

DRAFT

Advisory Committee on Problem Gambling Brief

COVID-19 and Problem Gambling

A cause for concern.

The pandemic of 2020 presents vast challenges to Nevada's economy, to humanity, and particularly to vulnerable populations. This includes threats to people with gambling disorders, and public health and clinical services to address their needs. Nevada's gambling treatment providers are reporting an uptick in activity as persons turn to gambling to cope with the pandemic-related stressors and as persons in long term problem gambling recovery are reporting the stress brought on by the pandemic is intensifying their gambling related urges.¹

Why has COVID-19 led to an increase in problem gambling?

There are some obvious and not so obvious reasons why we are witnessing an increase in problem gambling.^{2,3} One reason is that many of the major triggers for gambling are being exacerbated. These triggers include financial worry, loneliness, boredom, stress, anxiety, and depression. As many of us are feeling more isolated and disconnected, gambling has become an outlet to reduce restlessness and monotony and to cope with loneliness and negative mood.⁴

Additionally, stimulus checks are fueling a surge in Nevada gambling. In March, Nevada casinos collected more than \$1 billion in revenue, the largest amount spent on gambling recorded by the state in eight years. Analysts attributed record-breaking spending on gambling partially due to stimulus checks.⁵

During this time of rising unemployment and global economic instability, some are increasingly turning to gambling as a "source of income." If one is facing personal financial challenges, gambling can present significant problems. Turning to gambling during this time is not a safe or reliable source of financial support. Financial problems can exacerbate feelings of hopelessness and fast-track many individuals into a downward spiral. Those those with a gambling addiction have extremely high suicide rates.⁶

What can Nevada do to combat harms caused by problem gambling?

Fortunately, Nevada has a well-developed Problem Gambling Services system that has the potential to address this health hazard, affected by the ongoing crisis and its aftermath. The Nevada DHHS Advisory Committee on Problem Gambling (ACPG) is promoting a COVID-19 Problem Gambling Management Strategy to empower DHHS Problem Gambling Services with the ability to mitigate the impact and aftermath of the pandemic as related to secondary problem gambling related harms. The Governor's recommended DHHS Problem Gambling Services SFY 2022 budget is approximately \$1.84 million (amount to be granted out for services). To support a fully funded system, the ACPG estimated need is \$5.68 million.

In an effort to reach the estimated 6% of problem gamblers in the State of Nevada, ACPG proposes a comprehensive COVID-19 Problem Gambling Management Strategy to be implemented. This would include research to measure the scope and impact of COVID-19 on problem gambling in Nevada. Results from this research will be used to create a comprehensive public awareness campaign, the outcome being that more individuals receive assessments to determine their problem gambling risk and seek help. Infrastructure to support increased treatment needs would be the ultimate end to this research, awareness and treatment initiative.

Expected outcome.

The COVID-19 Problem Gambling Management Strategy is a bridge from the current crisis response of rapid telehealth service development to an enhanced public health process. It ensures preparedness for a significant increase in gambling disorder treatment needs while concurrently establishing health promotion by informing the public of risks to using gambling as a pandemic related coping activity. This strategy will enhance Nevada's capacity to support community health and manage COVID-19 related secondary problem gambling related harms in the population.

¹ Nevada Problem Gambling Treatment Providers Meeting (2021). In Minutes of staff committee meeting 12 May 2021. Nevada Department of Health and Human Services.

² Salerno, L., & Pallanti, S. (2021). COVID-19 Related Distress in Gambling Disorder. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, 156.

³ Håkansson A. Changes in gambling behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic—a web survey study in Sweden. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. (2020) 17:1-16. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17114013

⁴ Håkansson, A., Fernández-Aranda, F., Menchón, J. M., Potenza, M. N., & Jiménez-Murcia, S. (2020). Gambling during the COVID-19 crisis-a cause for concern. *Journal of addiction medicine*, 14(4), e10.

⁵ Yakowicz, W. (2021). March Madness And Stimulus Checks Helped Nevada Bring in More Than \$1 Billion in Monthly Gambling Revenue. *Forbes Magazine*, April 29th, 2021.

⁶ Karlsson, A., & Håkansson, A. (2018). Gambling disorder, increased mortality, suicidality, and associated comorbidity: A longitudinal nationwide register study. *Journal of behavioral addictions*, 7(4), 1091-1099.