

Gambling history is common among homeless people in Toronto, new study

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Homeless clients using services at Toronto's Good Shepherd Ministries are nearly nine times more likely to have a history of problem or pathological gambling than the general population, a new study from St.

Michael's Hospital has found.

"Intuitively, one might think there's a connection between [problem gambling](#) and homelessness but very few studies have explored this in any depth.," said Dr. Flora Matheson, a research scientist with St. Michael's Centre for Research on Inner City Health. "By doing this kind of research, we help community organizations to better understand their clients and provide more holistic, effective treatment."

The findings, published in the June issue of *Journal of Gambling Studies*, looked at the prevalence of [problem gambling](#) and pathological gambling among 254 clients at Good Shepherd.

Good Shepherd – a community-based organization in Toronto – provides a range of services for homeless clients. Its administrators were concerned that an organizational focus on substance addiction and [mental health issues](#) might mean that gambling was a "blind spot" for its staff.

Of the 254 interviewed at Good Shepherd, 35 per cent indicated that at some point in their lives they had been either a problem or pathological gambler. The prevalence of gambling in the [general population](#) is around 0.6 to 4 per cent.

"Toronto shelters now have a sense of how important screening for gambling history is among people who are homeless," said Dr. Matheson. "Further research is still needed to know whether similar rates exist across the country or the globe."

Dr. Matheson suggests shelters should consider implementing screening for gambling as part of intake. Organizations that identify similarly high rates of problem gambling could then improve services by:

- Training staff on the signs of gambling addiction
- Equipping staff with referral resources for gambling addiction programs
- Forming partnerships with organizations that offer [gambling addiction](#) programs
- Considering potential in-house responses to gambling addictions

Gambling was defined as betting money or something of material value on an event with an uncertain outcome – such as horse races, dice, scratch cards, bingo or even a card game with friends. While gambling can be a harmless pastime for some, for others it can become an addiction affecting daily life.

Those who experience gambling as a harmful addiction are often classified as problem gamblers and have difficulty limiting money or time spent on gambling. There are varying degrees of problem gambling but [pathological gambling](#) is the most severe form; an example would be when money is spent gambling rather than on basic life necessities such as food or shelter.

A plain language report detailing the research collaboration between Good Shepherd and the Centre for Research on Inner Health was also launched today.

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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