



# Coroners Court of Victoria

## Data summary

### Coroners Prevention Unit

#### Gambling-related suicides, Victoria 2000-2012

Date	10 September 2013
Coroner	State Coroner Judge Ian Gray
Topic	Gambling-related suicides, Victoria 2000-2012
Contact	Sheree Argento

## 1. Background

At the direction of State Coroner Judge Ian Gray, the CPU prepared this data summary regarding gambling-related suicides in Victoria.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Definitions

**Suicide.** The CPU definition of “suicide” incorporates three major (sub-)categories of death investigated by coroners:

- Coroner-determined suicide, where the coroner’s investigation is complete and the coroner explicitly found that the death was a suicide.
- Suspected suicide (closed case), where the coroner’s investigation is complete and the coroner made no explicit finding as to the deceased’s intent, but the cause and circumstances of death are consistent with suicide.
- Suspected suicides (open case), where the coroner’s investigation is underway and the medical cause and circumstances of death are consistent with suicide.

**Problem gambling.** The CPU adopted the definition of “problem gambling” set out in the 2005 Gambling Research Australia report *Problem Gambling and Harm: Towards a National Definition*. The definition is:

Problem gambling is characterised by difficulties in limiting money and/or time spent on gambling which leads to adverse consequences for the gambler, others, or for the community. (p.i)

**Gambling-related suicide.** The CPU defined a gambling-related suicide as a suicide and occurred in a context of problem gambling.

### 2.2 Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for a relevant death in this study were that (a) the death was reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria for investigation by a coroner between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2012, and (b) the death met the definition of a gambling-related suicide.

### 2.3 Case identification

The CPU used two parallel, overlapping search strategies to identify relevant deaths for the study:

- A search of the Victorian Suicide Register (the VSR) to identify every suspected and coroner-determined suicide investigated by the Coroners Court of Victoria between January 2000 and December 2012, in which the term “gambl” appeared in the Victoria Police report of death to the coroner (‘Form 83’).
- A search of the National Coroners Information System using the Coroners Screen to identify every death investigated by the Coroners Court of Victoria between January 2000 and December 2012, in which one of the following terms appeared in the Form 83 or (for closed cases) the coroner’s finding: “gaming”, “pokies”, “pokie”, “poker”, “betting”, “gambl”.

The results of the two search strategies were combined and duplicate cases eliminated. The CPU then reviewed the Form 83, post-mortem pathology report and (for closed cases) coroner’s finding to establish whether the death met the inclusion criteria.

## 2.4 Data collection

For each death that met the inclusion criteria, the CPU recorded the date of death, age and sex of the deceased, a brief description of the evidence regarding problem gambling proximate to death, and (for closed cases) any recommendations or comments the coroner made in the finding regarding problem gambling.

## 2.5 Data analysis

The CPU analysed deaths by annual frequency and by sex and age group of deceased.

## 2.6 Limitations

The CPU ability to identify a gambling-related suicide was reliant on one of several search terms being present in the Form 83 and/or coroner's finding. Where the search term did not appear in either document, the death could not be identified; the CPU has no way of gauging how many potentially relevant deaths were missed for this reason.

For many of the gambling-related suicides identified by the CPU, the gambling context was discussed in the finding but not the Form 83. This was probably because the Form 83 is submitted very early in the initial police investigation (when police might not be aware of the deceased's gambling), whereas the finding is the product of the far more comprehensive coronial investigation (which often uncovers issues that initial investigating police were unaware of). Therefore, for deaths recently reported to the Court and still under investigation by coroners, the lack of finding may have contributed to the CPU inability to identify relevant deaths.

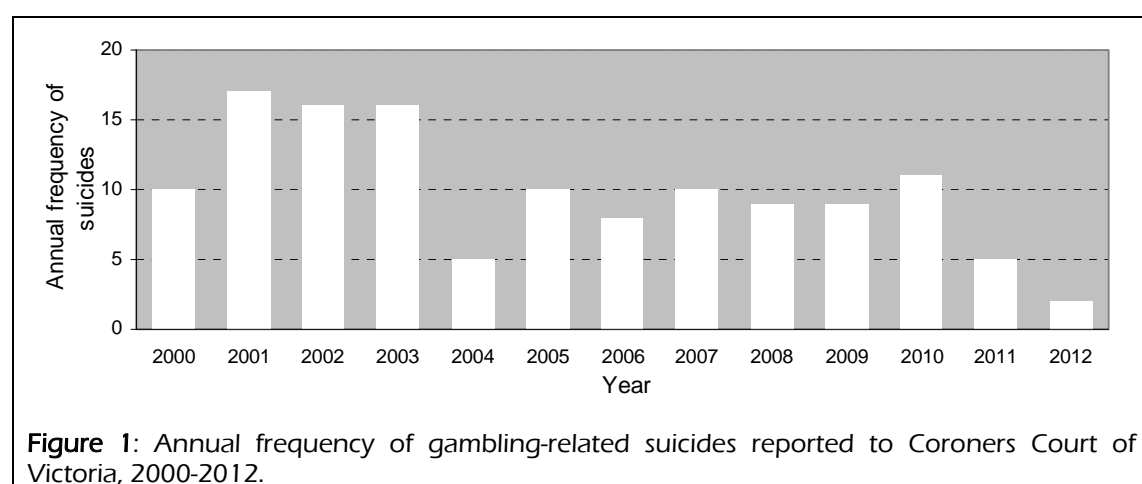
## **3. Results**

### 3.1 Frequency of suicide by year, sex and age group

The CPU identified 128 gambling-related suicides reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2012. These included 126 suicides of people who had engaged in problem gambling, and two suicides of people who were adversely affected by a partner's problem gambling.

### 3.1 Frequency of suicide by year, sex and age group

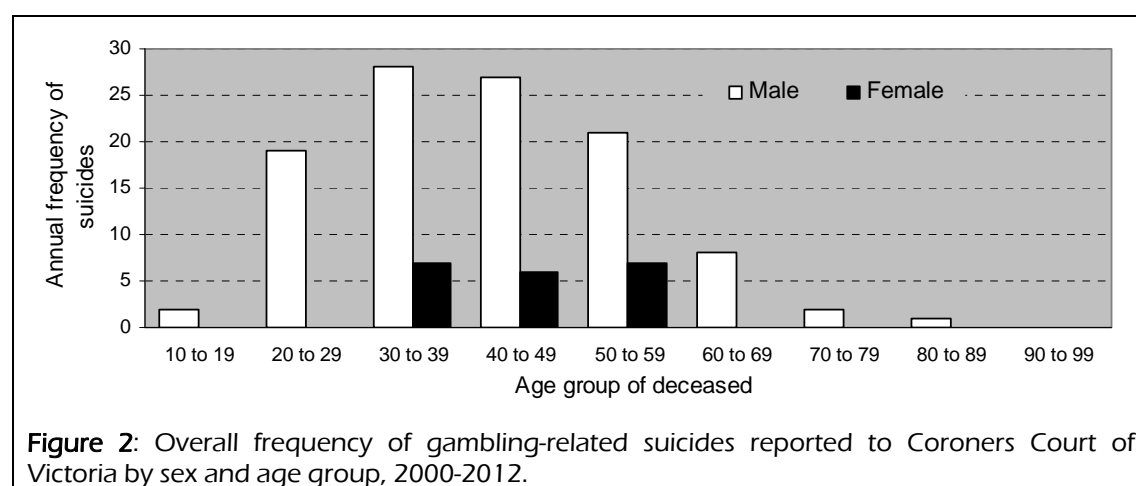
Figure 1 shows the frequency of gambling-related suicides by year; the annual frequency ranged between 17 deaths (2001) and two deaths (2012).



There appears to be a general decreasing trend in gambling-related suicides over time, with the lowest frequency occurring in 2012. However this may be an artefact

of the case identification process. Specifically, a greater proportion of more recent deaths reported to the Court are still under coronial investigation, meaning that the CPU had to rely more heavily on Form 83 text to identify potential gambling-related suicides (which, as discussed in the limitations above, is a less productive source of information than the coroner's finding).

Figure 2 shows the frequency of gambling-related suicides by sex and age group. Males accounted for a far greater proportion of deaths ( $n = 108$ , 84.4%) than females ( $n = 20$ , 15.6%). For both males and females, the peak age groups for deaths were 30 to 59.



### 3.2 Gambling behaviour

The CPU reviewed Form 83 and (for closed cases) finding text to establish the type of gambling in which the deceased was engaged, and the main location where the deceased gambled. Through this process the CPU found that both investigating police members and coroners tended to focus more generally on the existence of gambling behaviour, and did not focus as much on the specifics of the gambling including type and location.

The CPU could not identify the type of gambling in which the deceased engaged, in 105 (82.0%) of the 128 deaths. For the remaining 23 deaths the primary identified type of gambling was:

- Poker machines in 19 deaths.
- TAB gambling in two deaths.
- Online gambling in one death.
- Roulette in one death.

### 3.3 Other potentially relevant deaths

In the course of the case identification and review process, the CPU identified two homicide-suicides in which the male suffered significant problem gambling and killed his female partner before or in the act of suiciding. These two homicides were not included (though the related suicides were) because they did not meet the criteria for being a suicide, however they may be relevant in that they were explicitly linked to problem gambling.

### 3.4 Coroners' comments and recommendations

Among the 128 gambling-related suicides reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria in 2000-2012 and identified by the CPU, as at 28 August 2013 coroners had completed their investigations in 125 deaths.

The CPU reviewed the findings to identify any relevant prevention-focused comments or recommendations regarding problem gambling. The CPU found one relevant comment, in Coroner Edwin Batt's finding for the death of Jacob Van Berlo (20111672). The comment is as follows:

There is a strong inference arising from the circumstances of this young person's death that the opportunity to access an automatic teller machine located within the gambling venue, operated to feed his gambling addiction and so fuel his depression as to drive him to commit suicide.

[...] These findings should be brought to the attention of the Executive Commissioner of the Victorian Commission for Gambling Regulations and to those responsible for formulating and implementing policy on the retention of ATMs or similar cash dispensing machines at gambling venues.

The CPU notes that the Office of Gaming and Racing (Victorian Department of Justice) response to the comment is available on the Court website.

### 3.5 Findings publicly available on the Court website

The CPU checked the Court website and established that findings in five of the 128 deaths are available publicly:

- 20073645 the death of Assaad Rachmani. The deceased's problem gambling is mentioned in the finding. The finding is on the Court website because of a recommendations regarding treatment for mental illness.
- 200723728 the death of Patrick Tolan. The deceased's problem gambling is mentioned in the finding. The finding is on the Court website because of a recommendation regarding assessment of mentally ill patients and appropriate post-release management plans.
- 20084584 death of David Holland. The deceased's problem gambling is discussed briefly in the finding. The finding is on the Court website because of a recommendation regarding safety barriers at jumping suicide locations.
- 20084630 the death of Kelvin Swab. The deceased's problem gambling is mentioned in the finding. The finding is on the Court website because the death was subject to an inquest; there are no recommendations.
- 20111672 the death of Jacob Van Berlo. The deceased's problem gambling is discussed extensively in the finding. The finding is on the Court website because Coroner Edwin Batt directed a comment on ATM availability in gambling venues to the Office of Gaming and Racing; the Office's response to this comment is also on the Court website.