

book review

Problem Gambling in Europe: Challenges, Prevention, and Interventions

Edited by Gerhard Meyer, Tobias Hayer, and Mark Griffiths. (2009). New York: Springer. 333 pp., ISBN: 978-0-387-09485-4. Price: \$199 USD (hardcover).

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This new publication is an extremely useful work, and the editors and publishers are to be congratulated for providing such a comprehensive and informative reference piece on not only problem gambling issues in Europe, but on other aspects of gambling as well (e.g., earnings and participation rates).

The chapters are written by individuals or groups of scholars from 21 European jurisdictions and helpfully not confined only to those who are members of the European Union (EU). Jeffrey Derevensky has written an enthusiastic foreword that goes well beyond the ritualised compliments characteristic of many forewords and is informative and stimulating in its own right. The editors provide an overview of their book which is, in their words, “the first comprehensive overview about problem gambling in Europe.” They offer interesting but by no means uncontroversial commentary on (1) problem gambling as a public health and public policy issue, (2) issues of causality, and (3) strategies for the prevention and treatment of problem gambling.

Thanks to the clear editorial guidance given to the judiciously selected authors about chapter structure, the individual contributions are all of a high standard, are both interesting and informative as case studies, and furnish the material needed to make comparisons. Although the book does not itself offer a comparative summary, the following summary of findings culled from it (see Table 1) illustrates the types of issues on which the book sheds light and the kinds of further work—not just in the area of research, but problem gambling treatment and prevention as well—that need to be undertaken in Europe and elsewhere.

The book reports that no reliable data are currently available on problem gambling in France, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, the Slovak Republic, and Slovenia. Table 2 displays some of the studies that have been conducted over the past decade in jurisdictions outside Europe, as reported in Wiebe and Volberg (2007).

These two tables reveal the one main weakness I have identified in this book—namely, that different authors use different measures of the same apparent phenomena and risk, as well as various survey methodologies (e.g. face to face vs. telephone), sample designs, and so forth. Nonetheless, they give the misleading impression that like is being compared with like. [For this reason, we recommend our readers view these tables as they are intended—as a summary of the prevalence work in the field—rather than as a comparative look at problem gambling *per se* in different jurisdictions. –Ed.]

Table 1. Summary of Selected Prevalence Studies of Pathological Gambling in Europe

Jurisdiction	Year	Author(s)	Sample Size	Diagnostic Instrument	Prevalence Rate	
					<i>Life-time</i>	<i>Past year</i>
Belgium	2004	Druine et al.	3,002	DSM-IV Fisher		0.4
Denmark	2006	Bonke & Borregaard	8,153	NODS	0.3	0.1
Estonia	2006	Laansoo	2,005 (15-74 yrs)	SOGS-R	3.4	
Finland	2003	Ilkas & Turja	5,013	SOGS-R	1.5	
Germany	2008	Buth & Stouer	7,980	DSM-IV Stinchfield		0.6
	2008	Center for Health Education (Lang et al.)	10,001	SOGS		0.2
Great Britain	2007	Wardle et al.	9,003	DSM-IV		0.3
				PGSI		0.5
Iceland	2005	Ólason et al.	3,358 (18-70 yrs)	DIGS		0.6
				PGSI		0.5
Italy	2004	Bicanzoli et al.	1,093	SOGS	0.4	
Netherlands	2006	De Bruin et al.	5,575 (28% response rate)	SOGS	1.0	0.3
Norway	2005	Kavli & Berntsen	3,135 (18-30 yrs)	PGSI	1.9	
	2003	Lund & Nordlund	5,235 (15-74 yrs)	NODS	0.6	0.3
SOGS-R				0.3	0.2	
Spain	2004	Becona	1,624 (Galicia)	NODS	0.9	0.3
	1999	Ramirez et al.	3,000 (Andalusia)	SOGS	1.6	
Sweden	1999	Ronnberg et al.	7,139 (15-74 yrs)	SOGS-R	1.2	0.6
Switzerland	2007	Brodbeck, Durrenberger, & Znoj	6,385	NODS	0.3	
	1999	Osiek, Bondolfi, & Ferrero	2,536	SOGS-R		0.8

Table 2.
Summary of Selected Prevalence Studies of Pathological Gambling Outside Europe

Jurisdiction	Year	Author(s)	Sample Size	Diagnostic Instrument	Prevalence Rate
Australia	1999	Productivity Commission	10,525	SOGS-R	2.1
Canada	2002	Marshall & Wynne	18,887	PGSI	0.5
Hong Kong	2005	University of Hong Kong	2,093	DSM-IV	2.2
Macao	2003	Fong ka Chio & Orozio	1,121	DSM-IV	1.8
New Zealand	1999	Abbott & Volberg	6,452	SOGS -R	0.5*
Singapore	2005	Ministry of Community Development	2,004	DSM-IV	2.1
South Africa	2005	National Centre for the Study of Gambling	3,003	GA-20	1.4
USA	2000	Welte et al.	2,638	SOGS-R	1.9

*Last 6 months

Amongst the interesting issues which may be suggested by the data in this book are the following:

- Why do so many countries do so little about problem gambling, not even bothering to estimate the extent of the problem?
- Given this, how—in the case of state-owned monopoly industries—can governments claim to the European courts that their monopolies are justified in terms of protecting their citizens, especially from problems of excessive gambling?
- Are the differences between the poorer and richer states reflected in lower problem gambling numbers for richer states?
- Are differences between the dates of the studies significant in explaining differences in results—for example, because problem gambling numbers are for whatever reason declining in Europe?

In general, the introduction is particularly good in identifying policies and practices which could sensibly be adopted throughout Europe, and indeed world-wide, to mitigate the harm caused by problem gambling. The introduction is not, however, beyond criticism, and I hope it will be helpful to point out that the editors make a number of claims which are at the very least contentious (e.g., the claim that increases of accessibility lead to increases in problem gambling [p. xxii]). They are also not always scrupulous in discriminating between correlation and causality, for example, in discussing unhappiness in families and the presence of a problem gambler (xxi-ii); however, they do later acknowledge that it is not known whether people who are depressed tend to gamble too much or whether people gamble too much (in part) because they are depressed. Sometimes, too, it is important to distinguish between what is a risk factor for, and what is a symptom of, problem gambling (e.g., chasing behaviour is discussed as “a known risk factor” on p. xxii).

The truth is, as this book demonstrates, that one of the reasons it is so difficult to get good scientific data on problem gambling is that, comparatively, there is so little of it about. A more serious reason is that research has not hitherto been internationally co-operative and the funding for it has often been dissipated. This book is therefore especially welcome as an internationally-collaborative venture which succeeds in greatly adding to the evidence base

we have for Europe. As such, it should prove invaluable not only to scholars, but also to policy-makers and judges seeking to reduce the chaos that characterises gambling policy and legislation in almost all European jurisdictions, as well as that of the institutions responsible for the development and implementation of EU law with respect to gambling.

Reference

Weibe, J., Volberg, R.A. (2007). *Problem gambling prevalence research: A critical overview. A Report to the Canadian Gaming Association*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Gaming Association. [http://canadiangamingassociation.com/media_uploads/pdf/78.pdf, last accessed 5/29/2009].