



Recently Immigrated Latino Males and Problem Gambling

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It is widely recognized that Latinos are not a homogenous group. The diversity that exists within the Latino population is broadly based on country of origin, language, level of educational attainment, income, and immigration status, among others. Gambling is a popular and prevalent behavior among Latino males, making them vulnerable to problem gambling. According to the 2006 California Problem Gambling Prevalence Study, there are as many as 490,000 adults who are lifetime pathological gamblers and as many as 713,400 adults who are lifetime problem gamblers. A disproportionate number of these problem and pathological gamblers are Latino. In addition, Latino males who recently immigrated are at an even greater risk for developing gambling related disorders. However, few recently immigrated males seek help for problem or pathological gambling, and few studies have assessed the risk for gambling behaviors among this population. This makes it difficult for service providers to obtain the adequate information to work effectively with recently immigrated Latino males.

In this paper, we will review the known demographic information and specific sub-cultural factors that increase the risk for problem gambling. We will also examine the ways in which current outreach and prevention strategies might be further developed and optimized.

Demographic Characteristics

Due to challenging political climates and decreasing economic opportunities in Mexico and Latin American countries, immigration to the United States continues to increase despite increasingly aggressive government measures to curb illegal immigration.

In November 2005, the California Research Bureau estimated the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States to be between 5.5 million and 9.3 million. Fifty-seven percent were born in Mexico (Urban Institute Immigration Studies Program, 2004). It is estimated that California is home to roughly 2.5 million undocumented immigrants, two million of whom live in Southern California.

The majority of undocumented Latino immigrants are young males from impoverished rural and urban areas who are drawn to the seemingly countless new job opportunities in the U.S. The average income for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. is \$12,000 per year, which is lucrative enough to outweigh the physical and emotional risks involved in entering, living and working in the U.S.¹

The growing immigrant population heavily affects social conditions such as housing, education, employment opportunities, and healthcare in parts of the country where they take up residence.² These

social conditions in turn test the resiliency, both personal and workplace-related, of newly arrived immigrants. If the individual has a high degree of personal and workplace-related coping mechanisms, then acculturation stress and its accompanying mental health concerns will be lessened. Higher levels of education, greater amount of work/trade skills, economic self-sustainability, stronger social networks and greater social skills and adaptability are factors that lessen the culture shock of recently immigrated individuals.

Alternatively, for the individual who does not have an effective level of personal and work-related abilities, everyday stressors can become unmanageable, and the individual will develop a high risk for adopting and practicing negative coping mechanisms and addictive behaviors.³ Unfortunately, most recent undocumented immigrants fall into this latter category, making them vulnerable to addictions, including gambling.

Risk Factors

Studies have identified common familial, social and psychological factors that increase the risk for developing problem gambling behaviors among general populations.⁴ The contributing social factors include:

- Social interaction
- Sensory stimulation
- Decision-making opportunities
- Group membership
- Emotional/moral support
- Self-esteem

Although there is a lack of research on specific risk factors for Latino males, research done on the risk factors for developing alcohol and drug problems in this population merits a closer look, since these addictive behaviors can lead to problem gambling. These risky behaviors are influenced by similar stimuli, and many of the risk factors that lead to alcohol and drug addiction may also lead to problem gambling.

For recently immigrated Latino males, social interactions with peer groups begin casually as they seek out housing and job referrals. These initial task oriented interactions may eventually provide more intimate interactions that lead to socialization,

friendship-building, and the establishment of social networks. The risk involved within these networks is related to peer attitudes regarding alcohol and high risk activities, including gambling. For Latino males, alcohol use is highly regarded as a component of “maleness” and male virility.⁵ If drinking is perceived as being culturally appropriate in a social network, then alcohol use will be more likely to take place. Group membership and the accompanying emotional/moral support is thus acquired by joining in drinking and other high risk activities, including gambling, that are accessible through the peer group.

DEFINITIONS

Problem Gambling: This term is generally used as an umbrella term which encompasses all gambling behaviors which cause major disruptions in one or more major areas of the gambler's life. In terms of epidemiological research, problem gamblers may represent “sub-clinical” gamblers, who have significant problems with gambling but do not meet clinical diagnostic criteria.

Pathological Gambling: A formal diagnostic category set forth by the American Psychiatric Association as a mental health disorder, pathological gambling is listed under impulse disorders. Key features of pathological gambling include tolerance (needing to gamble with more money), withdrawal (irritability and restlessness when attempting to stop or reduce), and diminished control.

Other specific sub-cultural and social factors that make high risk behaviors and addictions more likely for this population include:

- 1) The separation from a spouse. It is a common practice for young Latino males to leave behind their homes, family and spouses to come to the U.S. in search of greater economic opportunities. This separation is directly linked to greater psychological stress (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2006) and a reduced ability to cope with environmental stressors, such as the ones created by the immigration process.⁶ This separation from spousal or familial support and from its accompanying responsibilities and accountability increases the risk for addictive behaviors, especially alcohol and drug use.⁷

- 2) Peer/social influence to binge drink and spend money.⁸ A pattern of drinking less frequently but more heavily has been identified among recently arrived Mexican and Central American men⁹, a practice referred to as ‘fiesta drinking’.¹⁰
- 3) Few recreational options. The few social and recreational activities for this socially marginalized group commonly involve frequenting venues (e.g., pool halls, cantinas, sporting events on TV/cable, live boxing) where alcohol use and gambling are common.
- 4) Increased unstructured/leisure time. Among Hispanic males, large amounts of unorganized activities are linked to an attachment to antisocial values and norms.^{11, 12}

Risk Factors Specific to Young Adults

The relationship between high risk behaviors and the risk factors for addictions has been assessed in a few studies with small samples of youth.¹³ However, there is a lack of research on the relationship between the psychological distress from immigration and the resulting risks for substance abuse¹⁴, anxiety, and depression and its relationship to problem gambling behaviors.¹⁵ As a result, there is a need for research to focus on young Latino males who recently immigrated to the U.S. It is believed that these men are at a higher risk for developing gambling problems than their older counterparts due to the following sub-cultural risks:

- 1) High-risk methods of entry into the U.S. can be dangerous as well as costly. Many Latino males with little money choose methods such as desert crossings on foot, freight train boarding, or the use of “coyotes” (those who facilitate illegal border crossings for a sum of money) who often place the immigrant in life-threatening situations, creating a high possibility for mental health trauma.
- 2) Working without a “green card” and a valid social security number prevents undocumented immigrants from securing good-paying jobs. The jobs taken by them tend to be low-skill and provide little training. In many cases, they are activities that require little experience and knowledge for their execution, are insecure, deregulated, precarious, and casualized. These jobs include agriculture, textile workers, cooks,

building workers, domestic servants, machine operators, cleaning and maintenance workers, manual laborers and assistants.¹⁶ Latino immigrants tend to be concentrated in those economic sectors that are farthest from the changes and associated benefits of the U.S. modern information economy.

- 3) Driving without a valid driver’s license or insurance creates everyday stress from fear of being pulled over and being asked for proper identification, as well as a high probability of deportation if arrested.
- 4) Unstable living arrangements and weak social networks based on economic need.
- 5) The social and emotional stresses of discrimination, which may raise the possibility of engaging in addictive behaviors.¹⁷

Further studies must also address the underlying cultural values, including determination, hard work, risk taking, machismo, and carnalismo that sanction the risk behaviors.¹⁸

Associated Pathology

It is important to review the existing body of knowledge that describes similar pathways to both alcohol and drug addiction and gambling addiction, and to focus on the relationships between risk factors for both types of addictions to better understand the social and psychological pathways that lead to gambling addiction behaviors. Sub-syndromal and problem gambling have been associated with other adolescent and young adult pathology. A large study of high school students found adolescent gambling associated with increased rates of a variety of risk behaviors, including alcohol use, substance use, seatbelt nonuse, driving after drinking alcohol, and violence.¹⁹ The study also found that these risk factors were more common in students classified as problem gamblers compared to non-problem gamblers. In general, the number of risky behaviors increased from non-gamblers at the low end, sub-syndromal gamblers in the middle, and problem gamblers at the high end. In a study of high risk behaviors among Latino youth, Latino males had a higher prevalence of risky behaviors than their White or Black peers, suggesting an even greater associated risk for gambling addictions for this population.²⁰

Motivation

For this specific young adult population, gambling is used as a coping mechanism, a way to dissociate from stressful events in their lives. The theory that gambling behavior may be a coping mechanism for negative or stressful life events is supported by a study that found that adolescents with gambling problems reported more negative life experiences as a whole, and more major negative life events, than social gamblers or non-gamblers. Adolescent problem gamblers show different and maladaptive coping strategies than non-gamblers, using less task-focused coping and more avoidance coping strategies.²¹

Prevention: The Need for Culturally-Specific Strategies

Current research in the area of gambling focuses on mainstream consumer interactions and dynamics within casinos and large, public venues. However, for recently immigrated Latino males, gambling occurs in non-traditional and often clandestine sites such as homes and apartments, worksites, cantinas, pool halls, and parks.

Current studies suggest strong positive associations between risk factors for alcohol and other drugs, social and psychological factors, cultural high risk behaviors and gambling among members of this population, but there needs to be a better understanding of their interaction and the ensuing

initiation and prevalence of problem and pathological gambling.

It is also important to understand that this is a developing area for provider education, many of whose Latino clients may present for other mental health issues such as depression, alcohol and other drug addictions, or violence and anger management issues, and who require new culturally-based models and treatment approaches to deal with gambling addiction.²²

The identification and training of peer educators is a viable prevention education model that can serve to educate at-risk newly immigrated males in a culturally relevant, non-threatening manner and provide essential risk factor information and feedback to the growing body of knowledge about the population. Another strategy involves the establishment of a call-in center to help provide information and referrals for the initiation and continuity of care to this highly mobile population where phone numbers and addresses are frequently changed or are nonexistent.

These strategies can serve to create more effective outreach, preventive education, and treatment models.

This article represents the views of the writer and not necessarily the views of the Office of Problem Gambling or the State of California.

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The project aims to educate the public and train a broad range of service providers, government agency personnel, and community leaders to help prevent problem gambling throughout the State and to provide information on treatment resources for those in need.

All project services are free of charge and CEUs are offered for selected trainings.

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