
V Use of the SOGS in Australian gambling surveys

V.1 Australian gambling surveys

In the absence of better tests of the number of gamblers who are adversely affected by their gambling, Australian studies have used the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) as the problem gambling measurement instrument.

Up to the time of this inquiry, there were 11 Australian gambling surveys that have used the SOGS. The only ‘national’ study, carried out in 1991-92 (Dickerson et al. 1996), was national in a limited sense:

- it covered the capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane (representing 84 per cent of Australian adults who live in an urban setting); but
- there was no coverage of rural populations.

Since that time, a number of statewide surveys have been carried out, covering metropolitan and country populations. They include:

- two studies for Tasmania — Dickerson and Baron (1994) and Dickerson and Maddern (1997);
- two studies for New South Wales — Dickerson et al. (1996a) and Dickerson et al. (1998);
- two studies for Victoria — Market Solutions and Dickerson (1997) and Roy Morgan Research (1999);
- studies for Western Australia (Dickerson, Baron and O’Connor 1994); and South Australia (Delfabbro and Winefield 1996); and
- specific studies of particular gambling modes or venues:
 - a Queensland study looking at the relationship between gambling related problems and EGMs (Dickerson, Boreham and Harley 1995);
 - a study of EGMs in Sydney registered clubs (Prosser et al. 1997).

The main interest in this appendix is to outline how the SOGS has been used in previous Australian prevalence surveys, noting in particular the timeframe used and the number and wording of individual questions.

V.2 Use of the SOGS in Australian surveys

Shaffer et al. (1997) have urged researchers who use a particular problem gambling screening instrument to do so with care and caution:

If you select an existing instrument, do not make significant modifications to the survey [instrument]; instead, consider adding questions relevant to your particular data needs. In this way, the psychometric properties of the original survey instrument will be maintained (p. 114).

Timeframes for the SOGS

The original SOGS was famed as a ‘lifetime’ screen, with questions posed in terms of whether the respondent had ‘ever’ undertaken a particular behaviour. Such a lifetime SOGS measure may therefore detect whether people have at *some time* in their life had problems with their gambling.

But clearly a lifetime screen has limitations as a measure of current prevalence of problems. For that reason, a current SOGS measure was devised which posed questions in terms of behaviour over the past 12 months. Reflecting a concern over the potentially high false positive rate for the current measure, Australian studies (other than the Commission’s) ask respondents about possible behaviours or problems experienced over the last 6 months.

This diverges from most international studies which tend to use a 12 month period.¹ The false negative rate in a 6 month SOGS appears to be considerably higher than in the 12 month SOGS, while the false positive rates appear to be very similar. Moreover, there is interest in trying to measure the annual prevalence rate and the associated annual costs of problem gambling, which would suggest a year rather than 6 months as the appropriate unit of time for all measures.

¹ Shaffer et al. (1997, pp. 107-8) reviewed all major prevalence surveys of problem gambling in the US. Among 43 studies of adult populations using the SOGS they found that 16 used lifetime SOGS only, 17 used the lifetime SOGS and a 12 month SOGS, 8 used a 12 month SOGS, and 2 used a lifetime SOGS and a 6 month SOGS. In other words, no US adult study reviewed by Shaffer et al. used a 6 month SOGS as the *only* test of prevalence rates.

Differences in question wording and survey contexts

The SOGS has been subject to considerable testing of its validity and reliability (Lesieur and Blume 1987; Lesieur 1994, Abbott and Volberg 1992). However, in many of its Australian manifestations, researchers have altered the wording or context of the test, usually without specific acknowledgment of the variation. Some changes may improve a test, especially where it is being applied in a different cultural context. For example, the question, ‘Have you lost time from work or *school* because of gambling?’ is routinely and appropriately changed in Australia to ‘Have you lost time from work or *study* because of gambling?’ reflecting the different understanding of the term ‘school’ in Australia compared to the United States. But other question differences may lead to biases.

As well, where different studies use different sets of words or different questions, comparisons between the studies have to be undertaken with greater care.

Some of the differences between Australian studies have been:

- In some studies (the Tasmanian and New South Wales studies), the SOGS questions were changed from a simple question to a statement and a question. For example, instead of ‘Have you felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?’ the survey asks ‘When I have finished gambling I have felt guilty. In the last 6 months how often has that applied to you?’ This rephrasing has unknown impacts on bias.
- Some studies repeat the time period relevant for each SOGS question (the 1996 Tasmanian study and the 1997 Sydney Registered Clubs study), while others only state the relevant period just once, prior to implementing the SOGS (for example, the 1996 South Australian survey). The former approach appears more likely to elicit appropriate current measures of prevalence than the latter. This is because after several questions, some respondents may well forget that the relevant time period is 6 months rather than a longer period.
- In some surveys (the Tasmanian and New South Wales surveys) respondents are asked to rate the frequency that a behaviour applies to them (never, rarely, sometimes, often or always). This clearly provides additional useful information over the original SOGS instrument, which mainly requests yes/no responses. However, it seems possible that people who say ‘no’ to the original SOGS might say ‘rarely’ to this revised version (which would be scored as a yes), leading to higher average SOGS scores.
- A number of studies avoid the term ‘loan sharks’ in the question on borrowing for gambling, and instead adopt the terminology ‘high interest rate finance companies’ (for example, the Victorian 1997 and the South Australian 1996 surveys). This is problematic. While some people or organisations which provide

loans at usurious rates may be finance companies, many will not be. Secondly, 'loan sharking' connotes the combination of a penal interest rate, and implies a sense of desperation in the borrower and a more threatening context for the loan. The questions may both have usefulness in identifying problem gamblers, but they may often relate to divergent behaviours.

- In some cases, (for example, the Tasmanian and New South Wales studies) the question 'Have you ever claimed to be winning money when you really had lost?' was re-worded as 'When I have lost at gambling I have bragged about winning. How often has that applied to you?' 'Bragged' is an emotive term with pejorative overtones, and could lead to a possible downward bias in answers.
- In the 1996 Tasmanian study, the original SOGS question 'Did you ever gamble more than you intended to?' was amended to 'When I have gambled I have gone on longer than planned. In the last 6 months how often has that applied to you?' The first question can relate to both expenditure and time, whereas the second only relates to time.
- Also in the Tasmanian study, there are omissions and additions to questions relating to borrowing money for gambling. No question is asked on loan sharks, nor is there a question about writing cheques knowing there was no money in the account (passing bad cheques). Instead there is a question about borrowing from friends and another about borrowing from other sources. 'Household' money is rendered as the narrower term 'housekeeping' money. These alterations have unknown impacts on the specificity and sensitivity of the test.
- The placement of the SOGS within the surveys has been different. In the New South Wales studies, the SOGS questions are interspersed among a range of other questions about the harmful and beneficial impacts of gambling, rather than appearing as a bloc.
- In some cases, for example the 1997 Victorian study, the SOGS appears near the end of a very long survey, while in others, such as the 1996 Tasmanian study, the overall survey length is short and undemanding, probably improving the accuracy of responses.

In summary, there have been significant differences in both the wording and placement of the SOGS in surveys implemented in Australia. This means that the variations in the prevalence rates observed will inevitably reflect an amalgam of real differences, random sampling errors and differences in test instruments and contexts.