> However, this task is challenging for two reasons. First, many youth do not see gambling as an issue for them personally. Second, youth receive gambling reinforcement messages daily through the media and advertising.<sup>22</sup> There is need for a comprehensive public health approach that supports youth in developing balanced attitudes about gambling while also taking steps to limit harm.<sup>21</sup> This broader understanding of the benefits and costs from gambling was stated quite succinctly by one youth in this study: "What you lose, money can't buy."

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## RÉSUMÉ

**Contexte :** Au cours de la dernière décennie, on a assisté à une croissance rapide des jeux de hasard au Canada et à l'étranger. Bien que les jeunes constituent un groupe potentiellement vulnérable, on en sait peu sur ce qu'ils comprennent de la situation et sur l'effet que cette hausse récente des jeux de hasard peut avoir sur eux.

**Méthode :** Notre étude porte sur la perspective des jeux de hasard chez les jeunes et fait appel à une méthode de recherche qualitative inductive et à une analyse fondée sur des principes théoriques à base empirique. Nous avons mené 12 groupes de discussion avec 103 participants (âge moyen = 15 ans) représentant divers segments de la jeunesse de l'Ontario. Les questions des groupes de discussion visaient à saisir l'expérience et les opinions des jeunes à propos des jeux de hasard.

**Résultats :** Les jeunes participants ont défini un éventail de jeux de hasard allant des simples défis et des paris amicaux aux jeux de hasard légalisés (loteries, casinos) et à la dépendance. Leurs opinions variaient selon l'âge et le type de jeu de hasard. Par exemple, les jeunes adolescents considéraient les défis et les paris amicaux comme des activités positives qui leur permettaient de se désennuyer et de tisser des liens sociaux. Ils établissaient une distinction entre les jeux de hasard et les simples défis, les premiers étant associés à l'argent. De nombreux participants étaient très peu au courant des possibles effets nuisibles des jeux de hasard. Les technologies de l'information (Internet) étaient perçues comme un moyen intéressant de jouer à des jeux et de faire des paris sans argent.

**Conclusion :** Le manque de sensibilisation aux jeux de hasard chez les jeunes, et ses conséquences, soulignent le besoin d'informer le public. Lorsque l'on définit les « problèmes » de jeu chez les jeunes et que l'on conçoit des mesures d'intervention en santé publique, il faut étudier soigneusement la gamme des comportements liés aux jeux de hasard et l'accès à l'argent, qui varie selon l'âge.