Canadian Aboriginals have similar gambling attitudes and behaviour as non-Aboriginals

What this research is about

Gambling was an important part of North American Aboriginal culture and tradition. Historically, Aboriginal groups believed that supernatural spirits could influence the outcomes of events. Thus, the outcomes of gambling games were sometimes used to foresee future events. Aboriginals believed gambling brought spirits together. As a result, gambling games were an important part of traditional ceremonies that were performed to make sure a hunt would go well, to ask for rain, or to cure sickness. Gambling was also part of Aboriginal politics and allowed tribes to compete in contests. Gambling games gave Aboriginal groups an opportunity to trade and be social. Games were found to be similar across Aboriginal tribes in North America, which suggests that gambling was valuable for tribal interaction. In contrast, gambling in North America today is used to make profits and entertain people. It does not have the spiritual and ceremonial purpose it had in Aboriginal culture. It is not known how the change in purpose has affected North American Aboriginal groups. The research team explored the attitudes, motivations, and gambling behaviour of Aboriginals who lived in cities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Aboriginals in this study were people who identified themselves as being either First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. First Nations was used in the study to mean a reserve community or band.

What the researcher did

The research team invited Aboriginals living in 15 cities across Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan to be in the study. These cities are urban cities of different sizes and have a large percentage of Aboriginals. The research team put up posters in shopping malls, local Aboriginal community centres, and other areas where Aboriginal people gathered. Participants had to be 18 or older, live within the city limits, and identify as either Aboriginal, First Nation, Métis, or Inuit. Participants were asked to complete a survey. The first section of the survey collected demographic information. The second section provided a list of 17 gambling activities and participants checked off which activities they considered to be gambling. The third section assessed attitudes toward gambling, such as whether they thought gambling was good or bad. The fourth section

What you need to know

The researchers investigated the attitudes, motivations, and gambling behaviour of Aboriginals living in Canadian urban cities. Aboriginals in this study were people who identified as being either First Nations, Métis or Inuit. They were living in urban cities in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The researchers found that urban Aboriginals had similar gambling attitudes and behaviour as non-Aboriginals. For example, most participants thought that gambling referred to western types of games, such as slot machine and lottery tickets. Few participants believed that gambling was part of traditional Aboriginal cultural or religious practices. Participants also reported that they mostly gambled to win money and for entertainment, which is similar to why non-Aboriginal people gamble. Many participants believed that gambling was harmful. But they were uncertain as to whether First Nations casinos were a good or bad thing for Aboriginal people. This study can be used by researchers to further investigate if Aboriginal groups living in other places in North America have similar western views about gambling.
asked participants about their primary motivation to gamble. The final section asked participants if they engaged in 12 different types of gambling in the past year (e.g., lottery, poker), how often they played, and how much money they typically spent in a month. A total of 1,114 Aboriginals completed the survey.

What the researcher found
About 9 in 10 participants said they had gambled in the last year. This is a higher rate of gambling than is typically seen in the Canadian population, but is similar to other North American Aboriginal populations. Gambling on electronic gambling machines, lottery tickets and instant win tickets were most common. Only 1 in 10 participants said they had played traditional First Nations games within the last year. Most participants recognized western types of games, such as slot machines and lottery tickets, as forms of gambling. Only 1 in 4 participants believed traditional First Nations games were forms of gambling. Many participants of the Blackfoot believed traditional First Nations games were forms of gambling. But few participants of other Aboriginal groups had that belief. Males and those with higher income were more likely to think of traditional First Nations games as forms of gambling. Also, many participants did not think that gambling was part of traditional Aboriginal cultural or religious practices. Almost half of the participants believed that gambling was more harmful than beneficial. But many participants were unsure if First Nations casinos were a good or bad thing for Aboriginal people. Those who thought First Nations casinos were a good thing tended to live in cities with the most First Nations casinos. Males were more likely to think that First Nations casinos were a good thing compared to women. Participants reported that they mostly gambled to win money. This was followed by gambling for excitement and entertainment. Males were more likely than females to report gambling for money. These findings suggest that Aboriginals who live in urban cities are likely to see gambling in the same way that non-Aboriginals do. That is, they think of gambling as a way to have fun and win money, and that it is different from their culture’s traditional practices.

How you can use this research
Researchers can use this study to further investigate if Aboriginal groups living in other places in North America have similar western views about gambling. They could also further explore why Aboriginal groups have higher rates of problem gambling compared to the general population. Future studies should consider social, cultural, and economic factors.

About the Researcher
Yale D. Belanger is a professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta. Robert J. Williams is a professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge and a Research Coordinator for the Alberta Gambling Research Institute. S. Yvonne Prusak is a member of the Rural Municipality of Mervin in Turtleford, Saskatchewan. Questions about this study can be directed to Robert J. Williams at Robert.williams@uleth.ca.

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