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Gamblers stealing millions to feed habit

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Gamblers are stealing millions of dollars to support their habit, a report has found.

The study, by a private corruption investigation group, throws weight behind federal government moves for a crackdown on problem gambling.

The study shows 190 convictions were made for cases of gambling-linked fraud between 2008 and 2010.

The convictions, and 147 subsequent jail sentences, were for cases where the proceeds of crime were gambled, or where gambling debts were the motivation for crime.

That crime cost employers, the tax office, Centrelink, hotels, family members and friends \$77 million in stolen money, which was gambled and largely unpaid due to bankruptcy.

In 12 of the cases, more than \$1 million was stolen - several of these topping \$5 million.

Poker machines were the most common way to gamble stolen funds, occurring in 56 of the listed cases, including nine robberies undertaken to feed poker machine habits.

More than \$13 million in stolen money was lost in pokies, averaging \$230,000 per person.

The report labelled poker machines as "particularly addictive", noting one case in which a 50-year-old woman fed \$4.6 million in stolen money through machines.

While poker machines were the most common way to gamble stolen funds, the highest amounts of money was laundered at track, more than \$25 million on horse racing alone.

Fraudsters also gambled in casinos and online at services including Centrebet, where a 33-year-old man spent \$2.9 million, which he stole from his employer.

Report author Brett Warfield, from Warfield & Associates, said poker machines remain "the main source of gambling outlet for fraudsters," citing previous reports.

"The impact on perpetrators, their families and some of the smaller organisations has been devastating," he said in a statement.

The Gillard government has used the same line to push poker machine reform, agreed to under a deal struck with independent MP Andrew Wilkie to form government.

It plans to introduce a mandatory pre-commitment scheme by 2014, that would require gamblers to carry cards to set limits.

Daily withdrawal limits for ATMs near pokies would also be set at \$250, with possible exemptions for clubs and pubs in small rural towns.

The government has threatened commonwealth powers to force the measures if the states and territories, which reap millions in gaming revenue each year, don't come on board by May.

The pre-commitment scheme was a recommendation of a 2010 productivity commission inquiry, which found that gambling adversely affects up to 500,000 Australians each year.

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