Addiction to Fruit Machines: A Preliminary Study Among Young Males

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Although most sources treat gambling as an adult phenomenon, adolescent gambling is more widespread than is generally recognized, and in some cases may even be pathological. This paper outlines a preliminary study of eight adolescents addicted to playing and gambling on coin-in-the-slot machines (more commonly known as 'fruit machines'). Factors involved in the onset of fruit machine playing are examined along with their alternative gambling activities and associated problems. The role of 'skill' and 'excitement' components in persistent playing are also discussed.

Adolescent gambling behavior has, until recently, been a much neglected area by researchers. This has probably been due to the legal restrictions causing most sources to treat gambling as an "adult" phenomenon. However, adolescent gambling is more widespread than is generally recognized (Griffiths, 1989a). A number of researchers have reported that in some adolescents, gambling may become pathological (Lesieur & Klein, 1987; Ladouceur & Mirault, 1988; Griffiths, 1988a). At present in the U.K., the gambling activity most likely to lead to pathological gambling behavior in adolescents is the playing of coin-in-the-slot-machines, more commonly called “fruit machines.”

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Recent studies (British Market Research Bureau, 1986; Ide-Smith & Lea, 1988) have shown that the playing of fruit machines is the most popular form of commercial gambling among British teenagers. To date, only eight studies have been published which examine the playing of fruit machines in the lives of adolescents (see Table 1). Apart from a study by Moran (1987) whose findings were based on headteachers' perceived estimates of school children's gambling, all studies of fruit machine gambling in adolescents have used questionnaires given to groups of young people as the basis to their research methodology.

The first survey conducted on young fruit machine players was that of Waterman and Atkin (1985). In a questionnaire given to groups of 451 Birmingham schoolchildren aged 14 to 18 years, they found 77% had played fruit machines at some point in their lives but that only 9% played them often. As age increased, fruit machine playing decreased and fruit machine playing was reported to be an enjoyable activity played in moderation.

Huff and Collinson (1987) reported the only study which has directly looked at a possible link between excessive playing of amusement machines (fruit machines and video games) and delinquency. In a questionnaire given to 100 (male) consecutive admissions to H.M. Youth Custody Centre (Feltham, South East England) aged between 15 and 21 years, it was reported that 60% gambled and 60% played video games. Twenty-seven percent gambled at least 3 times a week (12% every day) mostly on fruit machines, and 23% of gamblers had stolen to finance their habit. Twenty-one percent of video game players had also stolen to finance their playing.

Moran (1987) carried out a survey into 30 London borough schools and 25 of the headteachers reported that a number of problems were occurring at their schools as a result of fruit machine playing. These included poor work, truancy (missing school to play fruit machines), emotional disturbance, stealing (to finance their fruit machine playing) and aggressive behavior (fights in the playground over gambling debts). Although Moran's study could be criticized on the grounds it was based on subjective reports, further direct studies have confirmed his conclusions.

Barham and Cormell (1987) administered questionnaires to 329 schoolchildren aged between 11 and 16 years in Bognor Regis (a U.K. south coast holiday resort). They reported 169 children had visited an