

Ready or Not – COVID, Online Gambling and Single Event Sports Betting – Anticipating the Future, Preparing for Tomorrow

Introduction

COVID-19 has accelerated the growth of online gambling including grey market activity. This evolution, combined with the legalization of single event sports betting in Canada, heightened the importance of developing awareness and understanding the risks and opportunities existing for players across Canada.

New approaches – including research and collaboration – as well as funding for prevention, mitigation and treatment are needed. With single event sports betting, it seems as though there is a lot of emphasis on revenue generation. Equal consideration needs to be given to the potential negative impacts and costs.

The Partnership is a diverse network of public interest organizations from across Canada. It collaborates to build and share knowledge that challenges and influences thinking, and decision making within its organizations to advance responsible gambling, support sustainable growth and encourage safer play.

The Partnership brings together varying perspectives on responsible gambling. Membership is open to operators, regulators, treatment providers and non-profit organizations. Member activities focus on professional development and include planning and producing a Symposium and Think Tank in alternating years.

In May and June 2021, The Partnership presented a virtual Think Tank to identify the key responsible gambling and problem gambling issues related to online gambling during the pandemic and the legalization of single event sports betting¹.

Over the course of three half-day sessions of facilitated discussions, research presentations and guest speakers including representatives from the Canadian Gaming Association, Rutgers University and Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board, The Partnership developed a clearer understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on online gambling and single event sports betting and charted future forward strategies and tactics.

Two key research studies, undertaken by member organizations, British Columbia's Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch (GPEB) and BCLC (British Columbia Lottery Corporation), provided insights into current trends.

¹ Following the Think Tank, the federal government amended the criminal code on August 27, 2021, making it legal to gamble on individual sporting events.

The BC prevalence study and COVID follow up questionnaire showed online gamblers are more likely than gamblers in general to classify toward the higher risk end of the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). One-quarter (24%) of online gamblers classify as high risk on the PGSI compared to the 9% among all gamblers.

Results also showed two “groups” of players emerging: Low Risk and a more active High Risk group. In terms of the indicators of risk, the latter group experienced a different level of harm, with 41% feeling they had a gambling problem and 25% attempting to reduce their gambling. The study showed a high awareness (7 in 10 people who gamble) of the available RG tools, resources and supports, but the majority said they were less likely to use the services.

RGC studied examined COVID-19’s impact on gambling participation and mental health over a 12-month period (April to December, 2020). According to the research, most forms of online gambling expanded with a 20% rise in new online accounts with PlayOLG and a 15% increase in time and money spent. Results identified high-risk groups as young adults (males, ages 18-24), and key ethno-cultural groups (East Asian and South Asian).

This executive summary highlights issues, challenges and actions items related to five key areas that emerged from the discussions:

- Innovations in public education
- Digital strategies to reach players
- Unique RG considerations for single event sports betting
- Addressing concerns related to marketing and advertising
- The imperative of working collaboratively

Innovations in Public Education

The legalizations and resulting normalization of single event sports betting will require a corresponding systemic change in responsible gambling education. As each province begins to address public education, an opportunity exists to share best practices, data, and evaluation measures. While some Partnership members are restricted from speaking to underage youth, the members who work with this audience should increase communications with educators and parents/guardians about gambling and recognizing signs of problem gambling. Curriculum material should start with general information about gambling and move to more tailored-to-age material. Education should focus on risks.

For example, GPEB reaches a younger audience with curriculum modules about gambling for Grade 2 through high school and is open to sharing its resources. Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Ontario have groups who speak in schools.

As younger audiences see the incidence of single events sports betting grow, now is the time to educate them on prevention. Youth may see SESB as an entertaining activity rather than gambling. Some parents/guardians are also unaware of the risks of SESB on children/youth and young adults including how their own gambling habits and attitudes influences them.

For e-Sports players, we could present RG info before the games begin, and/or integrate it into messages that players are consuming thereby making RG part of the game.

For at-risk groups, especially youth, young males ages 19-35, and those who identify as East Asian and South Asian, targeted advertising to reach them is needed.

RG education resources need to be expanded to include dedicated resources for single event sports betting. Member organizations recognize they must improve and expand their efforts beyond traditional campaign outlets and include more education through digital channels.

PG risks with single event sports betting are not yet fully understood and prevention is needed more than ever. Without awareness and dialogue from a national perspective, players will continue to see single event sports betting as “fun” with little to no risk. What can we learn from other jurisdictions - including the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia – on how they have connected with players?

Digital Strategies to Reach Players

Online players have unique needs and behaviours in responding to information, connecting with RG tools and accessing help. New messages and delivery systems need to be considered in delivering gambling literacy.

The BC study results showed players know about the RG tools such as limit setting and timeouts but don't use them, indicating the need to promote and incentivize RG tools' use with push notifications, reminders, links, and instructions for relevant tools. Both gambling and non-gambling incentives could be used.

Systems to identify high-risk online players are advancing along with innovative ways to proactively connect with those who show signs of risky behaviours. Parallels with red flag indicators and face-to-face interactions in land-based venues are currently practiced. While it's possible to personalize messages in online play because everything can be tracked or

measured, the key is delivering personalized, real-time messaging which players will respond to. RG language and messaging needs to be adapted for online.

While innovations are needed to reach online players, we need to meet the players with resources and supports where they are. For example, chat platforms can be used to engage players in RG interactions that promote fun, enjoyment and informed decisions. It's important to show online players they matter through online chat and via telephone with RG-trained staff. RG advisors must move to the online space to pro-actively connect with virtual players who show signs of risky behaviours. A need exists to use RG incentives with players even though this is not happening now.

RG training for casino staff/management/GSAs to answer players' questions must also be updated. Progress is being made with online gambling, but nothing exists for single event sports betting.

Blocking software, available free, was recommended in the studies by the Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch and British Columbia Lottery Corporation.

Unique RG considerations for single event sports betting

Sweeping changes will occur once provinces roll out single event sports betting in local jurisdictions. Online gambling (including single event sports betting) will evolve and expand over the next decade. Some members recommended research be funded to collect and analyze behaviour data.

What sports are included? What are the long and short-term consequences? A generation of young people will grow up watching adults gamble on all types of sports as well as single event sports. How will they be affected and what messaging is needed around RG/PG? Readiness for these changes varies across the country from not being prepared to have conversations, to being in schools and talking to young adults, youth, and kids.

Single event sports betting will happen. Much is unknown but this presents the opportunity to get ready with data and how to use it and to work collaboratively with others (i.e. health ministry, local broadcasters, etc.).

Addressing concerns related to marketing and advertising

Online gambling, and advertising to promote it, are growing exponentially. Marketing budgets to attract new players are much bigger than RG budgets. Policies and standards are needed around marketing and advertising for single event sports betting.

Marketing and promoting RG supports and treatment programs should shift to online and mobile formats.

Players pay attention to slick advertising. RG advocates need to market themselves more effectively because visibility is currently low. Players are not connecting with current tools, and we need to create a new format to engage them. RG messaging and advertising must be bumped up to ensure they are as strong as promotion to gamble online.

The messaging to not buy lotto tickets as holiday gifts for children is successful. Could we take those learnings and expand and modify the messaging for single event sports betting?

Social media, the Internet, media, sponsorships, and watching-of-age family members engage in single event sports betting means youth will be exposed to gambling. We need to create flashy and dynamic RG messaging for young adults (males and females) using interactive communication tactics. We also need to inform adults of the risks associated with sports betting and how they can influence the gambling behaviours of youth and young adults.

Financial institutions should be included. They have a role in detecting and intervening in potentially problematic gambling. More can be done here by working with financial institutions. It might be possible to create voluntary tools to block gambling or warn players if they spend above a certain amount.

In the United Kingdom, a national self-exclusion program includes all lines of business and operators. As part of a national SE program, financial institutions can block transactions on credit cards on both state and private gambling websites.

The imperative of working collaboratively

The following action items were raised during the sessions and available to Partnership members to take on individually or collaboratively.

Collaborate to learn

- Create a central repository of what is being done in each jurisdiction regarding single event sports betting, including staff training, policies, messaging, etc. Include resources from other stakeholders (i.e., CRGA, CCSA, GREO, JPEP, etc.).
- Establish a skill/competencies matrix among Partnership members to identify strengths members can access.
- Fund a white paper: suggestions include “researching strategies currently in place across provinces”; “determining the role of social responsibility experts and regulators”; “literature review” and “tracking of player data.”

- Start discussions with legislators around single event sports betting allowed in venues where alcoholic beverages are served since alcohol use impacts decision making.

Invest in Research

- Invest in base-line research – Prevalence study to ensure the right indicators are being captured
- Survey countries with a history of online gambling for information on best practice RG tactics and messaging.

Target key demographics

- Identify experts on the 18-24 age group and look for effective practices around responsible alcohol consumption.
- Develop best practices and guidelines for ways to communicate with youth and young adults.
- Review previous research efforts and learnings from celebrity marketing and social awareness efforts to determine effective campaigns targeted at males, ages 19-35.
- Collect data on gambling trends in Canada on single event sports betting, eSports and fantasy sports including details about players and play behaviour. It is important to meet and learn from the people in the sports betting departments about data and best practices.

Create and promote tools and resources

- Create a built-in chat platform for online gambling.
- Create a national PG prevention campaign for single events sports betting. Identify and test key messages across all jurisdictions and discuss the potential of a national strategy and approach for messaging.
- Create a national checklist with guiding principles, messages and advertising for new games, identifying the minimum requirements that are expected.
- Share LRGG initiatives with all members.
- Create a prevention/awareness piece for online gambling and single event sports betting to educate youth and young adults. Start with LRGG messaging and adapt for audience and jurisdiction as needed.

Conclusion

Following the sessions, The Partnership agreed their message is stronger if they are aligned and speak with a unified voice. The variety of voices within The Partnership, given member organizations or jurisdictions, makes speaking as one voice challenging. Not all members can support a national program or statement. Certain members may use or support elements or program pieces. Even with this challenge, some members felt strongly we need to move RG issues further up the decision and policy makers' agendas.