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Study shows gambling can be a meaningful recreational activity for seniors

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WATERLOO – Gambling, despite its social stigma, can be a meaningful recreational activity for older adults, according to a recent study on gambling among Ontario’s rural seniors by Prof. Joan Norris of Wilfrid Laurier University.

The results are contrary to widely held negative perceptions about seniors and gambling. “Our results show that gambling is not a problem for the ageing population; rather, it is one of many activities undertaken by seniors,” Norris said. “Those who participate in many activities are more likely to gamble, and those who gamble do so for the enjoyment, to win, and to socialize with others.”

The study, undertaken with Prof. Joseph Tindale at the University of Guelph and funded by the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre, looked at the gambling attitudes and behaviours of more than 2,000 rural Ontarians aged 55 and older, with the majority over 70 years old. Participants – 65 per cent of whom were female and 56 per cent married – were asked questions about their gambling behaviour and attitudes, family history and other recreational activities.

Although gambling ranked ninth in importance relative to other activities, such as spending time with family and friends and volunteering, only 20 per cent of respondents said they “rarely or never” gambled.

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Family is an important factor in gambling behaviour. If a senior's family members gamble, and are supportive, then that both increases the senior's positive attitude toward gambling and reduces their risk of problem gambling.

While Norris said that seniors as a whole are not as at risk for problem gambling as teens and young adults, there are warning signs. "Those seniors that identify excitement and escape from boredom and loneliness as reasons for gambling, those that spend more than they planned or chase losses, or those that use gambling as a substitute for social relationships could be at risk," Norris said.

Norris and Tindale's next study is a three-year research project focusing on gambling among urban-dwelling baby boomers over the age of 45 in Waterloo Region and Guelph. People who are interested in participating in the study can visit: www.familygambling.ca.