

editorial

Covid-19 and Gambling in Ontario

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In the past three months the world has been hit with the most serious pandemic in just over one hundred years. For decades, scientists have been warning politicians to be prepared for an event of this kind, but, with a few exceptions, our world was nevertheless caught unprepared. During this current and particular pandemic many human activities have moved online, including both business meetings and shopping. To a certain extent, medical treatment has also been adapted to the Internet.

Gambling is a multi-billion dollar global enterprise. In Ontario, Canada, it is mainly offered in land-based casinos, racetracks, bingo halls, and lotteries. Most of these venues have been shut down or had their business curtailed in some way. Casinos have been closed since the middle of March.

What effect has this situation had on problem gambling? To determine the answer, I contacted Anne Counter, Director, System Navigation and Information Services, at ConnexOntario. The organization runs the Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline. ConnexOntario operates several helplines for information and assistance with mental health, substance abuse, and problem gambling. She provided me with a number of graphs for contacts over the past two years.

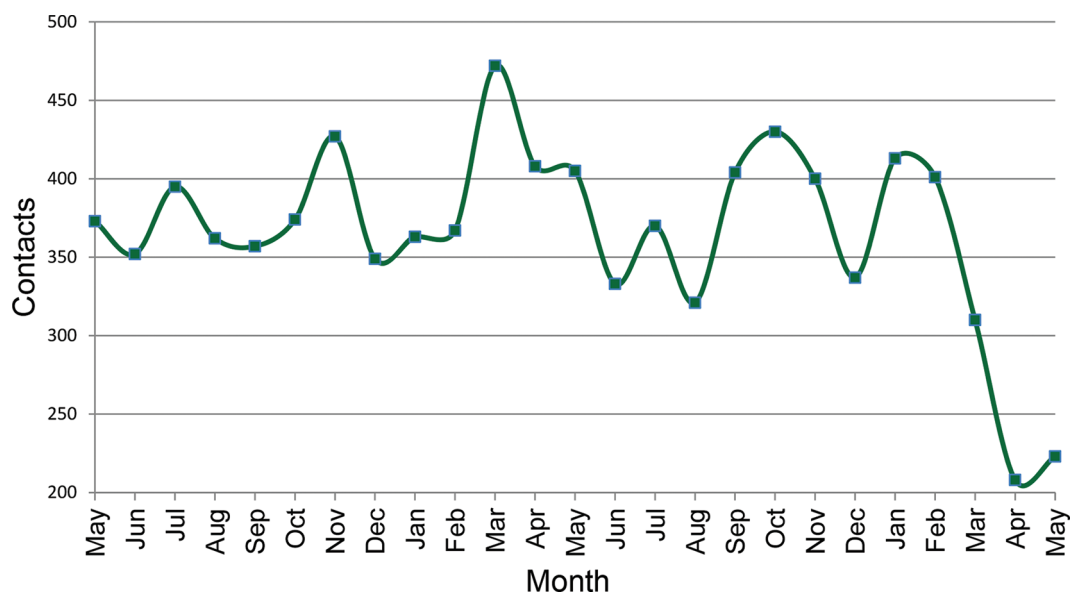


Figure 1. ConnexOntario helpline telephone calls related to problem gambling from May 2018 to May 2020. Reprinted with permission.

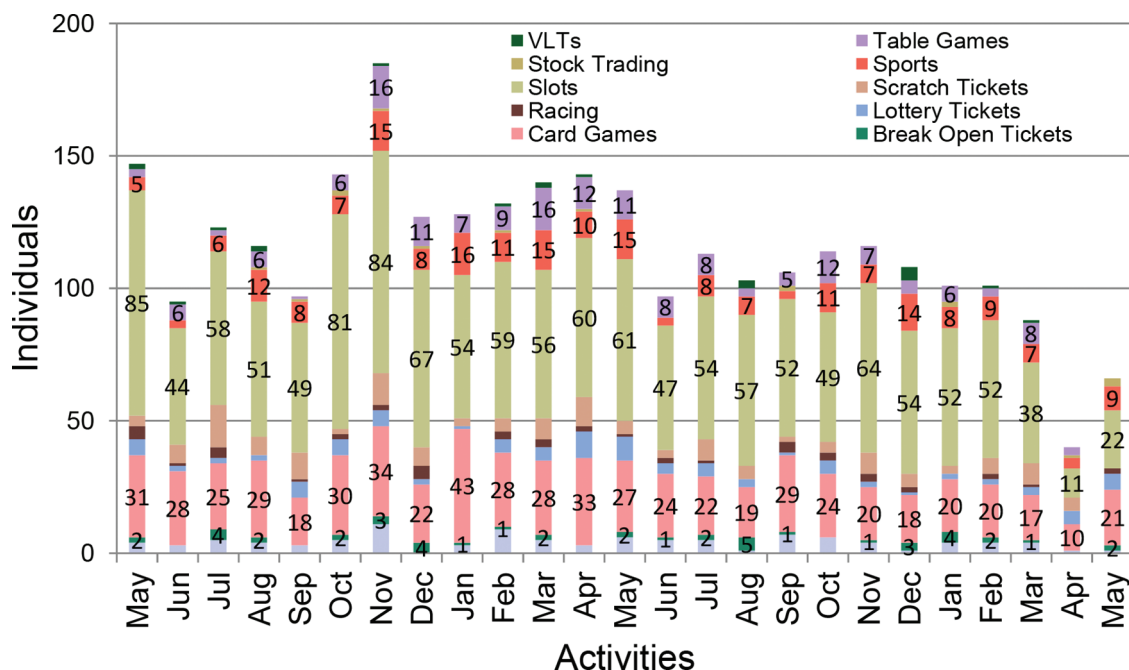


Figure 2. ConnexOntario information on gambling activities mentioned by helpline telephone callers from May 2018 to May 2020. One, none, or more than one gambling activity may be reported by a contact. Reprinted with permission.

According to the charts just described, the pandemic resulted in a sharp decrease in the number of calls related to problem gambling. As Figure 1 indicates, helpline calls vary in frequency each month, but in April and May 2020 helpline calls were down by approximately 50% in frequency compared to immediately preceding months.

A second graph they sent me shows the gambling activities the helpline callers mentioned. Slot machine games and card games decreased dramatically in frequency of play as the pandemic struck the province in April 2020. Table games have disappeared altogether in May. Card games and slot games appear to have increased again in May, a fact perhaps reflecting a shift to online play at this time. Note that the data does not differentiate between online and offline gambling.

We also asked ConnexOntario to provide us with information on crisis-related calls to their other helplines (e.g., rather than the gambling helpline). One clear effect of the pandemic is a sharp increase in the number of people making telephone calls to the crisis line in April and May compared to the corresponding months in 2019.

These figures should be interpreted with caution because not all people in crisis over gambling contact the helpline. However, another means of seeking help, the PlaySmart centres in many of the casinos in Ontario, have been closed entirely. The Ontario Lottery and Gaming (OLG) website provides a link to ConnexOntario.

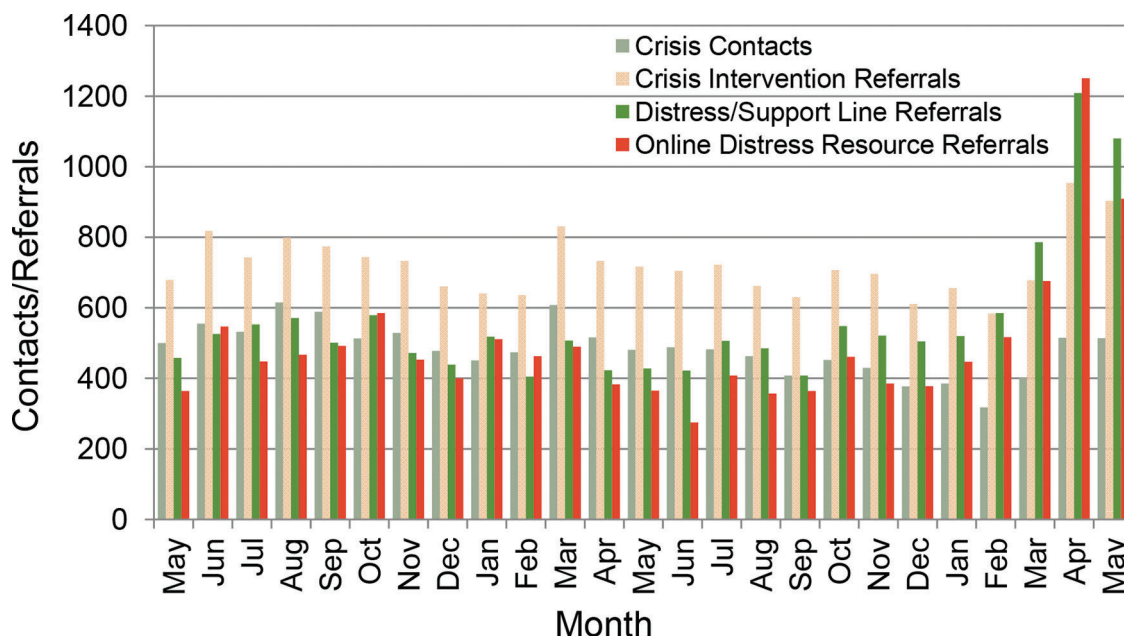


Figure 3. ConnexOntario information on crisis related telephone calls (not gambling related) from May 2018 to May 2020. Reprinted with permission.

Other gambling websites are not regulated in Canada and may not provide information a link to ConnexOntario. Interestingly, a quick search for online gambling websites found three sites that did provide links to responsible gambling information that included links that provided information on ConnexOntario. Another three online gambling sites did not, in fact, link to ConnexOntario, but nevertheless did provide links for services in other countries (e.g., two of the sites had links to problem gambling services in the United Kingdom). Thus, some of the people who switched to online gambling and then needed addiction help might be directed to contact ConnexOntario, and others would not.

In conclusion, the drop in helpline numbers suggests that the pandemic may in fact be leading to a *decrease* in the number of persons who are in crisis over gambling problems. The Covid-19 pandemic is clearly negatively affecting people's mental health but, interestingly, this situation has thus far not translated into an increase in problem gambling. It is important to continue to monitor how this pandemic affects gambling and gambling problems in Ontario in the future.
