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Gambling's biggest addict

Who has the worst gambling addiction in this country? Canadians might be surprised at the answer

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Who is Canada's biggest gambling addict? As it turns out, our provincial governments. When times get hard, with deficits growing and debt piling up, governments turn to gambling to take up the slack. When regular folks overspend and go over budget, the usual response is not to open up a larger line of credit. Not so with governments. Not satisfied with high levels of taxation, and overspending at every turn, gambling took an average of \$534 for every adult Canadian adult in 2011—money given directly to provincial coffers.

Governments show all the classic signs of addiction:

They hide the damage their addiction is causing

Like any gambling addict, governments do their best to minimize the visibility of the damage their habit is causing.

Gambling addicts are those whose gambling is causing damage to their finances, their families and their jobs. [1] But serious discussions about gambling's consequences are over, say governments, because gambling has been around so long. Like the gambling addict who hides the fact that he's burning through his family's mortgage money to support his habit, governments hide the real costs of their push for more profit.

Gambling addiction is a huge problem that cannot be ignored. In a 2010 paper titled *Government gambling and broken families* the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada outlined the effects of this addiction on the addict and their families. [2] We found that the effect of gambling addictions likely touch between 4.1 and 8.28 million Canadians.

They protect their monopoly

Provincial governments are fiercely territorial about gambling, like a gambling addict who won't let anyone else play their slot machine for fear of the next person hitting the jackpot. What the government and their private operators are allowed to do, private citizens are not. Any prohibitions which still exist are enforced only to protect the government monopoly.

In Vankleek Hill, a small town in Eastern Ontario, police carried out a warrant and found "illegal video gambling machines." Individuals were charged with violating the criminal code statutes against gambling. [3] In British Columbia, the government gambling site is trumpeted as "British Columbia's only LEGAL gambling site" (emphasis in the original).

They can't quit: They are expanding to get more revenue

Provincial governments are moving deeper and deeper into gambling activity. Whereas the gambler does this to recover his losses, governments do this in order to prop up expansive spending habits. In Ontario, the provincial government is now considering placing a casino in Toronto and other cities, something no party had considered since former Premier Bob Rae announced Ontario's first casino in Windsor in 1993. [4]

In addition, the OLG is committed to making lottery tickets and slot machines more accessible to the public in an effort to raise profits by \$1.3 billion annually by 2017. British Columbia, Atlantic Canada and Quebec have already expanded into online gambling, with Ontario soon to follow.

Just like the addict, government always wants more gambling revenue, and they'll do what they have to do to get it.

What can be done to purge government from this addiction? The average gambling addict would have access to bank accounts and credit cards cut off. Instead, the addicted government is allowed access to more money.

While we can't remove taxation powers, we can turn gambling revenue into a source of debt reduction. In this way, we would remove the ability of governments to see it as a fount of spending money.

Furthermore, research needs to examine the effects of gambling on individuals, families and communities in order to establish the true costs of gambling. The outcomes of gambling in communities are far from universally good as it is currently thought. Governments need to acknowledge the research that exists and build on it.

For example, the authors of a 2011 Canadian Consortium for Gambling Research report note that "[t]he monetary costs include money spent on a) treatment and prevention; b) policing, prosecution, incarceration, and probation for gambling-related crime; c) child welfare involvement for gambling-related family problems; and d) unemployment and welfare payments and lost productivity because of gambling-related work problems." [5]

For this reason, we recommend that:

- Gambling profit be used exclusively to pay down deficits and debt, until such time as both disappear
- So that government may come face to face with the cost of its addiction, we recommend that governments undertake or commission quality research into the effects on society of gambling

This eReview is taken from the recently released [Government--gambling's biggest addict](#). The report includes more detailed information about the nature of government's gambling addiction in British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia. For more information, contact the author at 613-565-3832, ext. 7504.

Endnotes

[1] Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario. (2012). What is problem gambling? Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. Retrieved from <https://www.problemgambling.ca/gambling-help/gambling-information/what-is-problem-gambling.aspx>

[2] Miedema, D. (2010). Government gambling and broken families: How problem gambling effects families. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/government-gambling-and-broken-families>

[3] Peeling, M. (2011). Illegal gambling machines seized in Cornwall, Vankleek Hill, Montreal. *Cornwall Standard Freeholder*. Retrieved from <http://www.standard-freeholder.com/ArticleDisplay.aspx?e=2585602&archive=true>

[4] Benzie, R. (2012, January 16). Liberals soften opposition to Toronto casino. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com/news/article/1116483--liberals-soften-opposition-to-toronto-casino>

Robson, D. (2011, January 17). The game goes on: Two decades of casinos in Ontario. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thestar.com/news/article/922751--the-game-goes-on-two-decades-of-casinos-in-ontario>

[5] Williams, R.J., Rehm, J., & Stevens, R.M.G. (2011). The social and economic impacts of gambling. Final report prepared for the Canadian Consortium for Gambling Research, p. 42. Retrieved from http://www.ccsa.ca/2011_CCSA_Documents/SEIG_FINAL_REPORT.pdf