The Prevalence of Pathological Gambling in Canada

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This paper critically reviews prevalence estimates of problem and pathological gambling in Canada. Populations studied are adults, adolescents and primary school children. The proportions of pathological gamblers found in Canadian studies (ranging from 1.2% to 1.9% for adults) are similar to prevalence rates reported in the United States. Given the apparent link between gambling availability and increases in the prevalence of problem and pathological gambling, it is hoped that provincial and federal authorities in Canada will make investments in research and treatment of pathological gambling in the future.

As in the United States, gambling in Canada has expanded rapidly in the past two decades. Before 1970, legal gambling in Canada was restricted to occasional charity bingos and raffles, midway games of chance, parimutuel wagering on horse races and friendly bets between individuals (Campbell & Lowman, 1989). By 1993, legal gambling in Canada had expanded to include slot machines and video gaming devices, casinos, large-scale bingo operations, sports wagering and off-track betting on horse races. Lotteries, bingo and parimutuel wagering are available in every Canadian province; casinos now operate in more than half of the provinces. Clearly, Canada is following the trend in
Western industrialized countries toward the approval and legalization of gambling.

Studies estimating the prevalence of pathological gambling in Canada are now available for six provinces: Alberta, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Quebec and Saskatchewan. While prevalence surveys have been completed in British Columbia as well as in Manitoba, the reports on these surveys were not available at the time this paper was written. Prevalence estimates in both of these provinces are similar to prevalence estimates in other Canadian provinces.

This paper will address the following topics: (1) prevalence estimates of adult pathological gambling in Canada; (2) prevalence estimates of adolescent problem and pathological gambling in Canada; and (3) a description of gambling behaviors among primary school children in Quebec. The results of these studies have been and will continue to be useful in evaluating the need for treatment and prevention services for pathological gamblers as well as the need for public education and information campaigns concerning the danger of becoming an excessive gambler.

Quebec is the only province where prevalence studies of pathological gamblers were conducted without the specific request of a government agency. In all other provinces, private companies or individuals were asked by provincial authorities to provide estimates of problem and pathological gambling in order to establish policy toward the legalization or expansion of various forms of gambling.

PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING AMONG ADULTS

Prevalence estimates of problem and pathological gambling among adults are available for six Canadian provinces. Detailed results of these studies are presented in Table 1 in the chronological order in which they were conducted.

Province of Quebec

The first Canadian prevalence study was conducted in 1989 (Ladouceur, 1991) and was based on the South Oaks Gambling Screen developed by Lesieur and Blume (1987), adapted and extensively used by Volberg and her colleagues in their seminal work on the prevalence