

Submission to the Toronto City Council Executive Committee: Expansion of gambling at Woodbine Racetrack

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Many individuals in Ontario gamble. Most do so without causing harm to themselves or others, but **about 2.5% of Ontarians have moderate to severe gambling problems.**¹ In Toronto, there are about 11,000 people with severe gambling problems and over 100,000 more with moderate problems.²

People with gambling problems experience a range of harms including mental health issues like depression, anxiety and substance use. People who gamble are also at increased risk of suicide; a significantly higher proportion of problem gamblers report having thoughts of suicide in their lifetime compared to the general population.^{3, 4} The Canadian Safety Council, an independent advocacy group, believes that more than 200 problem gamblers take their lives each year in Canada.⁵

Many people who gamble also experience dysfunctional relationships and financial difficulties because of their gambling. These harms affect not only the people with gambling problems but also their families and communities.

We recognize that gambling is a reality in Ontario and that it already takes place in many forms at Woodbine Racetrack. But research from around the world shows that increases in gambling availability are associated with increases in problem gambling.⁶ This means that **expansion at Woodbine will likely lead to an increase in the number of problem gamblers**, particularly in the area surrounding the facility.

It's estimated that **a quarter of Ontario's gambling revenues comes from problem gamblers.**⁷ This number is even higher for table games, and for slot machines – which are known to be especially problematic.⁸ Woodbine expansion is anticipated to raise revenues for the municipal and provincial governments, but based on the available evidence, it's reasonable to expect that **a high percentage of these new revenues would be contributed by people who are struggling with gambling problems.**

Ontario provides some of the best and most extensive Responsible Gambling (RG) programs in the world, including the RG work being done by Ontario Lottery and Gaming (OLG). CAMH collaborates with OLG on some of these initiatives. We provide consultation services and train OLG employees on how to intervene with customers who are showing signs of being in trouble. While this work is important, it should also be understood that there is no evidence to indicate that these efforts have a significant impact on decreasing the prevalence of problem gambling in casino venues. We are particularly concerned that there is very limited impact on early prevention of problem gambling.

In conclusion, there is considerable evidence that **expanding Woodbine Racetrack would likely have a negative health impact on some individuals**. CAMH endorses the recommendation by the Medical Officer of Health that City Council maintain its opposition to expanded gambling in Toronto.

CAMH also endorses the recommendation by the Medical Officer of Health that **if the City opts to expand gambling at Woodbine, it should require the facility to close for a minimum of six hours a day**. Many Ontario treatment providers report that a disproportionate number of people with gambling problems play after midnight and that extended hours have negative impacts on their clients.⁹ Closing a gambling venue for a few hours a day allows people with problems to take a break from their extended gambling. Evaluations of restrictions on opening hours in other jurisdictions suggest that policies of this sort can have a measurable impact on reducing gambling-related harms.¹⁰

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camh The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) is Canada's largest mental health and addiction teaching hospital, as well as one of the world's leading research centres in this area. CAMH combines clinical care, research, education, policy development, and health promotion to transform the lives of people affected by mental health and addiction issues.

 **Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario** The Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario at CAMH brings treatment professionals and leading researchers together with experts in communicating and sharing knowledge. Our focus is on collaboratively developing, modelling and sharing evidence-based solutions to gambling related problems, within Ontario and around the world.

¹ William and Volberg (2013). [Gambling and problem gambling in Ontario](#). Report prepared for the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre and the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care.

² Toronto Public Health (2012). [The health impacts of gambling expansion in Toronto – Technical report](#).

³ Cook et al. (2010). [Ontario youth gambling report: Data from the 2009 Ontario Drug Use and Health Survey](#). Report prepared for the Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario.

⁴ Nower and Blaszczynski (2008). Characteristics of problem gamblers 56 years of age or older: a statewide study of casino self-excluders. *Psychology of Aging* 23(3), 577-584.

⁵ Canadian Safety Council (2005). [Canadian Roulette](#).

⁶ Williams, Rehm and Stevens (2011). [The social and economic impacts of gambling](#). Final report prepared for the Canadian Consortium for Gambling Research.

⁷ Williams and Volberg 2013

⁸ Williams and Volberg 2013

⁹ Problem Gambling Institute of Ontario (2011). Focus group results from Ontario problem gambling treatment providers.

¹⁰ Gainsbury et al. (2014). Recommendations for international gambling harm-minimisation guidelines: Comparison with effective public health policy. *Journal of Gambling Studies* 30: 771-788.