



## Children of problem gamblers

When parents have problems with gambling, it is often children who suffer most. Young children can miss out on basic essentials if a parent has gambled away household money. Gambling can lead to broken homes, damaged relationships, physical and emotional harm, and a higher risk of the children becoming problem gamblers themselves. A single person's harmful gambling can affect five to ten people,<sup>1</sup> and children are vulnerable when it's their parent or other close relative.

### Going without

One in six New Zealanders say a family member has gone without something they needed or a bill has gone unpaid due to gambling. Māori were twice, and Pacific people one and a half times more likely to report experiencing these gambling-related harms than people identifying as European/other; people living in high deprivation situations were also twice as likely.<sup>2</sup>

A US study found children are often aware their parents cannot provide them with items like presents, school trips and even food not because of a lack of money but as a direct result of gambling behaviour.<sup>3</sup> If children's needs are not being met, they can suffer from health problems due to poor nutrition or malnutrition, and the responsibility of meeting these needs may fall on extended family, schools and social services. This can cause those children to feel that they are not cared for – or cared about – by their parents.<sup>4</sup>



*'Everything that we had, it's just all gone. Simple.'*

*18-year-old male<sup>6</sup>*

### In harm's way

News reports of children and babies left unattended in casinos or casino carparks while their parents gamble seem to occur with alarming regularity. This form of neglect was reported to the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) 59 times in 2011 alone, affecting 101 children. That's just in casinos alone, not pubs or clubs, and the number is on the rise.<sup>5</sup>

For children of problem gamblers, feelings of neglect can be a daily struggle. The parent may spend a great deal of time in a pub or casino, move out due to arguments about their gambling, or disappear unpredictably.

It can also be an emotional loss. The parent's personality can become unrecognisable to their children, who feel gambling has become more important than family. Their relationship with their child or children can be damaged as they become more secretive, unreliable and prone to breaking promises.<sup>6</sup>

Children are more likely to suffer physical violence or abuse if they have parents with problem gambling, especially when combined with other problems such as alcohol abuse.<sup>7</sup> A survey of gamblers and affected others accessing treatment services reported that 50% of participants were victims of physical, psychological, emotional, verbal or sexual abuse in the past 12 months, and 44% committed the violence or abuse.<sup>8</sup>

*'Most times whenever [Mum's] been out, she never leaves a note for me and she never tells me where she's going and I always get really scared.'* *13-year-old female<sup>6</sup>*

*If it's dad's turn to see you, how soon would you know that it wasn't going to happen?  
Well if he's about an hour late.  
Right so you don't really know until he doesn't come?  
Yeah. Oh, unless sometimes he calls.<sup>6</sup>*

## Unhealthy living

Problem gambling, especially when it is present alongside other disorders such as alcohol and drug abuse can increase the risk of children developing poor health. Alcohol abuse, educational difficulties, emotional disorders and suicidal tendencies are more likely when a parent gambles. Other associated problems include eating disorders, trouble sleeping, asthma, allergies, and gastrointestinal disorders.<sup>9</sup>

Children of problem gamblers are more likely to have:

- Alcohol disorders (31% vs 4%)
- Major depression (19% vs 7%)
- Drug use disorders (5% vs 2%)
- Antisocial personality disorder (5% vs 0%)
- Generalized anxiety disorder (8% vs 0%)
- Any psychiatric disorder (60% vs 11%)

*Data based on a study of problem gamblers' family members vs a control group.<sup>10</sup>*

## Continuing the cycle

One of the most consistent findings is when children have a close family member with a gambling problem they are far more likely to develop problems themselves. Children with a family history of problem gambling are between two and ten times more likely to develop gambling problems later in life. If the gambler was their father, it was 10 to 13.5 times more likely.<sup>11</sup>

A study of gambling in Māori communities outlines a model of how children are at risk if gambling is a part of their young lives. When exposed to gambling activities from an early age, in the form of house games at home or marae fundraising activities played by their parents or whānau, children grow up seeing gambling as a normal activity and central to social life. They may be allowed – even encouraged – to participate from a young age.

Dysfunction at home, in the form of financial problems or domestic violence, increases the risk that they will look to gambling for an escape. As they grow their gambling may become more intense until it has become problematic. From there, debt may spiral out of control, relationships may erode, and their children may be neglected.<sup>12</sup>

*A Māori study participant, when asked what is lost when a parent gambles:<sup>4</sup>*

*'Just spending time, spending time with your kids, and just loving them ... you put things like gambling first before your kids.'*

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health (2010). *Preventing and minimising gambling harm: six-year strategic plan 2010/11–2015/16*. Wellington: Ministry of Health.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, S., Abbott, M. & Gray, R. (2012). Knowledge, views and experiences of gambling and gambling-related harms in different ethnic and socio-economic groups in New Zealand. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 36(2), 153-159.

<sup>3</sup> McComb, J., Lee, B. & Sprenkle, D. (2009). Conceptualizing and treating problem gambling as a family issue. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 35(4): 415-431.

<sup>4</sup> Dyall, L. (2009). *The impact of gambling on Māori*. Auckland: Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga.

<sup>5</sup> Information provided by the Senior Communications Adviser at the Department of Internal Affairs, 29 February 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Darbyshire, P., Oster, C. & Carrig, H. (2001). The experience of pervasive loss: children and young people living in a family where parental gambling is a problem. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 17(1), 23-45.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Health. (2017). *Measuring the burden of gambling harm in New Zealand*. Wellington: Retrieved from [www.health.govt.nz/publication/measuring-burden-gambling-harm-new-zealand](http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/measuring-burden-gambling-harm-new-zealand)

<sup>8</sup> Bellringer, M. et al. (2016). *Problem Gambling and family violence in helpseeking populations: Co-occurrence, impact and coping. Final report*. Retrieved from Ministry of Health: [www.health.govt.nz/publication/problem-gambling-and-family-violence-help-seeking-populations-co-occurrence-impact-and-coping](http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/problem-gambling-and-family-violence-help-seeking-populations-co-occurrence-impact-and-coping)

<sup>9</sup> Rossen, F., Butler, R. & Denny, S. (2011). *An exploration of youth participation in gambling & the impact of problem gambling on young people in New Zealand* (report prepared for the Ministry of Health). Auckland: Auckland UniServices Limited.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw, M. et al. (2007). The effect of pathological gambling on families, marriages and children. *CNS Spectrums*, 12(8), 615-622.

<sup>11</sup> Dowling, N., Jackson, A., Thomas, S. & Frydenberg, E. (2010). *Children at risk of developing problem gambling*. Melbourne: The Problem Gambling Research and Treatment Centre.

<sup>12</sup> Dyall, L. (2009).

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