



THE CHINESE COMMUNITY PROBLEM GAMBLING PROJECT

To address the gambling problem within the Chinese American community, one organization has adopted a culturally mindful approach.

BY KENT J. WOO, MSW

What do Chinese American adults in San Francisco, CA, consider to be their community's greatest foe? It's not gangs or crime, nor is it substance abuse or domestic violence. Rather, the city's single-largest ethnic group's No. 1 concern is none other than gambling.

This finding was discovered by NICOS Chinese Health Coalition, a San Francisco Chinatown-based public and private partnership of more than 30 health and human service organizations, named after its five founding agencies: North East Medical Services, Independent Practice Association, Chinese Hospital, On Lok Senior Health Services, and Self-Help for the Elderly.

The coalition stumbled upon the realities of the gambling problem in the Chinese American community through the Chinese Community Health Study (unpublished), a random telephone survey completed in 1997. The study's primary purpose was to develop a health profile of Chinese Americans, including their healthcare access, usage, and needs. A secondary goal was to document the health issues of Chinese Americans to counteract pervasive model minority stereotypes—popularly held beliefs that, unlike other people of color, Asian Americans are a problem-free, success-driven, almost super-human ethnic group that needs no assistance. One of the most meaningful outcomes of the study, though, resulted from the one social question included in the survey. When asked "Which of these do you consider to be a problem in your community?" nearly 70% of the 1,808 respondents chose gambling.

The finding was both surprising and predictable. Many community counselors, social workers, and child care providers long suspected that gambling was a major issue for the Chinese; they were familiar with the scourge of this vice from having dealt with its effects on the families they served. Many who grew up in the community, likewise, could name a relative or friend whose gambling habit had grown troublesome. Still, these same people were shocked by the apparent extent of the problem.

Following a series of community forums, the coalition created the Chinese Community Task Force on Problem Gambling and, subsequently, the Chinese Community Problem Gambling Project (CCPG). As a pilot project, the CCPG has achieved great success in the past five years but has, by its own estimation, much more to accomplish.

Facts on Gambling

Gambling refers to any game of chance or skill that involves a financial risk. Just as there are a variety of gambling activities, there are various types of gamblers. The social gambler wagers for entertainment, and

the professional gambler wagers for a living. For the compulsive or problem gambler, who often wagers beyond his or her means, gambling is an addiction. According to the California Council on Problem Gambling, approximately 2% to 5% of bettors are problem gamblers. For them, gambling is an addiction that destroys them personally, professionally, and financially—not unlike alcoholism or drug abuse. Unbeknownst to many, pathological gambling is, in fact, listed as a mental health disorder. The *DSM-IV* describes a person so afflicted as being preoccupied with gambling and/or unable to control impulses to wager, among other traits.

When MSW students from the University of California, Berkeley conducted a prevalence survey ("Gambling Among Chinese Adults in San Francisco," unpublished), they found that 21% of the Chinese American respondents in the snowball sampling met the criteria for a pathological gambler.

The task force knew that it faced a number of challenges. Foremost, it would have to campaign against a widely accepted activity deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture and community. For example, gambling is often associated with celebrations, including birthday parties and the Chinese Lunar New Year festivities.

Another 14.7% fit the criteria for a problem gambler. The screening tool, the nationally accepted South Oaks Gambling Screen, did not account for some cultural biases. Nevertheless, most of those classifiable as pathological gamblers did identify themselves as having gambling problems (56.7%) and/or admitted that they had been told they have gambling problems (66.7%). The study also revealed that 30% of all respondents gambled once a week or more.

The Gambling Impact and Behavior Study (2000), a federally funded research project conducted by the University of Chicago, cited both benefits and costs related to the gaming industry. It found that towns with casinos generally experience strong economic growth, particularly in tourism-related industries. However, these towns also experience greater social ills. Such cities generally saw increased incidences of youth crime, white-collar crime, domestic violence, family stress, suicides, and problem gambling. In an unrelated forum, Tina Shum, a counselor at

Donaldina Cameron House, a social service organization in San Francisco Chinatown, estimated that approximately one-quarter to one-third of her domestic violence and divorce cases had roots in problem gambling.

The Chinese Community Task Force on Problem Gambling

As a first step in addressing the issue, NICOS formed the Chinese Community Task Force on Problem Gambling. The group was originally comprised of seven community leaders, but membership quickly expanded beyond 30, including mental health experts, youths, college students, law enforcement officials, and general community members whose lives had been affected by gambling.

The task force knew that it faced a number of challenges. Foremost, it would have to campaign against a widely accepted activity deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture and community. For example, gambling is often associated with celebrations, including birthday parties and the Chinese Lunar New Year festivities. In the University of California, Berkeley graduate student study, many responded "no" to the question "Do you gamble?" Yet, under the query "In the past month, which of these activities have you participated in?" respondents checked off items such as "purchased lottery tickets" and "bet on sports." As Ester Tran, prevention and education consultant to the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, observed, for many Chinese people, playing games for small amounts of money "is not considered 'real' gambling or an activity that could cause harm."

Gambling is woven into the community culture—pervasive in much of the physical environment of predominantly Asian neighborhoods such as San Francisco Chinatown. Advertisements for local gaming establishments cover billboards and fill Chinese-language newspapers. Although there are no casinos or card houses in the city and county of San Francisco, several are situated in nearby Bay Area suburbs, and scores of gaming corporation-sponsored tour buses destined for locations near and far pick up residents daily. Family associations, the leaders of which are generally regarded as the community's elders, often keep several tables for Mah Jong (a Chinese gin rummy-like game often played for money) at their headquarters. Even a number of nonprofit organizations feature Mah Jong as a social activity for seniors. One can barely traverse two blocks of the neighborhood without hearing the click-clack of Mah Jong tiles echoing through its alleyways. As Gene Chen, LCSW, director of the city's Chinatown Child Development Center, pointed out at the time of the study, it would be difficult to attack gambling without also attacking culture.

Moreover, the task force was greatly concerned about drawing the wrath of organized



您是否有賭博問題？

您有沒有因為賭博而出現財政困難，要向您的親友借錢？

您有沒有因為賭博而失去或破壞了和妻子、女友、丈夫、男友或父母的關係呢？

您有沒有因為賭博而忽略家人、疏懶功課，或者不盡職工作呢？

您有沒有用賭博來逃避問題，或者用賭來減壓以求鬆弛呢？

您是否感到無論輸贏，都沒有辦法停止繼續賭下去呢？

您是否本來只患小賭，結果總是賭得比預期中大呢？

當您試圖節制或戒賭，是否覺得身心不自在或者很容易生氣呢？

您的答案是甚麼？

對於以上的問題，如果有一個或以上您回答：「是！」那麼您可能就有賭博的煩惱了。您必須對自己坦白，您可能上了賭癮，您必須鼓起勇氣面對。



"When one person is addicted to gambling, the whole family suffers. Help is available," reads a NICOS Chinese Health Coalition brochure.

criminals. Many believed that gangsters controlled much of the community's illegal gambling activities and would not take kindly to anyone limiting their revenue streams. So, early on, for both political and practical reasons, the task force decided that its mission was not to attack gambling or the gaming industry, but simply to develop culturally appropriate strategies to address the issue of Chinese American problem gambling.

The Chinese Community Problem Gambling Project

Outside of its group members, the task force held scant resources. The group played its cards correctly, however, when members lobbied the board of supervisors at budget and town hall meetings, demanding public health dollars to address the issue. In addition to survey statistics, the group cited local demographic information: Nearly one-third of San Francisco was Asian American, and 20% of the total city population was of Chinese descent. One Asian American supervisor supported the cause, directing the Department of Public Health to allocate money to alleviate this problem that potentially affects thousands of residents. The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) added supplemental funds since NICOS designated "reducing problem gambling" as one of three initiatives in its TCWF-sponsored Chinatown Wellness Village project.

Following several strategic planning sessions, the task force parlayed its resources into the CCPG. As a starting point, the task force hired staff from two experienced organi-

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zations—the California Council on Problem Gambling and the Chinese Family Services of Ontario (CFSO)—to create and implement a training program for potential problem gambling counselors. Thirty-one community counselors, including bilingual English/Cantonese and/or English/Mandarin LCSWs and MFCCs, eventually heeded the call. Most



甚麼叫做上了賭癮？

對很多人來說賭博是一種有趣的活動，但對有些人來說並不如如此，他們會上癮。賭癮可以毀掉一個人的個人生活、事業前途和金錢財產。賭癮可以使您失去工作，破壞您和親友的關係，最重要的是您全家受害。

您需要幫助嗎？

只有您自己不知道是否上了賭癮。如果您真的上了賭癮，那並不表示您意志薄弱。賭癮就好像一種疾病，那是可以治療的。我們有為上了賭癮的人和他們的家人提供輔導和支持。如果您本人或者您認識有確上了賭癮，您要知道，您們不是唯一的上癮者。在這裡您可以為您自己或者家人取得幫助，解決問題。

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completed the two-week course, and many eventually gained council certification.

Task force members also hired Dae Advertising, a local advertisement agency specializing in marketing to Asian Americans. Together, they created the educational campaign's slogan, "When One Person Is Addicted to Gambling, the Whole Family Suffers," appealing to the community's strong family values. Project staff designed black-and-white print ads, posters, and brochures, as well as television and radio public service announcements. Visual images accompanying media materials consisted of popular gambling paraphernalia held by a healthy-looking hand that eventually degenerated into a skeletal hand grasping the same items, burnt, along with a charred family photo. By 2001, the group's media outreach efforts yielded a 21% awareness rate among the population, according to The Imoyase Group, evaluators in Los Angeles, CA. In 2002, the NICOS-Dae Advertising partnership won an award from the Newspaper Association of America for the year's best Asian American ad campaign.

The group also created a toll-free hotline. Eddie Chiu, PhD, director of the Asian Family Institute of Richmond Area Multi-Services, Inc., a provider of mental health services to Asian Americans in San Francisco, crafted the phone number 888-968-7888 especially for the population. In Chinese, the numbers "8," "6," and "9" are considered lucky, because they sound similar to the words for prosperity, wealth, and longevity, respectively.

The task force launched the media campaign in March 2000 with a press conference. More than 100 people called the hotline in the following three months.

CCPG Counseling Services

The task force also encountered significant challenges in creating a counseling program.

In addition to overcoming the tremendous stigma Asian Americans place on mental illness and their reluctance to engage in counseling, the group had to grapple with the fact that, despite several attempts, support groups such as Gamblers Anonymous had previously failed in the community.

For assistance, the group sought the counsel of Patrick Au, RSW, executive director of CFSO. In its search for a program model for Asian problem gamblers, the task force found only the CFSO's program in all of North America. Under the advice of Au, who was several years ahead on the learning curve, the task force designed its counseling program to include strategies such as using a social worker as facilitator in group sessions. Au observed that groups such as Gamblers Anonymous and Gam-Anon did not work well for the Chinese, who seemed to prefer a "professional" to a peer as group leader. Also under his guidance, the task force emphasized confidentiality in all outreach materials and client meetings.

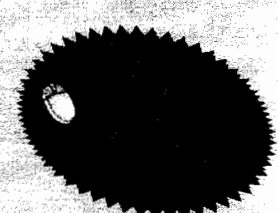
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Sr Paulette Yeung, LCSW, social worker at St. Mary's Teahouse Ministries, created her program, an alternative to Gam-Anon, accordingly. Yeung facilitated the six-session program that was designed to help problem gamblers' spouses understand addiction and codependency issues and regain their self-esteem. To make services convenient, accessible, and discrete, she hosted the program on Sunday mornings, when people were most likely to run their weekly errands in Chinatown.

In the fiscal year 2001-2002, its fourth year of operation, the counselors provided therapeutic services (individual and group counseling) to 49 families and 99 hotline callers. Also, staff increased the awareness of 203 community workers through one- to five-hour educational workshops.

Next Steps

Despite its success, the task force recognizes that it has much more to accomplish. For example, it would like to develop prevention-oriented curriculum for youths, whose rates of problem gambling are usually higher than those of adults. Secondly, it would like to establish a referral program similar to those provided for substance abusers, offering counseling as an alternative

to jail for people charged with gambling-related offenses.

Foremost, however, the task force would like to establish a stable funding source to accomplish these and future goals. While the city of San Francisco acknowledges the CCPG as a valuable service, it has not included the program in its base budget. In fact, because the program is routinely deleted from the city budget each year, a county supervisor must annually sponsor its renewal through an arduous political process.

Ultimately, the task force would like to see the gaming industry take responsibility for the problems it is abetting, particularly in Asian American communities. While many local card houses readily admit to targeting Asian Americans (who reportedly comprise as much as 60% of the clientele at some establishments) in their marketing, none currently contributes funds to outreach and treatment programs. California's Native American casinos have put a small percentage of slot machine revenue into state coffers for this purpose, but the state has never released any of that money to communities, nor appears to have any plans to do so. And that, for NICOS Chinese Health Coalition, is a great concern.



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Resources

California Council on Problem Gambling Web site
www.calproblemgambling.org

Canadian Health Network Web site
www.canadian-health-network.ca

National Opinion Research Center at University of Chicago Web site
www.norc.uchicago.edu