

INTERNET POKER: A PUBLIC HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

Briefing Document

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The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of potential public health issues related to legalizing Internet poker in Iowa. The paper does not advocate in support of or in opposition to Internet poker legislation. Regardless of whether or not there are legislative changes affecting the legality of Internet poker, some Iowans currently are, and likely will continue to be, engaging in real-money poker games online. Therefore, IDPH should continue education efforts designed to discourage Iowans from engaging in illegal gambling and to reduce problem gambling in Iowa. In addition, IDPH should continue to provide treatment services so individuals with gambling problems can receive the counseling and support services to assist them in quitting, reducing, or controlling their gambling.

Internet gambling was one of the least reported gambling activities engaged in by adult Iowans in 2011 (5% ever in lifetime, 2% in past 12 months) (Lutz & Gonnerman, 2011). About 3% of gamblers admitted for problem gambling treatment reported gambling online during the past 30 days (Lutz & Gonnerman, 2011). Some of the cited concerns about Internet gambling included the trustworthiness and fairness of websites, illegality, and security of financial transactions (Wood & Griffiths, 2008). However, **certain characteristics of online gambling may be particularly attractive to novice gamblers** who want to experiment with new games in an anonymous and private manner (Corney & Davis, 2010). If a legal, regulated Internet poker option becomes available, one can *speculate* that some Iowans who had not previously gambled online would start wagering on Internet poker games, at least on a trial basis. **People who gamble online tend to also gamble offline** (Wood & Williams, 2009); therefore, **more Internet gamblers would not necessarily mean an increase in the number of Iowans who gamble.**

People with gambling problems are disproportionately represented among Internet gamblers (Griffiths, Wardle, Orford, Sproston, & Erens, 2009). Internet gambling has the *potential* to lead to increased problem gambling for some individuals (Griffiths et al., 2009; Ladd & Petry, 2002), but the scientific literature has *not* clearly established a causal relationship between gambling online and developing a gambling problem (Shaffer & Martin, 2011). The prevalence of problem gambling for gambling of all kinds during the past 12 months is less than 1% in Iowa. Approximately 13% of adult Iowans have experienced one or more symptoms of problem gambling during the past 12 months (Lutz & Gonnerman, 2011). **Given the ease, convenience, and constant availability of online gambling, it is speculated that legal Internet gambling could exacerbate problems for an unknown number of Iowans with, or at-risk of developing, gambling problems.**

Adverse consequences associated with problem gambling affect people other than the gambler. For instance, 22% of adult Iowans said they have been negatively affected by the gambling behavior of a family member, friend, or someone else they know (Lutz & Gonnerman, 2011). Because of the **high level of comorbidity of problem gambling with other mental health problems** (Lorains, Cowlishaw, & Thomas, 2011), it is difficult to disentangle the social costs directly attributable to problem gambling from costs that could be attributed to other problems. It is even more difficult to quantify social costs that can be directly and solely attributed to a single form of gambling activity (e.g., Internet poker).

Internet gambling is relatively new. Although the scientific literature on this topic is growing, the number of empirical studies is small and the number of studies assessing the social impacts of Internet gambling is limited. Currently, there is very little data about the gambling behaviors of Internet poker players in Iowa. **In conclusion, making an exact determination about the size and scope of potential social and public health impacts exclusively attributable to Internet poker in Iowa is not currently possible.**