

Estimated 750,000 problem gamblers among America's youth

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Gambling activity is widespread among U.S. adolescents and young adults ages 14 through 21, according to a study conducted by researchers at the University at Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions (RIA).

Results of the first national survey of its kind show problem gambling -- described as gambling with three or more negative consequences (for example, gambling more than you intended or stealing money to gamble) in the past year -- occurring at a rate of 2.1 percent among youth 14 to 21. That percentage projects to approximately 750,000 young problem gamblers nationwide.

In addition, 11 percent of the youth surveyed gambled twice per week or more, a rate that describes frequent gambling. Sixty-eight percent of the youth interviewed reported that they had gambled at least once in the past year.

"In a society where young people are increasingly exposed to gambling influences, there is cause for concern," said John W. Welte, Ph.D., principal investigator on the study.

The results were available on line in December 2007 and will be published in the June 2008 issue of the *Journal of Gambling Studies*.

A total of 2,274 U.S. youth were surveyed from August 2005 through January 2007 for this study. Interviews were conducted in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The national, random-digit-dial telephone

survey was sampled from all phone numbers in the U.S.

The rates of problem gambling found in the study are not, in fact, as high as the rates of problem gambling found in eight previous studies conducted in smaller jurisdictions by other research teams, according to Welte. Five of those studies were school surveys that obtained data only from youth attending that school or residing in one state or one region of the country. Others were telephone surveys using age-targeted population samples. Welte said, “The 2.1 percent rate of problem gambling for our national study has a 95 percent confidence level, making it unlikely that we found a lower problem gambling rate by chance.”

Welte is a senior research scientist at RIA and a national expert in the epidemiology of substance abuse and gambling. His co-investigator on the study is Grace M. Barnes, Ph.D., a senior research scientist at RIA and a national expert in substance use pertaining to adolescents, parenting and families.

“As might be expected, all statistically significant results showed that greater gambling involvement is associated with aging into an adult status,” Welte stated. “In fact, gambling may be associated with the transition into adulthood.”

The RIA researchers examined pivotal times of life for youth (employment, student status, living independently from parents, and marriage) and found gambling increased with each major life change. Those who worked full-time were more likely to gamble, those who were not students were more likely to gamble frequently (twice a week or more) and those who lived independently were more likely to gamble and to be problem gamblers (three or more negative consequences during the past year).

“We compared problem gambling rates among youth with problem gambling rates among adults from our national study of U.S. adults in 2000,” Welte said. “As far as gender, it seems likely that females’ gambling involvement tends to emerge in adulthood, while male involvement can be high in adolescence. We found identical problem gambling rates for adult males and young males (4 percent). We found adult females gambling rates were much higher (3 percent) than that of young females (less than one-tenth of a percent). In other words, problem gambling is almost non-existent among female adolescents and young adults.”

Black youth were less likely to have gambled than white youth; but if they gambled, it was likely to be more frequent (30 percent vs. 12 percent respectively). Asians as a racial group showed the lowest gambling involvement. Native Americans were found to have a higher rate of frequent gambling (28 percent) when compared to whites (9 percent) as well as to be higher on measures of problem gambling. This could be a reflection of the rapid spread of legal gambling venues on Native American reservations. Generally, low socioeconomic groups were less like to gamble, but if they did, were more likely to be problem gamblers. The highest socioeconomic groups are associated with the lowest gambling involvement.

Religion was related to having gambled in the past year with every religious group except Catholics, who were less likely than Protestants (except Baptists), to have gambled at all. Other religions (which include Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others) had a lower rate of having gambling in the past year (42 percent), but if they gambled, they had higher rates of frequent gambling than any other religious group. Similarly, Baptists were less likely than other Protestants to have gambled in the past year, but if they gambled, they had higher rates of frequent gambling.

Source: University at Buffalo

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