

**12% of Hong Kong families affected by gamblers in the families
Impact of gambling felt by about 240,000 local families, study revealed.**

Around March and April this year, youth organization *Breakthrough* conducted a Study of Gambling Impact on Hong Kong Family. The Study revealed that within the last 3 to 4 years, 12% of Local families fell victim to various levels of impact because of the presence of gambling members in families whose obsession with gambling affected family finance, relationship among members and Individual members emotionally. The Study also showed that people coming from affected families suffered from poorer psychological health and inter-personal relationship, while social support for them was weak. Gambling damaged the relationship among family members who by isolating themselves and their families. Long term speaking, such phenomenon weakened the Social Capital of the whole society, which was built upon reciprocal help and trust.

People interviewed in the above Study came from a representative sample of local families, aged between 15 to 64. 1418 local residents were chosen by random sampling and interviewed on the phone. The interview success response rate was 46.6% while the sample standard error stood at less than 2.6%. The average age of those interviewed was 34, and the group comprised more female members (56.9%) than male. The study aimed at getting a general picture about local families with gambling members and impact they suffered from because of the presence of gambling members. The study also drew comparisons on the psychological health, interpersonal relationship and social support experienced by those interviewed.

An average of 2 persons in each family participated in Gambling.

According to the Study, only 15.5% of the local families had never come into contact with any forms of gambling, while over 80% had had members participating in gambling in the past year, showing an average of nearly 2 persons per family, representing half of the number of members in each interviewed household.

Among local families, 71.7% had the habit of buying *Mark Six* members, 50% played *Majong*

regularly with friends and relatives, 54% played *Poker* and were engaged in *Horse-racing bets*. Last year, members from 9.4% of the families went to *casinos in Macau, gambling ship(s), local gambling dens or majong houses* to engage in high-risk gambling activities.

Gambling members placed families under impact of gambling

Of the 1418 families interviewed, 11.9% indicated that the problem of gambling had created an impact on their families (see table 1). According to statistics the finance of 5.4% of the families had been affected, for example savings originally meant for purchasing household appliances were spent on gambling. Valuable family items were either pawned or sold to repay gambling debts or simply to generate money for gambling. Furthermore, relationship among members of 10.5% of the families deteriorated because of worries over problems caused by gambling, for example, individual members might become agitated and irritable, refusing to talk to one another, often engaged in heated arguments or might even strike each other. People from 3.8% of the families said that worries about gambling related problems had left them incapable of concentrating either on of the families interviewed had been affected.

The 2001 Population Census indicated that there were 2,050,000 households in the territory. Projected on this basis, over 240,000 local families had become victims of gambling in recent years.

It was observed from the Study that compared with other interviewed families, the aforesaid families showed an obviously higher percentage of their members taking part in various gambling activities, in particular in “horse-racing bets” (79.3%), “going to Casinos in Macau, gambling ship(s), local gambling dens or majong houses” (20.1%) and “soccer gambling”(see table 2). More members from these families took part in gambling, and the money they spent on gambling each month was 3 times that of other interviewed families. The result of this Study matched with that of “ A Study of Hong Kong People’s Participation in Gambling Activities” conducted by Polytechnic University, commissioned by Home Affairs Bureau. According to that Study, people engaged in “horse-racing bets”, “going to gambling dens” and “soccer gambling” stood a high risk of becoming potentially problematic or pathological gamblers.

Gambling weakened family and Social Capital

The Study also revealed that, compared with others who were interviewed, people from families with gambling-related problems experienced poorer psychological health. They were less optimistic about their future, had a lower sense of self-value and had no explicit goals in life. In terms of interpersonal relationship and social support, they did not perceive

support from family and friends as often as they should, and lacked confidence in their community and neighborhood. All these pointed to the fact that, bent under the burden of gambling, the families in question were weakened both internally and externally, easily becoming isolated and vulnerable. Individual members were hindered in their personal developments. When confronted with life demand tensions from outside, there was a tendency for them to take radical actions which might lead to other social problems.

Survey showed that the ratio of those in support of (53.1%) and against (33.9%) legalization of soccer gambling remained much the same as the few surveys conducted earlier. No matter how they felt towards legalization, more than half of those interviewed were concerned that such an act would in the long run increase and aggravate conflicts in local families, only 30% thought otherwise, while over 10% thought “there might or might not be such a possibility”. The result was similar to that of a general survey done by *Breakthrough* the end of 1999 towards the public opinion on expanding gambling channels, meaning that the public were worried about the long-term impacts on society, especially on families.

Raymond Au, Director of Breakthrough Counselling Centre, referred to his experience in counselling in this area and said that where such problems occurred between a married couple, their relationship would suffer. Even though divorce might not be the necessary outcome, it would still take a long time to rebuild the trust between the husband and the wife. If however, the kids were involved in gambling, the diversity of opinions held by different members regarding the repayment of debts would cause the family to fall apart. In a lot of cases, the gambler had to flee by leaving their families. Eventually the family might break up.

Shirley Loo, Development Director of Family Heartware pointed out that at a time when unemployment rate ran high, some may regard gambling as their ‘second chance’. As a result they found themselves in deep waters, debt-ridden and unable to extricate themselves. Examples of such cases can be found in real life. The study told of quite a high level of participation in gambling by local families and reflected the belief of Hong Kong people that it was all right to gamble in small amounts. However, Ms Loo urged the public not to underestimate the potentially damaging effects of gambling on families. This was particularly the case in families in which members had only a weak sense of belonging, lacked communication and support and felt lonely and helpless. Such were the breeding grounds of pathological gamblers. Even more unfortunate was that family members who showed an obsession for gambling had in fact become a role model for the kids in the negative sense. These were problems worth in-depth thinking.

Tiger Chan, Breakthrough Researcher in charge of the Study, felt that the results revealed to society the price paid by families under the influence of gambling. We should take note that apart from creating financial pressure, gambling also destroyed the harmony and mutual trust which once existed among family members, alienating them from one another, and weakened our social capital which was built on mutual help and concern, creating even more personal and social problems. Recently the Government set up the Community Investment and Inclusion Fund. Aim at enhancing the society's Social Capital, it was hoped The Fund would widen the basis of mutual help and trust on which our Community could operate. The results of the study told us that relaxation on control of gambling would contradict the aim of the Fund. Tiger Chan asked the Government to formulate its gambling policy according to the principle of enhancing and strengthening the overall social capital. He also stressed the importance of consistency in that the Government should not let current financial consideration affect long term social development.

According to the Social Development Index announced earlier, evidences of deterioration of both families and youngsters revealed a shortfall in our society. Stated that family problems arising from high-risk gambling activities sounded, *Andrew Tang - Community Health Psychologist*, a warning for the society. When attention of the public was focussed on such issues as suicide among economic hardship, Government and the social service sector responded by encouraging people to stand firm in adverse situations and to help each other. Ironically, they failed to realize that the policy of relaxation had virtually undermined people's ability to cope with adversity. This was another disaster on top of the above. The study indicated that high-risk gambling activities ruined the link between individuals and social capital, weakened family ties and damaged community spirit. Individuals, families and the society all had to pay a heavy price in this regard. The Government should convey an in-dept assessment on the adequacy of the present social services in handling gambling-related family problem. It should also take a more family and community-based preventive measures in educating the public about the adverse effects of gambling.

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Table 1: Impacts of gambling on families

During last three to four years, experienced the following problems as a result of the gambler in your family or household:

A. Financial impacts (5.4%)

- 1) 2.0% Money for food, clothing or bills for the family being spent on gambling
- 2) 2.1% Money set aside for family holidays or other family purchase being spent on gambling
- 3) 3.5% Family or household members asking you or other members to lend them money due to gambling.
- 4) 1.1% Household objects, possessions or toys being sold or pawned to gamble or to pay gambling debts.
- 5) 1.3% You or other family members having to work more or longer hours to earn money due to gambling

B. Relational impacts (10.5%)

- 6) 6.2% Being lied to or not told the whole truth by the gambler or other family member.
- 7) 4.3% Fights or arguments between parents or other family member about or because of gambling
- 8) 7.1% Parent irritable, angry or neglectful because of gambling related worries.

C. Emotional impacts (3.8%)

- 9) 3.7% Had difficulty concentrating at school due to worries related to the person's gambling.
- 10) 1.6% Had difficulty making or keeping friends at school due to worries related to the person's gambling.

Added up item 1) to 10) standing for 11.9% of sampled families

Table 2: Gambling behavior between impacted families and non-impacted families

Gambling types	Family members participating in gambling		Chi-square test
	Impacted families	Other interviewed families	
horse-racing bets	79.3%	52.9%	Chi=40.943 , P<.000
going to Casinos in Macau, gambling ship(s), local gambling dens or majong houses	20.1%	8.8%	Chi=19.468 , P<.000
soccer gambling	16.6%	5.6%	Chi=25.705 , P<.000