

Survey shows gambling rates stay steady

Both the overall participation rate in gambling activities and the overall percentage of problem and pathological gamblers has remained stable in recent years, a Home Affairs Bureau spokesman said today (December 14).

Releasing results of the survey, the Study on Hong Kong People's Participation in Gambling Activities, the spokesman said that the survey provided the Government with a useful and comprehensive set of updated statistics on Hong Kong people's participation in gambling activities. The bureau would carefully study the results in implementing gambling policies and planning measures to address gambling-related problems.

Commissioned by the Home Affairs Bureau and financed by the Ping Wo Fund, the survey was conducted by the Social Sciences Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong from March to May this year to track the results of a similar study conducted in 2001.

Comprising a telephone survey, a youth survey through self-administered questionnaires and five focus group discussions, the survey assesses Hong Kong people's participation in different kinds of gambling activities and their gambling behaviour, the prevalence of problem and pathological gambling in Hong Kong, and the attitudes of Hong Kong people towards gambling activities.

"We note that the overall participation rate in gambling remains stable, but there is a decline in the overall participation rate in illegal gambling activities," the spokesman said.

"The fact that some people are participating in both legal and illegal gambling activities demonstrates the need for

continued efforts to combat illegal gambling through various measures, including vigorous enforcement action and anti-gambling legislation, as well as ensuring that our regulatory system for existing authorised betting activities is effective in diverting the gambling demand from the illegal into the legal outlets.

"The decline in the rate of participation in football betting with local illegal and offshore bookmakers had, to a certain extent, reflected that the betting demand had been considerably diverted to authorised channels after legal football betting was introduced in 2003.

"On the other hand, the increase in football betting reflected the continued trend of growing interest and participation in football betting in recent years. This rising trend was also evidenced by the results of different surveys before authorisation of football betting."

The spokesman said the survey indicated that there might be a modest increase in the estimated number of pathological gamblers in the society, but the overall percentage share of problem and pathological gamblers in the community remained stable (around 5%). This pointed to a continued need to provide appropriate remedial services for problem and pathological gamblers.

"We have commissioned a study on the effectiveness of the services provided by the two pilot counselling and treatment centres for problem and pathological gamblers and the study will be completed next year," the spokesman said. "We will take into account the results of this survey, as well as those of the evaluative study, in considering how best to provide services to those who encounter problems with their gambling behaviour."

The Government started to implement preventive and remedial measures to address gambling-related problems in a

coordinated manner in September 2003 when the Ping Wo Fund was set up. However, the survey findings indicate that many members of the public are still not sufficiently aware of the measures.

"There is a need to strengthen publicity," the spokesman said. "We will continue to drive home the messages to the general public through different channels. We are now producing a new TV docu-drama series in collaboration with Radio and Television Hong Kong. This will be based on real-life stories of ex-gamblers who encountered problems with their gambling behaviour. We will also continue to publicise the counselling and treatment services through different means, such as TV and radio commercials and posters and banners."

The Government is concerned about the finding that of those young people who have gambling experience, more than half had their first experience in gambling at or before the age of 12. Many overseas studies have revealed that the younger a person starts to gamble, the more vulnerable he or she will be to gambling-related problems in the future.

"We consider that there is a need to step up measures to educate children in primary schools about the risks and consequences associated with gambling," the spokesman said.

"As many young people first participated in gambling to kill time, there is also a need to inculcate in young people the concept of living a healthy and balanced life.

"We are also concerned that among those respondents under 18 years who participated in football betting with the Hong Kong Jockey Club, almost half were reported to have placed their bets through family members, relatives and friends. Moreover, only slightly more than half of the gambling parents considered reducing their gambling participation to avoid a negative impact on their children, or have educated their children about the risks and negative impact of gambling.

"This indicates that many parents are not aware of their duty to show responsible gambling behaviour to their children and let their children know the risks and negative impact of excessive gambling. We will discuss measures to advise parents against allowing their children to participate in gambling, or betting on their behalf, and on how to educate their children about the risks and problems associated with excessive gambling," the spokesman added.

The findings also showed that the media provided youth with easy access to gambling information and exposure to gambling activities, which could impact on their gambling behaviour over the longer term. The Government would continue to call upon the media to handle betting information in a socially responsible manner such as separating such information from sports news, and adding sizeable warning messages on betting in the news section.

"We will take into account the findings of the survey in devising an appropriate strategy to address gambling-related problems in the community," the spokesman said. "We have already briefed members of the Football Betting and Lotteries Commission and the Ping Wo Fund Advisory Committee on the findings and we will consult the two committees in formulating measures to tackle the problems."

Further details of the major findings of the survey can be found at the website
http://www.hab.gov.hk/en/publications_and_press_releases/reports.htm.

Ends/Wednesday, December 14, 2005

Issued at HKT 19:25

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