

# Changing lives with a roll of dice

York Region is a hotbed of illegal gaming

BY PATRICK CASEY  
Staff Writer

**O**n a rainy afternoon in Toronto, two men slip into the back of a taxi cab. Within minutes, the pair each hold a \$50 bill and cast a bet on two raindrops that strike the side window, wagering which speck of water will be first to reach the bottom of the car's tinted glass.

Unequivocally, that defines a gambler.

Compared to nicotine, alcohol, prescription drugs and illegal narcotics, gambling is an addiction that often fails to garner mainstream attention. Yet its effects are just as hideous for the gambler, creating a host of problems at home and work, with family and friends.

Two examples of gambling surfaced last week.

In Toronto, a 33-year-old man was killed after being shot six times in the back at an after-hours gambling den. Described as a card house, the room is located above a Taiwanese tea room and has been raided several times by police.

And court submissions Thursday detailed how former Newmarket recreation director Bill Andrews and an unnamed accomplice worked a sophisticated scheme for five years, bilking more than \$500,000 from the town coffers, all to feed a gambling addiction.

Gambling arrives in several



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION/ROB ALARY

*This is one in a series of articles examining the seamer side of life in York Region.*

forms, including the legal variety — such as the provincial government-sanctioned lottery tickets, the flashy casinos in Rama, Niagara Falls, Windsor, and soon North Bay, or the rows of slot machines recently installed at area racetracks.

A record \$1.97 billion was generated in gaming revenue last year

alone from the three commercial casinos.

But according to two members of the York Regional Police vice squad, even though Queen's Park rolled the dice and waded knee-deep into the industry, its lusty involvement has yet to diminish illegal gambling establishments across the region.

"It has not changed significantly," confirmed Det. Sgt. Michael Fleming, who heads the force's vice squad. "There are still illegal casinos, there are still social clubs that are gaming houses because they take a piece of the rake for profit.

"The greatest percentage of the people that would go to a legal casino are law-abiding citizens and they wouldn't go to an illegal casino. But there are those that go to illegal casinos and appreciate them because the rules are different. There are different games available, the pots are bigger."

Lurking in the shadows, predominantly in southern York Region, are illegal underground casinos, roaming between Markham, Richmond Hill and Vaughan. Offering free booze, prostitutes and loan sharks, the

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## From cards to dice, what they're playing

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Gambling's thrill is endless and, so too, are the games.

Like that old Flintstones cartoon episode where Fred is addicted to betting, losing his shirt to the neighbourhood kid, Arnold, in a game of jacks, York Region's bettors have plenty to wager on.

The Italians favour scala, a form of gin rummy, and bocce tournaments to cast their bets, while Asians enjoy pai gow poker and fan tan, which Const. Alan Cooke of the York Regional Police vice squad calls "gambling for the sake of gambling."

Fan tan involves a bowl filled with beans or buttons and, with 30

or more players, around a table, participants will cast bets on the sequence of items removed from the bowl.

"There is absolutely no skill involved and it is such a frenzy," said Cooke.

Other Chinese games include mah-jong, a tiles game similar to dominoes, and sic bo, a dice and board game so complicated, Cooke says, it once took an undercover agent more than six months just to learn the game's basic manoeuvres.

Favourites in the underground illegal casinos include barbooty, a small die with specific payoffs written on every side of the cube. Bets are laid and the rolled die leads to the exchange of hundreds

of dollars in a single turn.

High-stakes Texas hold'em poker is another gem, where two cards are dealt to players with a minimum \$15 buy-in required. Additional cards may cost \$10 or more, creating \$500 pots that are up for grabs.

Electronic gambling across the Internet remains relatively new, although worldwide e-gaming revenue has soared to more than \$1.2 billion US last year, and could top \$8 billion by 2002.

But with off-shore sites in Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, Cooke said, it's literally non-enforceable by lawmakers.

And while bookmakers concentrate on operating massive professional football and hockey

pools, the small office pool selecting the winner of the Masters golf championship or the National Hockey League playoffs is legal — as long as the operators are not taking a percentage of the pot.

"As long as all the money that is taken in goes back out, it is not illegal," said Cooke.

"But if the organizer takes 5 per cent because he is keeping statistics on a computer, that makes it illegal."

"It's not illegal to bet, it is illegal to draw a profit."

Lottery tickets in support of your local minor hockey or soccer league, says Cooke, remains a legal endeavour — if the scheme has a licence and is registered as a charitable foundation.

### PINPOINTING GAMBLERS:

Gambling can be an enjoyable pastime, an evening's entertainment or an occasional outing. But for some people, it can lead to devastating consequences. Similar to alcohol abuse, gambling abuse can ruin individuals and families.

#### 1. What is gambling?

Any time you bet money or something of value on an event of uncertain outcome, you are gambling.

#### 2. Who is at risk? The following are signs a person may have a problem.

- Gambling for longer periods of time.
- Preoccupation with gambling, constantly thinking about and preparing for gambling.
- Chasing losses — gambling more often and playing higher stakes to "win back" lost money.
- Frequent, unexplained absences from home or work and undue secrecy.
- Gambling to escape from obligations or life's daily pressures.
- Gambling debts, lying or criminal activity to finance gambling.
- Neglecting family and personal needs, such as nutrition, sleep, schooling or your general well-being.

#### 3. What is problem gambling?

Gambling is a problem when it adversely affects relationships, family, friends, employment and finances, and also affects your physical, social and mental health.

### RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING:

- Gamble for entertainment, not as a way to make money.
- Balance gambling with other leisure activities.
- Only use discretionary income, not money for everyday expenses.
- Set a budget and stick to it.
- Don't borrow money to gamble.
- Set a time limit.
- Take frequent breaks.
- Be aware — risk increases at times of loss or depression.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

If you think you have a problem or know someone who does, there are qualified people and organizations that can help, including:

- Addiction Services for York Region — (905) 841-7007
- Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline — 1-888-230-3505
- The Canadian Foundation on Compulsive Gambling (Ontario) — 1-888-391-1111
- The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health — 1-800-463-6273

— Patrick Casey

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