

REPORT NO. 1

Money, Meaning & Gambling:

A qualitative study of the gambling experiences of some young homeless people in inner Sydney

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FOREWORD

For many years the Oasis Youth Support Network has served the community, providing hope and help to many of our nation's most disadvantaged young people. Through its vast range of services, hundreds of young people have received all types of assistance to rebuild their lives.

While the emphasis of Oasis has largely focused on the provision of services, it has been part of the vision of the Network to use its experience and contacts with homeless young people to contribute to the community's understanding of the issues affecting them.

I am therefore delighted to release the first of what will become a series of reports that examine various issues associated with youth homelessness.

The first of these reports examines homeless young peoples' experience with gambling. This report raises several questions and issues that have significant implications on the way youth services think about, and respond to gambling amongst homeless youth. It is our hope that the issues raised will lead those working with homeless youth to re-evaluate the way services are provided to this group.

We are grateful to the New South Wales Government through the Casino Community Benefit Fund for making this research possible through their generous financial support of the project.

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Lieut Paul Moulds
Director
Oasis Youth Support Network

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much of the literature on gambling and young people is similar to the general literature on gambling which is focused on quantifying problem gambling amongst adults, particularly males. The quantification process is based heavily on a North American psychopathology approach in which the individual is held solely responsible for their gambling behaviours. The scant Australian research on gambling and young people acknowledges the social acceptance of gambling in Australia. However, this research still focuses on gambling levels, particularly problem gambling with its emphasis on individual disorder. The wider context of gambling for young people, particularly young homeless people, is unknown.

By resisting the preoccupation in most existing literature to compare gambling levels across age and sex and assume definitions of problem gambling, this study is able to explore the context of gambling for young homeless people. It places the young homeless people involved in the study as central to the research. Participants were asked about the relationship between young homeless people (including themselves) and gambling. By the use of purposive and haphazard sampling, it is not appropriate to generalise from the results of this study to all young people, nor even all young homeless people.

Some key findings include confirmation of the acceptance of a culture of gambling in Australia. Most of the young people had experienced gambling from an early age, usually in primary school, and often in their family environment. The young homeless people in this study associated gambling with money, and as a means of obtaining more money. They valued money as it enabled the purchase of consumer goods and a sought after "glamorous" lifestyle. This consumerist ideal was viewed as a measurement of achievement, and was related to feelings of positive self-worth. The significance of society's values and their relationship to gambling as portrayed in this study by the young people is of importance for future policy development in this area.

Another significant finding of this study was the close association between alcohol and other drugs and gambling. Gambling activities usually occurred within pubs and were often a secondary activity to drinking. Drugs, particularly alcohol, were more of an issue than gambling. All but one of the young people interviewed in this project spent more time and money on drug taking activities than gambling. Some interviewees saw their problem quite explicitly as drinking or other drug taking, rather than gambling. Gambling and drugs contributed to everyday life and for a few young people, an attempt to achieve meaning in life. Drugs were often used to block

out pain, while gambling relieved boredom (related to unemployment), loneliness and a lack of social belonging.

Electronic gaming machines were reported as the most popular type of gambling, which were easily accessed in pubs, and for a few of the young homeless people provided a sensory appeal. There was an acceptance of pubs (and drinking of alcohol as a broad social norm) which were considered highly accessible and well promoted. The young homeless people, particularly the young women, usually placed substantial value on the need to belong and socialise in broadly acceptable settings.

The extent to which gambling is a factor in youth homelessness was a major reason for undertaking the research project. The young people interviewed indicated, however, that it was not a major contributor to their homelessness. Many of them stated that they chose to cover accommodation costs before spending money on gambling. Interventions that simply educate young people about risks of gambling or seek to restrict access to gambling venues would probably have little impact on this group. These young people are well aware of the risks associated with gambling. Generally, gambling was perceived as having limited risks in the lives of the young homeless people in this study.

For those young people in this study who self identified with problem gambling behaviours, their gambling was related to choices to seek money and the experience of winning, which gambling could provide. Development of programs and policy agendas need to address issues of job creation and secure income, and also issues related to social interaction and belonging. Examples could include the development of recreation and employment activities and programs that combine opportunities for winning and personal achievement.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Salvation Army's Oasis Youth Support Network provides services for homeless young people, aged 16-21, including street outreach, accommodation, case management, specialised counselling, employment services and education. A key issue for staff in these programs has been the reported problems of young people in managing their finances. Their perceptions suggest that gambling is a factor in the way these young people expend their income. A literature review by the Australian Institute of Gambling Research (1997) also notes concerns about the possible harmful impact of gambling on adolescent children. However, they caution against support for such views as "no surveys or studies have been published" (56).

The majority of the literature on youth and gambling is from North America and focuses on measuring the extent of 'problem gambling' amongst adolescents. It indicates a high level of gambling. For example, data from the Minnesota Council on Compulsive Gambling (Blanding, 1996) found that 75 to 91% of adolescents had gambled at some point in their lives.

The small amount of Australian research in this area also indicates high rates of gambling. A study in Victoria found that three-quarters of youth aged 13-25 had participated in gambling activities (Moore & Oshtuka, cited by Gibson, 1997). Similarly, in a Queensland study nearly 60% of 18-19 year olds identified as having played electronic gaming machines (Boreham et al., 1996). Maddern (1996) refers to this as the normative nature of gambling for adolescents. Little is known about the nature of gambling among disadvantaged and at-risk young people, although the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) notes that this group may be more likely to gamble:

Of those youth who were vulnerable for future problem gambling, the strongest correlations are with poor education and employment opportunities, some psychological factors and socio-economic disadvantage in general (ACOSS, 1997:17).

Applications of both the U.S. and Australian definitions of problem gambling are criticised by McMillan (1997), who says that they promote problem gambling as:

a disorder of the individual it is heavily moralistic and culturally specific it assigns gamblers to a sick role with an obligation to get well the individual gambler is labelled as the primary source of the problem the problem is defined by the disciplinary experts rather than the gambler (11).

Studies have tended to present a medical perspective with a focus on individual gamblers and their psychopathology (eg. Shaffer & Hall 1994; Ladouceur et al., 1994; Winters, Stinchfield & Kim, 1995). This emphasis has meant that the bulk of research has quantified problem gambling to more extreme instances of gambling, often not exploring the significance of high prevalence rates. In addition, discussions of gambling are usually limited to prevalence estimates in Western society, and often ignore the meaning and significance of gambling in the lives of young people.

1.1 Research focus and objectives

The focus of the present study was to explore the issue of gambling from the perspective of young homeless people, in order to inform Salvation Army policy decisions about appropriate services and interventions.

The specific objectives were:

1. To examine young homeless people's idea of gambling and their gambling experiences;
2. To explore the personal and social effects of gambling on young homeless people's lives, including relationships between gambling, income and homelessness, and the issue of problem gambling;
3. To make recommendations about appropriate policy and/or services.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical background

The research approach avoided structured methods of interviewing determined by the research team and service providers, as such an approach "afford(ed) little room for children (and young people) to describe their own views and the meaning that their experiences hold for them in their own words" (Hogan, 1998:1). Instead, the researchers involved the young people in a collaborative way throughout the project. This involved using a qualitative research approach to define the parameters of the study and provide contextual details on the meaning and relationship gambling had among homeless youth.

The value of qualitative research is its "study (of) social life in its natural context" (Finch, 1986:164). As such it has a capacity to contribute an understanding of individual social contexts and the diversity of human experience to policy-making.

The application of qualitative research over the last two decades to research with and for women, has resulted in a transformation in the way research reflects knowledge of the world, clearly asserting that women, too, can be 'knowers' or agents of knowledge (Harding, 1987; Kramarae & Spender, 1992:4). Children and young people who can be recognised by their social status as non-adults have a similar history of being excluded from knowledge making forums (John, 1996:10). Indeed, most knowledge of non-adults has developed from adult interpretation, rather than being directly provided by children and young people. Researchers such as Alanen (1994), who have drawn attention to the structural marginalisation of children, have emphasised the need to analyse the experiences of children and young people from their standpoints, and to incorporate this information into policy development. While much of the current childhood research does not directly focus on older adolescents, many adolescents see themselves as part of the category of children, because of their non-adult status (Mason & Falloon, 1999).

2.2 Specific Methods

The initial recruitment of young people for the study utilised purposive or judgement sampling (Kidder & Judd, 1987; Chadwick, Bahr & Albrecht, 1984), where Salvation Army staff identified potential participants for a group interview. The entry criterion was current homelessness (that is, those utilising homeless services), and having some knowledge and/or experience of gambling. Subsequent interviews relied on haphazard sampling and included any appropriate young person who was available at the place and time of the interview and accepted the invitation to participate.

Throughout the study, efforts were made to reduce interviewer-participant

inequalities by involving the young people in the decision-making process. Consequently, early consultation with the young people encouraged their input into the structuring of interviews (such as group vs individual interviews), venues and times for interviews, method of recording, whether reporting back was appropriate and suitable methods to compensate youth involvement.

Both individual and group interviews were conducted during 1997-98 on Salvation Army premises. They included three group interviews and twelve individual interviews. A total of sixteen young people contributed to the data. The young people chose the type of interview format in which they wanted to participate. Five contributed to more than one forum. Eleven of the interviewees were male and five were female. One group (n=3) was of a mixed gender, one was all male (n=3) and the other was all female (n=3). The ages of those interviewed ranged from 16 to 20 years, and represented diverse cultural backgrounds.

Interviews were semi-structured, in-depth interviews that involved:

conversation(s) with a specific purpose ... the means by which the researcher can gain access to, and subsequently understand, the private interpretations of social reality that individuals hold (Minichiello et al., 1992:87).

The interview schedule included broad questions on the nature of gambling, its context within the lives of the young people, and how it interacted with their income and homelessness. Individual interviews took between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours to complete, and group interviews ranged from 1 to 1.5 hours.

All participants received a movie pass to compensate for their time, and a copy of the study findings when requested. All interviews were taped and later transcribed. Utilisation of pseudonyms protected the anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of their responses. Participation was voluntary. Participants were fully informed about the nature of the study and their right to cease the interview or recording at any time. The young people provided taped permission to use information from the individual and group interviews. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were offered the opportunity to listen to their taped interview and make any amendments. Some young people responded to offers to view transcripts, but there was greater interest expressed in seeing a copy of the final report. Salvation Army staff did not have access to transcripts.

2.3 Data analysis

Early transcripts were read, discussed and some tentative codes identified. More detailed analysis occurred after all the data had been collected. The author and the consultant examined the material for emerging patterns and themes before developing a series of final codes. Data analysis was conducted manually.

3.0 FINDINGS

A number of major and frequently overlapping themes were identified from the interview transcripts. These centred around the young people's understanding of gambling and experiences with gambling, the importance and pursuit of money in the lives of the young people, how gambling activities contributed to income and meaningful social activities, gambling's relationship to homelessness, and gambling as a problem. Each are addressed separately below:

3.1 Young people describe gambling

In providing a definition of gambling, participants noted that it involved money, usually to obtain more money:

Putting down money to get more (Christopher, 19 years).

It's people trying to win and get money that's all (Stephen, 19 years).

For some of the young people, gambling involved consumables other than money:

You can gamble away jewellery and stuff it doesn't necessarily have to be money (female group).

When I go to the pubs and I'm in the mood for gambling it's usually for a beer (Lachlan, 17 years).

They'd try and get all these balls and then they'd bring you a packet of cigarettes for it (mixed group).

I won a carton of smokes (Dale, 19 years) (playing cards within a juvenile justice centre, where cigarettes have a high value).

Young people indicated knowledge of a broad range of gambling and gambling related activities. These included :

- "hustling", defined as winning money off friends and associates, especially on sports activities eg. basketball, football and pool;
- playing cards, especially poker, but also blackjack;
- poker machines;
- video games through providers such as Timezone;
- lottery, "lotto", "powerball" and "scratchies";
- "horses", "dogs" and other forms of racing especially through the use of TAB's;
- flicking "footy" cards against the wall at school; and
- racing Christmas beetles.

The most commonly referred to form of gambling involved electronic gaming machines (EGM's), especially poker and/or card machines. Although some young people were involved in other activities (some gambling related and others not), all of them made reference to the use of such machines when talking about gambling experiences and knowledge. Generally, the young people were well aware of casinos but had less direct involvement and experience with these venues.

In the female group the definition of gambling was extended to risking one's life through drug taking. One young woman who initially stated that she did not gamble, later in the group discussion recognised that the components of gambling bore much similarity to her drug using activities, except that the stakes were higher:

We gamble every time we have a shot we think, will it kill us? It's kind of like playing a Russian roulette game (female group).

There was some difference in the description of gambling activities by age and gender.

For example, gambling among under 18's was more likely to be with friends and acquaintances and those 18 or over in a pub and with poker machines:

There's a lot of 18 year olds now that gamble. I'm 18 now, I can gamble... I can go to the pub (female group).

I was not allowed in the pubs down in Bourke. Then I came to Sydney, and as soon as I turned 18 I'd just go for the pubs, to play the pokies (Dale, 19 years).

The young women were far more likely to gamble with "scratchies" (instant scratch lottery tickets) than on poker machines:

I know lots of girls who buy \$2 scratchies but I don't know lots of girls who put money in the poker machines (Jane, 19 years).

Young women were more likely to highlight the importance of gambling in a social context. For example, the social meeting at a pub was an important part:

With females, you know, you often see groups of them. But males just don't care. They just go there by themselves and play I don't look around at who's on the pokies. I just like talking to my friends and things and not caring what's around (female group).

I know lots of young women and girls and when we go down the pub we don't go to play the pokies (Jane, 19 years).

It would feel weird a lot of people think it's not right for women to sit at bars and so making them think it's not right for women to gamble (female group).

The young women also perceived young men as gambling more than them:

Yeah, the guys I know gamble a lot. Like, it's mainly guys that I know who gamble not like us girls' (female group).

I've seen most boys gambling (Jane, 19 years).

3.2 A family activity

Most young people had experienced gambling from an early age, some while in primary school. While not always the case, the young people who gambled were likely to have experienced gambling in their family. Nearly all young people referred to family influences, parents or extended family, as a reason for gambling or for not gambling. For example:

Dad took me down to a rooster fight, bet on that one pretty good me and my friend caught two spiders and we put them down on a stick and we were fighting them 41 a card game I remember sitting down with my mum and mum's friends you're brought up to win, you know. It's like from the very start it's either you win or lose (Stephen, 19 years).

My dad was a gambler, and then I became one after him my mum used to gamble as well, and I used to sit by my mum and she would say this is your horse. It's a big influence, I believe if my parents weren't gamblers I don't believe I would've been (Helen, 19 years).

Me and my brother used to always muck around play you for 5 bucks.... go to the pool comp. that's what leads up to it just small stuff like pool tables (Christopher, 19 years).

My mum used to play the poker machines used to go down to the pub, yeah. Mum used to work in the pub (Aaron, 16 years).

I was a young fella, I was only five. I used to sit down with my dad and we used to get the dominoes out and play and I used to use my pocket money at 12 I used to gamble at the Boy's club (Lachlan, 17 years).

Or Sam (19 years) who learnt to play blackjack for entertainment in his country of origin and now plays poker machines for the same purpose:

I was just young, 5 or 6, my parents teach me because you get pretty bored, so you play cards a lot.

One young woman could not recall much gambling in her family environment:

My mum's not a gambler, and neither is my father so I just wasn't brought up into that (Jane, 19 years).

Yet, two young women who experienced gambling in their families, reported that they did not gamble now:

With my brothers cards (and) when we were little we used to put a dollar on the dogs and at my Aunty's house we used to play the pokies, but we used to like use the money over again (mixed group).

I don't like to gamble because you've always got to chance things (even though) my guardian back home, she gambles, she loves to gamble it's just my relations gamble and girlfriends (female group).

Sometimes there were different messages about gambling within families. For example, Dale (19 years) used to gamble a lot. When he lived with his father's side of the family,

I watched my nan playing cards and that's how she started me off playing cards. then my uncle kept going when I was younger 8, my uncle started going to the pubs and I always used to see them pressing the buttons and all these coins kept coming out.

Now he relates more to his mother's side of the family which appears not to gamble,

My aunty she doesn't gamble she keeps saying something, that they're just making money out of you.

3.3 Money is everything

All the young people in the research made numerous references to money being the essential component of a satisfying life:

I believe money is everything in life. And if you've got money you can have whatever you want (Helen, 19 years).

Everything revolves around money. Everything. I mean, everything. Including love (male group).

Everything is money even these (mixed group in reference to movie passes that were given to them).

You need the money, you have no money – you get nowhere in your life (Sam, 19 years).

The centrality of money to life was often associated with gambling. Indeed, gambling for some was a way to obtain money, especially the "quick buck":

They think its a shortcut to a buck they can do more things with money when I win I could do this, I'll do that (male group).

Like everyone sees it as easy money a quick way of winning (Stephen, 19 years).

Gambling was valued as a legitimate way of getting money, in contrast with illegal means of getting money:

Like most of the people who come here probably do rorts and stuff. There's only a few that come here who gamble.... instead of stealing, right, trying to get money from stealing, I'd rather do it a legal way, and that's when I went back to gambling, because that's not illegal (Lachlan, 17 years; note that the legal age for gambling in NSW is 18).

Money from gambling was seen by some as a way of getting things valued in our society, such as good clothes and housing. In this case it was by people who would usually have difficulty affording these things.

For example, Christopher (19 years) reported gambling so that he could afford to pay for a knee operation without which he could not do certain types of work or play football, a highly valued activity. Another participant noted that:

I've always wanted to be a hairdresser and you've got to pay a lot of money to do the course (Helen 19 years).

Money generally was also important for the young people because it enabled the purchase of consumer goods and a glamorous lifestyle, which informed the world of their achievements and was related to feelings of positive self worth:

Up in the Cross you know you see men and women driving around in Porsches and Ferraris and they drag out a hundred dollar note, for a packet of chips and a drink or something like that I want to be able to have my own home. A nice house a nice car.... I want all that stuff (Helen, 19 years).

It just feels good wearing nice clothes (Sam, 19 years, who won \$800 gambling and spent it on Country Road clothes).

A lot of people who don't have money, don't get respect but the people who do have a lot of money they get a lot of respect (Helen, 19 years).

3.4 Homelessness, gambling and income

The extent to which gambling is a factor in youth homelessness was a major reason for undertaking the present research project. However, the young people interviewed indicated it was not a major reason for their homelessness. Many stated that they chose to cover accommodation costs before spending money on gambling:

Half of mine goes to rent man (Stephen, 19 years).

As long as I keep a roof over my head I'm happy (Dave, 18 years).

Three participants noted exceptions to this. One young woman reported having nowhere to stay:

A lot of times, that's mainly through spending all my money all the time I usually can't afford to pay rent because of playing the pokies all the time and drinking alcohol and I've been banned from some refuges because I say I promise I'll pay rent and I haven't done it (Helen, 19 years).

John (20 years), who in one episode of gambling became homeless, even though he had intended to put money aside for rent and food, said:

You're playing away at it and you find out you've lost and you think, Ah you go into your pocket yeah I'll put another five bucks in and then nothing left.

Christopher was kicked out of accommodation for an incident involving both drinking and gambling.

Other factors, such as negative home conditions and expenditure on drugs, were seen to have more to do with homelessness than gambling:

There's a lot of reasons why people are homeless. It's not just one especially related to family (male group).

I was brought up in a lot of violence and that (Dale, 19 years).

I reckon it's more to do with drugs. A lot to do with drugs and alcohol than it is to do with gambling (mixed group).

The ability to gamble was limited by income (average about \$120 per week), that is, the less money the lower the level of gambling:

Less actually that's why I only go every now and then (Stephen, 19 years).

I don't have much money anyway, so I don't do much gambling anymore (John, 20 years).

Maybe if I've got a spare dollar or two I always do something (John, 20 years).

Just whenever I've got extra money (Aaron, 16 years).

About \$50 a fortnight that's the money you use you start off with (male group).

I make roughly \$400 a night (on the street) like, I've worked every night, so you're looking at about \$2500 a week that goes through the pokies, and I mean grog and stuff like that (Helen, 19 years).

\$1200 over 3 - 4 days (Christopher, 19 years, who had binge episodes).

The young people who gambled obtained money for gambling from several different sources. For many it involved using their own money or borrowing from others:

Pay cheques (Jane, 19 years).

Sometimes I do go and borrow five bucks or whatever (male respondent, mixed group).

Amongst those who gambled most, money was at times obtained in less socially acceptable ways:

Yeah. I used to go and shake the money off my mum (Dale, 19 years).

The reason I stopped is because I started rorting and all that – like stealing stuff (Lachlan, 17 years).

I started streetwork because I like to play the pokies a lot ... and because I'm on such a low income \$260 a fortnight I can't afford me drinking – plus the pokies, plus paying rent (Helen, 19 years).

One young person gambled more when at home:

Because you're living with your parents and they always give you some money. So you go out and spend it (Sam, 19 years).

Generally, the young people made choices about when they would gamble their limited income. Sometimes they preferred to spend money on goods rather than gambling:

Clothing and everyday things shampoos and conditioners and socks and clothes transport even that is pretty expensive (female group).

For one young woman confronted with limited choices for her income:

I always make the decision not to waste my money but it just happens anyhow... so I would probably be better gambling, I guess, at least I've got a chance of winning some back (female group).

For those who did gamble more frequently, much of their participation was driven by a desire to regain the money already spent, in spite of recognising the risks:

I haven't got much. I might as well try and make more (Christopher, 19 years).

I just wanted to get back the money that I lost. I was getting very frustrated so I just kept going back (Lachlan, 17 years).

I just wanted to make money (Dale, 19 years).

I just want to see how you win it how to win big money (Sam, 19 years).

When money is short to try and get it back and to try and get more (mixed group).

Living on the edge

Many of the young homeless people in this study considered themselves to be living on the edge of society with lifestyles characterised by drug use, low income and personal insecurity. Their daily experience of life involved numerous risk taking activities of which gambling was just one.

While recognising that choice was a factor in gambling, for many there was also awareness that gambling involved risk:

There's no easy way to get money, there's always a risk (Christopher, 19 years).

The risk was attractive to some young people as it produced excitement:

If there was no risk in it I wouldn't be gambling (Aaron, 16 years).

They love doing something against the law of course they're going to try something they can't do (male group).

It is not so much getting addicted at a younger age, they do it because they know it is against the law laws are made to be broken that's what kids think (Dave, 18 years).

The young people realised that gambling involved losses as well as wins. The element of risk and sense of loss for some was a reason why they did not gamble, and exercised greater levels of choice and control when it came to spending money:

It's true you've got to put money down to win some, but then you don't always win something do you a waste of time, because you don't really win (Lachlan, 17 years).

And you either win or you lose there's no hope winning anything It's like one in a million chance (Zac, 19 years).

Why put your money in a little hole (Jane, 19 years).

It's a waste of money (Aaron, 16 years).

It's a waste of time and money (Sam, 19 years).

Yeah it could be. It's a good way to lose money too (Aaron, 16 years).

I just lost kept on losing, kept on losing and I haven't won since and I just plain stopped with it I'm tired of losing my money. I'd rather go out and buy a bottle of alcohol or something (Lachlan, 17 years).

Like, if I didn't do that every time I use the poker machines, if I saved it I would be halfway to my stereo by now. And I would have been back to Queensland and back seven or eight times (Dave, 18 years).

3.5 The glamour of gambling

The attractiveness of gambling was emphasised for the young people by advertising. Certain advertisements, especially the casino advertisements were remembered:

When people watch telly and watch the ad, they go, Oh, I reckon on the weekend I should go and gamble they go, spend it all too much (Sam, 19 years).

Yet, the image advertising portrayed was criticised for its unrealistic picture of gambling, by accentuating the winning aspects:

They always write up, saying that somebody won, but they don't tell you how much they lost in the progress (mixed group).

You have ads that are glitzy and jazzy and great music, and when you get there is it really like that? Where is it people laughing around the roulette table; I just won 100 million dollars or something? No it's not. You hear people going Doh! Because they just put it on the wrong one (Jane, 19 years).

In one group there was discussion in which advertising was considered to have only limited influence:

Oh some would notice. But then others would think that it's just a waste of time they're just advertising, if you want to lose your money you could gamble it (mixed group).

A life of their own

Some of the young people noted the way in which the gambling environment, including the electric gambling machine itself, contributed to the attraction of gambling by providing a significant level of sensory stimulation. This appeared to be particularly the case for the more serious gamblers who treated the machines as if they were alive:

It's really alive, like the machine is really alive. And that's what makes me go back as well (Helen, 19 years).

Got hypnotised by the money in the middle I could see the number flashing I walk past the pubs and that and I see the gambling machines and they sort of keep teasing you (Dale, 19 years).

Remembering a friend's gambling and their enjoyment Is it the lights or something? Like, the lights go round does it do something in your head? (Jane, 19 years).

Win and then he'll lose and then he'll win and then he'll lose, I think it teases you a bit man (Stephen, 19 years).

Even the sounds of the machines could influence individual interest. One young woman associated gambling with a "ching ching" sound and repeated this sound throughout the interview:

You hear all the coins come out and so you just go and you jump on the pokies again (Helen, 19 years).

For one young man chasing a certain machine was symbolic for luck and was sought out:

The (name of machine) it's called and that's probably one of the best games I've found so far, to win was going through all the city pubs and couldn't find it and like every time we play it I've always won on it (Dave, 18 years).

The environment and role of machines was, however, a turn off for one young man:

I can't sit there It's like playing a video game but the same the same picture all the time, you get nothing to do, you just watch and go (Stephen, 19 years).

3.6 Gambling, alcohol & other drugs and escapism

The findings reveal a complex relationship between gambling and drug use, particularly in the way that these activities contributed to attempts to achieve meaning in life. Drugs, particularly alcohol, were often more of an issue than gambling:

Drugs, cigarettes. Drugs are the biggest scene (male group).

But like who's not going to drink everyone has a drink it's the thing (Dave, 18 years).

They spend more on drinking (Stephen, 19 years).

I'd prefer to buy alcohol than sit there and put five bucks into the pokies (female group).

All but one of the young people interviewed in this project spent more time and money on drug taking activities than gambling. Some interviewees saw their problem quite explicitly as drinking or other drug taking rather than gambling. One young person reported always being:

Too stoned and had no money to gamble (female group).

Another participant could only relate gambling activities in her life when she redefined taking drugs as gambling, that is, gambling with her life:

Oh, I think about it well this could kill me (female group).

Some young people viewed gambling as similar to drug use due to its addictive quality:

When people start it they can't stop (Dave, 18 years).

For those young people who believed they had an issue with drugs, they described drug use as a way to block out pain in their lives:

It's hard to face reality (female group).

Makes me feel better (Jane, 19 years).

It makes you forget about all the bad shit you get a habit and you start needing more and more and you need to spend more and more (Aaron, 16 years).

Sometimes I drink to get less feelings and that (Dale, 19 years).

Gambling on the other hand was discussed as a way of chasing positive experiences, such as a winning feeling, which will be examined later.

Two participants reported that drug use usually accompanies gambling:

I guess that's another reason why I don't go and gamble, you see I don't drink (John, 20 years).

I drink and I gamble at the same time (Helen, 19 years).

Christopher (19 years), who defined his gambling practices as episodic rather than addictive, noted extreme drinking and gambling binges:

In about 5 days I went through about \$1200 on drinking and gambling.

Others may continue alcohol use but not gambling. As one young person who no longer gambled on the pokies revealed in a second interview:

Oh I still go into the pubs. I still drink (Lachlan, 17 years).

The amount of drinking sometimes provided a reason to curb gambling, for example, Dave (19 years) noted:

The more you drink the more drunk you're going to get, and the more you're not going to realise what you're doing, and the more you're not actually realising you're throwing away so much money (Dave, 19 years).

While there was some indication that involvement in alcohol and to a lesser extent other drug use comes before gambling, there was one notable exception reported by a young woman about her flatmate:

He just gets stoned after he gambles because he feels so bad (Jane, 19 years).

3.7 Available options

Gambling for most of the young people in this study centred around pubs, which were the centre of social activity, in turn providing the young people with easy access to legalised gambling options:

We go to the pub, we have a couple of beers and whatever, and have a go on the pokies (mixed group).

They're practically in every corner of the street around here (Stephen, 19 years).

You walk around and there's pubs looking you in the face everywhere and TAB's (Zac, 19 years).

Everywhere you go there's gambling (mixed group).

Its just there you go to the pub for a drink and you've got them in front of you. You go there for a game of pool and they're right there. Why not throw a couple of dollars in (male group).

I've only just started gambling 7 or 8 weeks since I've been up here. Because I've had money, more freedom and the pubs are easier to get into (Dave, 18 years).

Like if you go to a pub they won't ask your age (Dave, 18 years).

Like all of us were under age, but we still managed to get in there (male group).

Ease of access to gambling facilities occurred not only in pubs:

Younger people like all my friends are under 18. They go to the TAB because, you know, they're not really strict on it (male group).

Obsession, I see him there all the time, and he always talks about it at the (Salvation Army care place) there's a gambling game there, and he goes down there (Stephen, 19 years).

3.8 Avoiding isolation and filling in time

Relief from stress and boredom

Gambling was reported as a way of coping with stress and boredom. For Christopher, coping with stress was a particularly significant reason for gambling and drinking:

When I get the shits instead of taking it out on other people I just go to the pub and get drunk and have a go on the pokies, if I get really pissed off it

doesn't stress me up relief in just hitting the machines when I lose I just whack and that's probably why it helps, I'm thinking about nothing I used to go out instead of gambling. I used to go out and get into a fight. Take my anger out (Christopher, 19 years).

Others reported that:

(Gambling was) something to do (female group).

I wasn't even worried about anyone when I was playing the pokies or something (Dale, 19 years).

I was bored and I kept throwing my money through the machine it's just something to do to pass the time when you're bored and that (Dave, 18 years).

It's just like a leisure time passer it's just something to do I suppose (female group).

To get money I guess when I was bored (Lachlan, 17 years).

Most of us young people go and gamble away because it gives us something to do during the day (John, 20 years).

It's just you're bored on a train or something you buy a Scratchie you know you've got something to scratch it's your leisure (female group).

I remember one time we were so bored, we had a little dirt track and the Christmas beetles were out, and the next minute we just go yeah (Stephen, 19 years).

Meaningful occupation

The experience of unemployment with the large amount of spare time was a major contributor to boredom:

If I was working I wouldn't have gambled (Christopher, 19 years).

It (gambling) would effect homeless people more than people who live in a place, because they go to work and relax, and people who's homeless just walk around the street, until their dole form comes (Sam, 19 years).

But if we had a job to go 5 or 6 days a week then everything would be sweet, you know We don't have that here there's nothing for me to do at all, except to go out and look for a job and that's boring as it is. Because you know for a certain fact that you won't find a job - so the only way to keep the money is to go and gamble it It's very boring, I do the same thing every day.... Too boring for me and I hate it. I'm trying to find myself a job and get out of there (John, 20 years).

The importance of finding employment that was interesting was emphasised by some young people, in contrast to jobs that were boring:

You choose your own kind of job – what job you like and all that (Sam, 19 years).

A job that pays well and that I like as well. I can't have a job that pays well but a shit job which I dislike (Stephen, 19 years).

I don't like onion picking, all you get is burrs on your fingers and that and in the middle of the sun it's very hot (Dale, 19 years).

Being with others

Gambling was more than dealing with boredom, it was also a way of avoiding feelings of aloneness, through socialising:

Boredom plays a big part(but) some people just can't handle being by themselves I can't I can't because you get bored more when by yourself Drugs escapes you from reality where with playing the pokies for you've got people around you and you're not alone (female group).

You could be just sitting at home, in your own flat They just know if they go down to the TAB or somewhere. That way there are people around them and that (male group).

I do bad things to myself (included gambling), you know. When I get lonely. Sometimes people won't pay attention to me (Dale, 19 years).

Like when you're out there you can meet people too, you talk to people you start chatting and then you've got a new friend (Dave, 18 years).

Yeah just a few of us head off down to the pub have a glass of beer and just play the pokies (female group).

See people going out, oh can I come too to gamble with you part of people (Sam, 19 years).

I'd go with friends it's just the atmosphere, catch up with friends (Aaron, 16 years).

When all my friends are together, we just go there for a social thing, you know. It's traditional now yeah we'll meet at the TAB (Stephen, 19 years).

You're using drugs, right, and it escapes you from reality where with playing the pokies you've got people around you and you're not alone (female group).

For some young people it was through socialising that they were introduced to gambling:

That's how I started gambling. I used to go with friends and play pool (mixed group).

If I hadn't known anybody when I got to Sydney it would've been all right technically I would call it peer group pressure (John, 20 years).

Furthermore, changing the people one socialised with was seen as a way of stopping gambling:

I don't hang out with them any more (John, 20 years).

Oh, I'm just hanging out with my friends (who don't gamble), doing something different just going out (Lachlan, 17 years).

Just to get me out of this scene. This isn't what I'm used to. But I'm getting used to it, I want to go back to (town name removed) do more socialising (Christopher, 19 years).

3.9 Feeling good

Many of the young people indicated that gambling was associated with positive feelings, hope, and achievement, and made them feel better about themselves.

Some of the "highs" experienced with winning were described as follows:

It's that feeling you get it's a really good high feeling that's with me. I'm out there to win, that's all I'm thinking about the adrenalin rush there's that big high feeling and it's better than anything (Helen, 19 years).

I only got the adrenaline rush when I was winning he was meant to be the best in the pub and I beat him, hey, and I got a mad feeling then (Lachlan 17 years).

That's at the TAB's and that the adrenaline there, and that's what it is, that's all it is, an adrenaline rush (mixed group).

You put the dollar in and you start off the game and you're trying to finish it It's like saying I can beat it I can beat it (Stephen, 19 years).

They described similar highs or rushes of adrenaline when participating in abseiling and other activities.

The young people highlighted the significance of feelings of hope they experienced when they gambled:

The hope of winning something it's like hope it's all there this is going to win I know this is a sure thing (Jane, 19 years).

They see people walk out with a load of money. Then they go up to try it (male group).

Oh I probably lose but, they've got that little bit of hope that they're going to win this time (female group).

Helen summed up the way in which drinking and other drugs blocked out negative feelings and gambling built up positive feelings:

Drinking hides my feelings. It blocks it out so I don't have to think about it. And like, playing the pokies is building my self-esteem back up too you win some money and you feel good about yourself and you've achieved it It makes me happy inside (Helen, 19 years).

For a few including Helen, gambling and in particular winning was linked to feelings of achievement:

Yes get on in life It feels like you're really something and a someone (Helen, 19 years).

(Gambling is) a self-esteem thing because a person mightn't feel good and then they go and put the money in this thing hoping that they'll win something, and feel better about themselves (Jane, 19 years).

Gambling signified the achievement of adulthood and was contrasted by some with feelings of being inferior which was attached to a non-adult status. This was stated clearly in the female group:

There's a lot of 18 year olds now that gamble. I'm 18 now, I can gamble I can go to the pub I feel like an adult now people respond to me, you know, sitting up there wasting my money (female group).

In this group, all the young people discussed the feelings of power which accompanied gambling and contrasted it with the negative way they felt when adults looked down on them, especially as "street kids":

You want to be on the same level but they do keep looking down on you we're street kids so we've got heaps of people who condemn us they hear us behind them they'll grab their bags check their wallets it makes you feel a shit (female group).

3.10 Gambling as a "problem"

The young people reported that they understood when gambling was a problem. They used the words "addiction" and "habit" as well as "out of control" to describe problem gambling, and drew comparisons with drug problems:

You can't help your addiction (female group).

What people do with it a lot of splashing money, and people lose out of it and the addictive thing is they go back and again and again (Fred, 19 years).

A thing you don't have control over (Stephen, 19 years).

Gambling is a habit (John, 20 years).

It's a drug. It's a form of a drug, anyway. Like the same as drinking (Dave, 18 years).

Many of the young people saw their drug use and/or drinking as a problem, whereas most did not see their gambling activities as posing a problem. Only one person saw themselves as having a problem with gambling, which involved losing money and causing problems with people. She described it as:

I feel real shitty I haven't achieved anything you regret what you do you just go back I just can't help it Hope because I want to win it. Temptation, it's like an addiction I treat it as my life. You know, it's like a treasure box – I just need to get into it the gambling is much stronger. I love my children heaps but to get where I want to get I just have to push some things aside (Helen, 19 years).

Another identified as having episodic gambling problems and a third had previously seen himself as having a problem with gambling. By the time of the individual interview, however, he commented that he was no longer gambling.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Most of the existing Australian research on gambling (eg. Maddern, 1996) documents levels of gambling. While the present study is qualitative in nature and so does not allow a comparison of levels, gambling for nearly all the young people in this research was a feature of their lives. Gambling was something they had been doing since primary school, frequently as part of family activities. In this respect, gambling activity for these young homeless people resembles that of youth in the broader Australian society (ACOSS, 1997), where the involvement of youth in gambling reflects what appears to be a social norm. McMillan has stated that in Australia "gambling has for decades been accepted as a normal, everyday activity"(1997:11).

The young people in this study referred to a wide range of activities as forms of gambling. Paralleling findings by Boreham et al., (1996), the use of electronic gaming machines (EGM's), particularly in pubs, was the most frequently used and referred to gambling activity. No matter what type of gambling activity these young people described, money was a central component. Indeed, the most common definition of gambling was "putting down money to win more".

Gambling for this study's participants was valued as a way of making money, money to buy basic necessities and key consumer goods, such as fashion clothes and accessories. Their limited finances normally excluded them from buying such items. Homeless young people have been referred to as one of the most disadvantaged groups in our society, with limited opportunities to fully participate, inadequate levels of income, and greatly reduced access to employment, health and community services (Magree & Elkington, 1993:2). In seeking to satisfy their needs, the young people chose gambling as a socially sanctioned activity, which contrasted with illegal activities, such as stealing.

Gambling was also an important way to enhance these young people's lives. Some saw gambling not just as a means of achieving desired consumer goods, purchasable if they won sufficient money, but also as a way to achieve less tangible, but socially important goals. These goals included achieving, self esteem and being perceived as an adult. For a few these social goals explained their attraction to and close association with gambling, while for others gambling was just one of the means chosen to meet these goals.

The young people in this study reflect what Wyn & White (1997) refer to as the "substantial proportion of the youth population" for whom the "achievement of a meaningful, fulfilling livelihood" is jeopardized (p28). This creates a situation that

places homeless youth as "losers" in our society, for whom life "can be very boring" (Wyn & White, 1997:121) with any sense of meaning to life likely to be elusive. In this context it is easy to understand the attraction of gambling. It provides young people with the experience of being "winners."

Gambling for the young homeless people in this study also helped them to escape feelings of aloneness and boredom. Many of them, especially the young women, emphasised the significance of the social aspects of gambling. This finding parallels results from the Queen of Hearts research project (Brown & Coventry, 1997) in Victoria, where the women interviewed recognised the importance of "social conviviality" in gambling activities. In addition, these activities helped "to relieve boredom, isolation and loneliness" and to provide a feeling of belonging (Brown & Coventry, 1997:11). The crucial factor for young people, seeking to fill their hours of unstructured time with social activities, but lacking transport, was accessibility. Pubs provided the most available option, with the social interactions almost inevitably being based around drinking and gambling, particularly with EGM's.

For the group of young people in this study, alcohol and drugs provided an escape from life's problems. Further, in association with other activities such as gambling, it was a way of seeking to add meaning in their lives. They considered drugs and particularly alcohol, which often accompanied or preceded gambling, to be a greater problem for them than gambling. Drugs and gambling served as a way of resolving feelings of social exclusion, inequality and deprivation. These feelings were associated with their inability to achieve the common goals of society, such as meaningful employment, accommodation and income.

The young people in this study shared the realism of gambling with the young people surveyed by Moore & Otshuka (cited by Gibson, 1997) in that they were highly aware that with gambling it is more usual to lose than win. Consequently, most young people in this study chose to limit their gambling involvement in favour of other spending priorities. The youth made clear that their personal and social needs rather than a rational choice dictated their activity in gambling. This was most marked for those few youth that believed they gambled a lot. Even for others involved infrequently in gambling activities, the experience of winning outweighed the loses. Generally for the youth interviewed, who by their self definition were "living on the edge", gambling was only one component of risk taking activities in their lives. Indeed, the level of risk involved in gambling was low, in contrast to other aspects of their lives. For instance, one young woman defined her drug use as constant gamble, with her life often at stake.

Most young people said that they could recognise when gambling was a problem or an addiction, but did not see this as an issue for them. This finding may challenge the inference in the ACOSS (1997) report, that disadvantaged young people are more "at risk" than mainstream youth for problems in gambling. Few of these young people saw gambling as a factor in their homelessness, reflecting the finding of Boreham et al., (1996) that gambling does not necessarily divert money away from expenditure on household necessities. Where diversion of expenditure occurred this related more to acquiring drugs and fashionable clothing. However, a small number of those who participated in the research and considered themselves to be 'problem' gamblers, and did identify some connection between gambling and being homeless. As limited information was collected on the nature of problem gambling from participants, when and how gambling becomes a problem or an 'addiction' for these few young people is unclear.

The major contribution of this study is the in-depth information it provides about the reasons for and meaning of gambling in the lives of a group of young homeless people. Similar research with other groups of young people, particularly those in more mainstream society, is necessary to provide greater understanding of gambling in the lives of young people. This could include young people at school and living at home, and others in independent accommodation. Such research has the potential to further inform us about the role of gambling in the lives of young people and the contexts in which gambling becomes a 'problem'. Other research could examine the nature of problem gambling in more detail.

5.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Gambling was not defined as a significant problem by most of the young homeless people interviewed. This is an important factor in identifying specific policy directions around gambling and homeless young people. When they did gamble, they did so with considerable awareness of the risks involved. These findings reinforce a finding of the ACOSS study in relation to issues of access by youth to gambling, that gambling by "young people has more to do with the culture of gambling than legislation or regulation of the industry" (ACOSS,1997:29). Consequently, policy that targets young people for restricted gambling access, or knowledge-based gambling risk education programs, are unlikely to be effective, given the broader acceptance, and indeed encouragement of gambling in our society.

Other factors that emerged from the research have implications for both macro and micro level policy development with young homeless people. At the macro level, the findings of this research pose a major challenge for social policy makers to confront the realities of life for youth "living on the edge". In addition, development of policies to enable young homeless people to be constructively included in mainstream society should be done in collaboration with them to aid relevance and involvement. Here, both government and non-government organisations can play a role in advocating strategies which seek to improve the social conditions of those young people who become or are 'at risk' of becoming homeless. Specifically, meaningful job creation and improved basic income are obvious requirements for these young people.

At the micro level, understanding the importance of gambling within the context of the lives of homeless young people has considerable significance for appropriate agency policy. In particular, policy needs to recognise that involvement by most young homeless people in gambling, whilst being driven by boredom, is an expression of a social norm such as belonging, rather than necessarily a problem of a dysfunctional individual. This challenges the dominance of traditional interventions based on assumptions of individual deficits such as poor self-esteem and educational ignorance. While such approaches have relevance, their effectiveness is limited if factors are not addressed at the macro level.

The findings of the research highlight the value of interventions which address what the young people themselves identify as their needs, such as the provision of opportunities to achieve and to experience belonging. Here, meaningful employment has been identified as important in helping the young people meet both their instrumental needs for money and their emotional needs for achievement. An

example of Salvation Army practice being developed in collaboration with these young people occurred within this research study, when some of the young people indicated that they would like to be involved as peer researchers on the topic of young homeless people and gambling. As a consequence, a further research study was initiated in which some of the homeless young people were trained and employed as peer researchers, to extend this project.

Further, in relation to the young people's expressed need for social interaction, agency strategies could be developed to provide opportunities that young people would find appropriate. Bowling is an example of interesting social activity that was mentioned, but considered by them to be less accessible than drinking and gambling activities. Other options for social interaction which could be of value are those which provide a high degree of excitement and energy, while at the same time giving a feeling of achievement and winning. Some participants highlighted abseiling as an example of such an activity.

It is the co-development, with the young people, of interventions that target the many entwined facets of meaning, which hold the greatest promise. For example, interventions that address boredom, belonging and achievement. This collaborative design of interventions can occur at the individual and group level. These young people are seeking to enhance the meaning in their lives and from the experience of this research process, are likely to respond to collaborative interactions, especially interactions where they have the primary role in identifying their needs and the ways of meeting these needs. Even those few young people who identified themselves as having gambling problems, and welcome behavioural based interventions such as counselling, emphasised the need to acknowledge the context of their gambling. Interventions where the young people have a role in defining their needs and choices are likely to be more effective than adult imposed perceptions of their problems. For instance, The Salvation Army, in outlining assumptions behind the initial research application, highlighted budget/financial counselling as a probable form of intervention. For some this would be welcomed, yet as an intervention it must operate with strategies that accordingly understand and enhance meaning and income in the lives of the young people.

The resources required for such collaborative and young people-focused interventions may be offset by the longer term benefits. Using resources in this way is likely to prove economically and socially more cost effective than interventions provided without relevance or personal meaning to the lives of homeless young people.

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