

Gambling

'Of Crocodiles, Calcuttas and Card Games' - Gambling - A Northern Territory Perspective

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Abstract

Gambling, both in its regulated and unregulated forms, is a part of the normal social and cultural fabric of the Northern Territory. The Territory has a population of 180,000 people distributed sparsely across a land area of approx 1.35 million square kilometres. The 1995-96 estimates for gambling expenditure in the Territory is 3.36% of Household Disposable Income. This equates to \$822 per capita, the highest expenditure per head in Australia but the per capita figure may be skewed by involvement of interstate and overseas tourists as well as interstate and international telephone and internet gambling. There are clearly negatives as well as positives to gambling. Amity Community Services believes that the adoption of a systems approach offers the best opportunity to reduce the harm associated with gambling. While acknowledging that there may be some conflicts in agendas, Amity implements this approach by working with the various sectors of the community involved with gambling. These sectors include government, venue owners and managers, community organisations, groups and individuals. The object is to identify where there is commonality of agenda, to develop strategic alliances and to develop initiatives aimed at harm reduction in relation to gambling.

Introduction

In this paper we will briefly examine the historical and contemporary context of gambling in the Northern Territory, describe some of the characteristics of the Territory and overview the role and approach of Amity Community Services in relation to gambling.

Gambling, both regulated and unregulated, is a part of the everyday social and cultural fabric of the Northern Territory. Gambling is undertaken in many forms, not all, of course, involving financial wagers. In July this year, for example, a Territory newspaper reported the result of backing the wrong Australian Football League team in a weekend game in Melbourne. When Carlton lost to Melbourne, the losing punter was obliged to honour the 'wager' made between himself and his friends before the match. It had been agreed that the loser of the bet would swim, naked, the murky crocodile-infested waters of the Elizabeth River. Not without compassion the friends watched the swim - escorting their friend via a dinghy with an echo sounder to warn him of any 'crocodile-shaped objects'. But when the echo sounder revealed shapes worthy of suspicion, they decided to keep quiet so their mate could carry out his obligations (Sunday Territorian, 27/7/97). Most would agree that in this instance the stakes were high, given the potential for a large personal loss and that fatal crocodile attacks have not been all that uncommon in the last fifteen years!

'Calcuttas', on the other hand, restrict the commitment to a financial wager and have

been popular at country races where licensed bookies and registered horses are 'thin on the ground'. In calcuttas, the horses are 'auctioned', the proceeds are put into a kitty, and the kitty can then be divided according to agreement, for example into first, second and third prizes. The 'owner' receives their dividend according to the race placing, and may donate part of the dividend to the jockey. At the Pine Creek Races of the early and mid 1980's, for example, the rules excluded all but grass-fed horses from nearby stations. These horses were auctioned and raced according to the rules mentioned earlier.

Once the day's horse racing was complete, jockeys were then auctioned in a calcutta and raced in a foot race. Female racegoers were also auctioned for a foot race, as were the gymkhana horses and their young riders, to much mirth and merriment. The Pine Creek Race Meeting has more recently come under the organisation of the Darwin Turf Club and become a regulated meeting. The calcuttas continue, however, in events such as the wheelbarrow race at Pine Creek May Day weekend.

Card games can be observed in Aboriginal communities, both large and small. The games can be huge and, in some communities, are referred to as 'casinos'. Card casinos are particularly popular amongst Aboriginal groups and have been used for many years for the purpose of redistributing resources, social interaction and accumulation of money (Altman, 1987). Foote (1996) indicates that in the past, after mining royalties had been distributed, as much as \$70 000 has circulated in a card casino.

The Northern Territory community appears to have had a relaxed attitude towards gambling in all its forms, and seems to voice little concern regarding its consequences.

History of Gambling

Similar to other states and territories in Australia, the Northern Territory has had a long association with gambling. Gambling is thought to have been introduced to Aboriginal communities through contact with Asian traders who frequented north Australian waters, then later through the arrival of Europeans (Berndt & Berndt, 1977), and through Afghan camel drivers in Central Australia (Stevens, 1989). Horse racing has held a prominent position in the cultural and social fabric of the community since European settlement (Hogan, 1993). Race meetings were well attended by a cosmopolitan population as early as the 1870's, a population made up of "Chinese, Malays, Japanese, Singhalese, Aborigines and the Britisher and colonial - a gathering very characteristic of the land we live in" (Hogan, 1993:13).

Searcy, in his book of the late 19th century, titled *By Flood and Field*, says of racegoers of the time, "Some of them not worth talking about, mere vulgar vagabonds; others again, though vagabondish enough, with a spice of romance in them. All, objectionably bad, or attractively wicked, turned up at the races, well mounted to a man" (1911:292).

It is also clear that there were some highs and some major lows for those involved in these earlier forays. Searcy tells of Sgt O'Donoghue's horse, first named "Coronation", which then, having marred its reputation at the Adelaide River races, was renamed "Ruination", and was then later to become so successful that it was renamed "Reformation"! Searcy recounts that "hard earned cheques representing months of toil were knocked down in a few days" (1911:292). While Searcy's book is not a pure history of north Australia, it is a story based on anecdotes he collected as well as his own experiences. His stories are consistent with others reports of early race meetings. Ernestine Hill indicates that large "... bets were recorded from men to whom years of work and wander suddenly seemed a detail. There are some who come to bush races in a swag and go home in a motor car, and vice versa" (in Hogan, 1993:20).

Horse racing flourished in the Territory during World War II, with the influx of service

personnel. Meetings were arranged to keep servicemen and women entertained, with an irregular schedule, and locations kept secret "to keep the enemy guessing" (Hogan, 1993: 27)! The significance of horse racing in the community remained strong over the years. This was made more than apparent during the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy, as Darwin lay stripped of obvious symbols of community via the destruction and devastation of the cyclone, and the evacuation of masses of its people which saw a city of 50,000 reduced to 8,000. Just 17 days after Tracy hit and already cleared of debris, Fannie Bay Racetrack was host to a five race program arranged by the "hastily convened Sports & Entertainment Committee". "Free race meeting! Free admission, free programs, free beer and freedom from the gendarmes to play two-up"! (Hogan, 1993:45)

While gambling on horses has been recorded since the earliest days of Territory race meetings, such gambling was done through various types of 'bookies' as the TAB was introduced only as recently as 1985 (Hogan, 1993:66).

'Two-up', sweeps, card games, lotteries, pools, and lotto have also been significant gambling activities and have their devotees. The introduction of legal casinos in Darwin and Alice Springs twenty years ago brought with it, in the legal sense, an even greater variety of gaming to Territorians. With the casinos came poker machines and traditional casino games. Before this, however, illegal casinos and bookies had been operating in the Northern Territory for many years, and were sanctioned by the administration of the day. These illegal bookies not only catered for locals, but also handled substantial amounts of money from the South, including the laundering of "difficult money from all states" (Bowditch, 1993:33).

Community Benefit and Problems

Regulated and unregulated gaming has broad community support, both in the historical and contemporary settings. The community has been, and remains, keen to 'wager' on a variety of activities, from wheelbarrow races to satellite broadcast boxing bouts. Gaming is embedded in many ways into the lifestyle of the Northern Territory community. Professor Jan McMillen is currently engaged in research into the social and economic impact of the introduction of gaming machines into clubs and hotels in the Northern Territory, and when this report is released, we hope to have a clearer understanding of the costs and benefits of the gaming industry.

There do appear to be benefits to gaming. These include: personal enjoyment of winning, social interaction, community benefit, and stress release or an escape at times of distress. There are also the economic benefits of employment, more money spent in communities, and increased tax revenue. The belief that tax revenue would rise was underpinned by the Select Committee on the Effects of Poker Machines in Community Venues, which estimated in 1992/93 that "the proportion of Household Disposable Income devoted to gambling will reach and stabilise at about 3%", and that at that time the estimated proportion of Household Disposable Income devoted to gambling was 2.17% (1995:47). The 1995-96 estimates for gambling expenditure in the Territory is 3.36% of Household Disposable Income. This equates to \$822 per capita, the highest expenditure per head in Australia (Tasmanian Gaming Commission, 1996). It is unclear how much these figures are skewed by the fact that there were 1.3 million interstate and overseas visitors to the Territory in 1995-96 who may participate in gambling, and that gambling income is also derived from interstate, overseas telephone and internet sports betting.

Apart from profits for those individuals and corporations involved in the industry, the Racing and Gaming Authority indicates that its revenue from the racing and gaming industry was approximately thirty million dollars in 1995-96. The thirty million is returned to the community through the sport and recreation fund, the lotteries fund, the community benefit fund, the industry assistance fund and the racecourse development

fund, as well as funds returned to consolidated revenue (Racing and Gaming Authority, 3rd Annual Report).

Alongside the visible benefits of gambling there is also evidence of personal, social and economic costs. The personal costs include distress, depression (Foote, 1996) and poorer nutrition due to depleted financial reserves (Hunter & Spargo, 1988), social costs such as fraud, theft (NT News) tax evasion, and corruption (Pinto & Wilson, 1990). The economic costs can include loss of work time, decreased productivity, inability to pay bills and debt (Foote, 1996). The Select Committee on the Effects of Poker Machines in Community Venues (1995) have heard estimates indicating that 5% of the adult population may experience a problem in relation to gambling, and that this 5% could be contributing 25% of the gambling revenue.

Various agencies report seeing clients with gambling related problems (Amity Community Services - Darwin, Drug & Alcohol Services Association - Alice Springs) so there clearly are negative as well as a positive sides to the gaming industry.

Distance & Demographics

The factors that define responses to gambling issues in the Northern Territory are population size and distribution, isolation, cultural diversity and values and the community structure.

The 1996 Northern Territory population was estimated at 181,900. It is a population distributed sparsely across a land area of approx 1.35 million square km's with only 6 centres having a population greater than one thousand people. Darwin is the capital city with 80,900 residents, or 44% of the Territory population (N.T. Government, 1997).

In 1991, 19.2% of the Northern Territory's population were born overseas and a further 14.6% were Australian-born persons with at least one parent who was born overseas. While the Territory has a greater proportion of the overseas-born from 'mainly English speaking' countries (eg, UK, Ireland, New Zealand) compared to all of Australia, it is noted that those born in 'non-English speaking' countries are a much more diverse group in the Territory, comprising people from more than 100 national origins. The strong representation of migrants from South East Asia, with which the Territory shares common ocean borders, is reflected by the over-representation of Philippines-, Singapore- and Indonesian-born groups (Hugo,1997).

It is important to emphasise that Darwin, for much of its early history, was a multicultural city, whereas other Australian capitals were very much dominated by Anglo-Celtic groups. In 1991, 59.5% of the Territory's overseas born population lived in Darwin, the largest group being of Greek origin (Hugo,1997).

In the Northern Territory, 23% of the population (ABS, 1996: 18) are Aborigines living in both urban and small remote communities. Isolation can be a major characteristic of Territory life. It has been noted that, "it has taken well over a hundred years for telephones to become available in some communities in the Northern Territory" (Select Committee, 1996: 69). Remote communities vary in size from a number of families on an outstation, to small towns with a community government.

Many smaller aboriginal and mining communities are isolated for months at a time, due to seasonal conditions, except for air travel. Aboriginal community life often continues to rely on self-regulation through rights, obligations and privileges based on kinship (Hiatt, 1987: 175) rather than through the imposition of by-laws and legislation, and gambling reflects this reality. It is also argued that aboriginal gambling is not benign, acting as a "conduit for a major drain on resources and energy...that undermine personal and

community development" (Hunter, 1993:251). In a "topography of poverty, broken fleetingly by the dream of a big win,...gambling may appear a not unreasonable pastime" (Hunter, 1993:252).

Economy

The major components of the Territory's economy are mining, retail trade, construction and government administration and defence (ABS NT in Focus 1996). Tourism contributes to a number of components of the economy and is the second biggest industry after mining in dollar terms. Employment in the Territory returns high incomes. The average weekly total earnings of Territorians was the second highest in Australia behind the Australian Capital Territory.

Cash Payment Gaming Machines

While the casinos have had cash payment gaming machines since their establishment in Darwin (1979) and in Alice Springs (1982), these machines have only been introduced into clubs and hotels since 1 January 1996. Prior to January 1996, clubs and hotels owned draw card machines, and goods were offered as prizes. Now approximately 500 cash payment gaming machines are located in 30 clubs and 16 hotels across the Territory, together with approximately 570 machines located in the Darwin and Alice Springs casinos (N.T. Racing & Gaming Authority, 1996).

Telephone/ Internet Sports Bookmaking

A number of organisations in the Northern Territory and in other States are sanctioned and licensed to offer wagering on sports events via the telephone and the internet.

Centrebet, for example, is based in Alice Springs. It was established in 1992, and claims to be "the first organisation in Australasia to be granted a telephone sports bookmaking licence". It is also established as an internet gambling site. Centrebet indicates that it takes wagers from all parts of the world. Bets can be placed on Australian Rules Football, cricket, golf, United States baseball, Olympic and Commonwealth Games as well as horse racing to name a few sports (Centrebet promotional material).

It is clear that gambling in the Northern Territory is not only keeping up with technological advances, but at times, setting the pace. There is, however, a significant threat to the Territory's sports betting industry from interactive television sports betting as the technology probably will be introduced later in the Territory than the heavier populated areas of Australia (Select Committee, 1996:69).

Amity's Role and Approach

Amity Community Services has provided a service for gamblers for more than a decade. Initially, it was a face-to-face counselling service for people in the Darwin area, referred through the legal/judicial system. From the inception of the gambling service, the approach taken by the agency has been that of harm reduction rather than a requirement for abstinence and has had a focus on self responsibility. Interventions are based on a cognitive behavioural approach. Gambling is seen as normal and functional rather than abnormal and dysfunctional, accepting that it may become a habitual behaviour.

What is Amity's definition of harm reduction? Harm reduction is based on the assumption that the particular behaviour will continue, but the process attempts to reduce the harm

associated with that continued behaviour. Abstinence, on the other hand, attempts to stop the harm by stopping the behaviour. While abstinence may appear to be the ideal for some, it may not be acceptable or achievable for many. Therefore, the goal of the counselling service is to reduce the harm and is neutral about abstinence and the longer term agenda of the client.

Until 1993 the provision of gambling intervention services by Amity was seen as ancillary to its core funded service areas such as education, early intervention and counselling in the area of alcohol and other drug use.

In 1993, the then named Darwin "Diamond Beach Casino" consulted with Amity in regard to providing appropriate information and intervention for patrons who approach the Casino indicating they were experiencing difficulties related to their gambling. Diamond Beach Casino management indicated that they believed that it was inappropriate and inadequate to only respond with a 'ban' on the patron attending the casino.

From this consultation, Amity became aware of (1) the usefulness of adopting a 'systems' approach in the area of gambling intervention and (2) the need to develop strategic alliances with the various players in the system.

The systems approach depends on systems thinking. Senge (1994) argues that systems thinking is orientated at examining the interrelatedness of forces, and looks for the common process. He points out that this cannot be done as an individual, not because it is too difficult, but because good results in a complex system depend on bringing in as many perspectives as possible. Systems thinking points out interdependencies and the need for collaboration. "It may be necessary to bring in new members - particularly people who were once seen as enemies" (Senge, 1994:92). For the systems approach to be effective it is useful to steer away from blaming individuals but rather explore the systemic explanation.

To use and promote the 'systems' approach effectively, it is important to be aware of the various agendas in play at any given time. There are politics involved in the various interactions in all areas of society. It is useful to be politically aware prior to entering agreements with the various components in the system. It has been argued that for an organisation to safely and effectively engage with other components of the system requires effective political processes between the organisation and its environment. It requires the members to have "...a capacity to see the big picture, understand the political climate and deal with the political environment" (Limerick,1993:143).

When the systems approach is accepted there is an acknowledgement and a validation of other components of the system. Therefore, the approach is predicated on inclusion of the various components rather than exclusion, with a view to influence rather than control. It is about building strategic alliances and relationships within the system.

Since 1993, the 'systems' approach has been adopted in an endeavour to include other components of the system - these include the TAB, hotel and club management, and community organisations that are an appropriate vehicle for community education and intervention in areas around the Territory. Amity has also been involved in discussions with individuals and groups to identify organisations that have existing relationships and are seen as appropriate sources for intervention by the community. The Alice Springs Casino has requested and participated in training for staff in relation to issues surrounding gambling. In addition discussions with the Darwin casino, club and hotel staff and internet gaming providers have been undertaken regarding problems associated with gambling and responsible practices.

The systems approach has also been utilised in the area of community education. In

conjunction with both the Darwin and Alice Springs Casinos, as well as the Northern Territory Racing & Gaming Authority, Amity developed posters indicating referral points for gamblers experiencing problems, a booklet on "Managing Your Gambling", a 1-800 Territory-wide contact telephone number to enable greater access to counselling, as well as continued provision of face-to-face assessment and counselling. Distribution of the posters extended to TAB outlets throughout the Northern Territory, and with the recent introduction of poker machines in community venues, posters are displayed at all hotels and clubs licensed to provide poker machines.

Amity also consciously identified government organisations and authorities where the public frequently paid accounts or attended for financial assistance. Examples of these are Telstra, the Northern Territory Housing Commission, and the Department of Social Security, who all display counter cards with gambling intervention information. The Northern Territory Power and Water Authority provided, free of charge, advertising space on their accounts conveying the same message.

Conclusion

It is the view of Amity Community Services that gambling is influenced by many factors, some unique to the Northern Territory, others common to all states. It recognises that like other lifestyle behaviours, gambling is a normal behaviour influenced by certain individual, social, cultural and historical factors and that there are costs and benefits associated with gambling for the individual, the community, industry and government.

It is through this recognition that it is possible to examine the interrelatedness of sectors within the system and look for a common process which aims to minimise the costs or problems experienced, while still recognising the benefits of gambling enjoyed by various members of the Northern Territory.

It is important for individuals to take responsibility for their behaviour and to learn effective skills to deal with their own needs and the impact of their environment. Equally important is the development of joint ventures and relationships between the Northern Territory Government, industry and community-based services that enables these sectors to take responsibility for their behaviour and to foster an environment which aims to reduce the harm associated with gambling. The continued incorporation of these important areas is the basis of the systems approach which, Amity Community Services concludes, offers the best opportunity for harm reduction.