

Public Health Association

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The link between pokies and local crime

The number of poker machines in a community, and the ease with which people can get to them, is associated with higher crime in the surrounding neighbourhood, the Public Health Association conference was told today.

The initial findings of a three-year research project to understand and measure harm to communities from gambling were presented to the conference by Drs Martin Wall and Karen Witten from Massey University.

“Research in 2008 found that playing poker machines was the type of gambling that caused the most harm to families but we wanted to find out about the harm to whole communities.

“How many poker machines there are and how easy it is for players to get to them appear to be linked to higher rates of crime in the surrounding community. This seems to have nothing to do with how deprived the community is.

“We looked at rates of assaults, family disputes, theft and burglary and found they increased in the areas with the most pokies and the easiest access to them over those areas with the least.

“We also found lower levels of social cohesion and a higher number of food parcels given out by the Salvation Army in areas with a higher density of machines or less distance to the nearest gambling venue. Social cohesion was measured by asking people, among other things, if they felt their neighbours could be trusted and whether they felt safe when walking in their neighbourhood. Interestingly we could not make a link between gambling opportunities and debt levels nor children’s welfare.”

The next step will be to design ways of minimising harm to such communities.

The researchers are currently working with community groups and providers of problem gambling services on the most effective ways that harm can be minimised. These will then lead to pilot projects in a number of communities over a two-year period that should yield useful evidence of ‘what works’ in this field.

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