RESEARCH QUESTIONS
What communication channels are most effective at recruiting new clients to problem gambling services? Can a roadside billboard advertising campaign increase admission rates to problem gambling services?

PURPOSE
Recruitment to problem gambling intervention programs is very difficult, and most problem gamblers never seek or access formal treatment. In part, recruitment is difficult due to the small number of problem gamblers in the general population. Information about gambling programs does not always reach people who need it. An identified barrier to seeking treatment for problem gambling is a lack of information about available services. Previous research suggests that billboards can be an effective method to share health promotion messages. However, no research to date has examined the impact of billboard messages on gambling service admission. The current research examined whether billboard advertisements about problem gambling service options would increase admission rates to local services.

HYPOTHESIS
The researchers expected that putting up roadside billboards for a 24-week period would increase the number of new admissions to local problem gambling services.

PARTICIPANTS
Participants were 97 gambling helpline callers, 29 gambling service clients, and 28 website visitors.

PROCEDURE
Billboards were installed in and around Windsor, Ontario, with messages prompting people with gambling problems to contact a gambling helpline or website. The billboards were displayed for 24 weeks, and rotated in 4-week cycles, with 4 to 8 billboards on display at all times. The researchers then tracked use of the local problem gambling website, helpline, and in-person services. The researchers assessed the communication channel that influenced a first contact to these problem gambling services by talking to helpline clients, tracking website hits and surveying website users. In addition, for a month at the end of the 24-week billboard campaign, some in-person problem gambling service clients completed a survey asking where they learned about the service and their awareness of the billboard campaign.

MAIN OUTCOME MEASURES
Communication channel influence was measured by asking first-time helpline callers, website users, and in-person problem gambling service clients where they learned about the service. The researchers also compared the number of gambling service contacts from before and during the billboard installation. Awareness and impact of the billboard campaign was also measured through self-report from in-person problem gambling service clients.

KEY RESULTS
Contrary to expectations, putting up billboards around Windsor, Ontario for a 24-week period did not increase the number of new admissions to local problem gambling services. During the billboard installation period, helpline calls were lower than in past years. The most common referral to the problem gambling helpline was from other people (34% during the billboard campaign). During the billboard campaign only about 6% of callers mentioned the billboards as a reason for calling; this was unchanged from baseline. Most website visitors learned about the gambling service website through a search engine; 11% learned via the billboards. Most of the in-person problem gambling service clients were referred by other people, but noticed the billboards after they started receiving services. Specifically, 14% noticed the billboards before attending the services, whereas 55% noticed the billboards after attending the services.

LIMITATIONS
The small sample of website visitors and in-person problem gambling service clients who completed a
survey means these results may not be generalizable to all problem gamblers or billboard campaign contexts.

CONCLUSIONS
In spite of the high potential public exposure from the campaign, billboards with messages about problem gambling services did not increase admissions or contacts. More research is needed to understand how problem gambling services can be effectively promoted to people with gambling problems who are ready to make a change. Future research should include a comprehensive baseline of the impact of existing outreach services, and use strategies to gather more representative samples.

KEYWORDS: marketing, problem gambling help, communications theory, behaviour change, problem gambling, advertisement

URL: http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1524839914566455