



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: DAVID RIDLEY

THE ODDS AREN'T GOOD Recent research has cast serious doubt on the long-term payoff of compulsive gambling.

Study links gambling and suicide

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News Writer

According to an academic article written by two University of Alberta researchers, gambling addicts are about 3.4 times more likely to attempt suicide than the average Canadian.

Dr Angus Thompson, a former U of A professor now with the Department of Public Health at Flinders University in Australia, along with Dr Stephen Newman, a psychiatry professor at the U of A, wrote the paper linking gambling and suicide based on data taken from the Canadian Community Health Survey.

The survey, which interviewed almost 37 000 Canadians ages 15 and up, discusses various issues impacting health, from mental illnesses to unemployment. Thompson and Newman also took information from a previous study they'd done in 2003 that assessed over 7000 adults from Edmonton on similar topics.

"This study of a very large number of Canadians, coupled with our earlier investigation [...], showed a very simple and important fact: that suicidal behaviour, mental illness, and severe gambling problems are interrelated," Thompson said. "Our studies were the first, we believe, to show [the relationship] in a community sample, which is much less biased than observations on

a clinical sample or than recollections or hearsay."

By analyzing these two studies, Thompson and Newman concluded that very serious or "pathological" gamblers are more likely to have suicidal thoughts or to have had attempted suicide in the past.

"Having ruled out the influence of a number of other factors, we still found that the odds for a suicide attempt are about 3.4 times higher among pathological gamblers than among others," he said.

According to the Problem Gambling Resources Network of Alberta (PGRN), the gambling industry has become a billion-dollar business in Alberta, growing at an alarmingly fast rate since 1990. PGRN, which funds and works with programs like the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC), has noted the need for public awareness since gambling addiction in children even as young as twelve has continually increased since 2002. However, Thompson stressed that in order to solve the increasing gambling problem, it is not sufficient to focus on causes of gambling addiction alone.

"Other studies have shown that most social problems are, in fact, related. So, the trick might be to find out what underpins them all, rather than focusing on separate causes for

gambling, suicide, substance abuse, and so on," Thompson said.

He added that although the paper, based on data from the two studies, only correlates pathological gambling and suicide and doesn't show cause-and-effect, this study is the evidence many anti-gambling establishments have been waiting for. Thompson said when the data initially included other possible factors of suicide attempts that aren't specifically gambling but are usually associated with gambling addictions—for example, alcoholism, mental health problems, and economic instability—people were 8.5 times more likely to have attempted suicide.

Thompson added that overall, the study suggests the increasing number and promotion of casinos is basically adding salt to the gambling wound, and that reducing the amount of pathological gamblers starts with decreasing exposure to gambling institutions.

"The evidence overall is that gambling in the form of casinos is a social evil, and because of its [...] addictive nature, it is not about freedom of choice," Thompson said. "Gambling is not about the exercise of free choice in the way we ordinarily conceive it—at least [not] any more than it is for an addict taking heroin or an alcoholic having another drink."

Risks of spiked energy drinks not widely known

SPIKED • CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

O'Brien has also picked up on the popularity of alcoholic energy drinks among university students. She explained that the study was prompted by a patient she encountered who had drunk himself into a comatose state by mixing alcohol with energy drinks.

"I wasn't aware that this phenomenon was going on, but when he woke up many hours later [...] and I asked him why he did it, he said, 'Because [when you drink spiked energy drinks,] you can drink longer without passing out,'" O'Brien said.

The study's aim was to assess the popularity of spiked energy drinks, to determine their effect on excessive drinking behaviour, and to find out what associations they had with high-risk behaviour. Information was compiled through an online survey that was sent out to ten American universities, resulting in 4271 student responses.

Of those participating students who admitted they drank, one in four said they mix alcohol with energy drinks. Researchers discovered that when students do so, they are more likely to drink excessive amounts of alcohol because they don't feel as drunk.

However, not all U of A students are



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KYLER ZELEVY

DEFINITELY NOT THE BOMB Researchers advise against this popular mix.

convinced of the potential dangers, including Tarlan Razzaghi, a first-year law student.

"I probably feel more drunk after a Jäger-bomb. I drink them because they speed up the process," she explained.

On the other hand, Brendan Haughian, a third-year science student, doesn't feel the study has revealed anything shocking.

"I already know it's probably not a good idea to mix energy drinks with alcohol. It just basically backs up what

I thought before," Haughian said.

While the results may seem like common sense to Haughian, O'Brien hopes the results of the study will help to spread awareness to students who are still clueless about the dangers of spiked energy drinks.

"It impairs your ability to tell when you're drunk. You're an awake drunk, but you're still drunk, and you don't know it. You don't know if you're okay to drive or if the situation you're in is a risky one."

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