Gambling and Homelessness: the Hidden Addiction

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Problem Gambling and Homelessness are public health and social concerns that are both increasing, but are frequently considered as independent issues. LePage et al (2000) used the SOGS in 87 individuals relying on community assistance in Canada and found a problem gambling prevalence of 17.2%. In the USA, Nower et al (2014) used the SOGS in 275 homeless people and found a problem gambling rate of 23%, whilst Shaffer et al (2002) used the Massachusetts Gambling Screen in 171 homeless people seeking treatment for substance use disorders, and found a rate of 12.8% for level 2 problem gamblers. Qualitative semi-structured interviews investigating routes into homelessness identify gambling as a contributing factor (Holdsworth & Tiyce, 2012, Australia; van Laere, 2009, The Netherlands). Crane et al (2005) questioned homeless adults in the US, Australia and the UK, and found gambling listed in the top ten contributing factors across all three countries. Thus, international evidence indicates that the prevalence of problem gambling is elevated in homeless populations. The relationship between gambling and homelessness has not been examined in the UK.

Methods: 468 participants were recruited from 16 homeless centres in Westminster, London. Participants who answered yes to a gambling screening item completed the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI,Ferris & Wynne, 2001); 164 also provided age (m = 41.79 s.d. 11.9, range 18-78); 268 provided gender (250 male, 18 female). Data were compared to the 2010 British Gambling Prevalence Survey.

Results: The CPGI problem gambling (score >7) rate was 11.6%, with 3.3% at moderate risk (CPGI score of 5-7), and 8.3% low risk (CPGI score 1-4). The CPGI risk categories differed significantly between the homeless and the BGPS (χ² (3) = 11.1, p < .011): the homeless group displayed a greater proportion of problem gambling relative to low/moderate risk. A larger percentage of rough sleepers were problem gamblers than those living in hostels χ²(2)= 9.9. p=.007. EGM roulette machines and horse racing were the most popular gambling activities in the homeless.

Conclusions: This is the first study to show a higher rate of problem gambling in a British homeless population compared to the general population. Furthermore, a higher proportion of respondents with any gambling risk fell in the problem gambling category in the homeless group compared to the BGPS cohort, indicating some bi-modality of gambling involvement. Our data emphasise that homeless people constitute a vulnerable population, and that the problems of homelessness and gambling addiction may benefit from being addressed concurrently.