


## THE AUSTRALIAN

# Poker machine curfew would cut gambling harm, help rebound from Covid-19

TIM COSTELLO



By **TIM COSTELLO**, CONTRIBUTOR  
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Poker machines operate in pubs and clubs in all states and territories, except Western Australia where they are sensibly restricted to casinos. They operate up to 18 hours a day in most places, but a staggering 20 hours a day in Victoria.

Shutting poker machines from midnight to 10am is a simple way to reduce gambling harm and help our economy rebound. Reducing operating hours is a sensible measure that has been recommended for more than a decade by public health experts and bodies such as the Productivity Commission. Nothing good is happening in pokie rooms at 3am, but the industry wants pokies running then because their best customers are people who are experiencing the worst gambling harm.

At its most extreme, gambling takes lives. I've lost count of the funerals I have ministered for people who have taken their lives because of gambling harm. That is the sad reality behind the vast profits of the gambling industry.

And then there's the gambling-related domestic violence, family breakdowns, mental ill-health and homelessness. Until the lockdown, I frequently had people in the street coming up to tell me about their family member, close friend, or even themselves and what gambling had done to them. Gambling harm is insidious, almost hidden. People are ashamed to admit they have a problem because the gambling industry relentlessly insists on the fallacy of "responsible gambling".

Australians saved more than \$3bn while poker machines were off around the nation. And those savings continue to grow in Victoria, where it is estimated the community has collectively saved more than \$1.4bn since the March shutdown. That is almost a quarter of the \$6bn Victoria is spending to support businesses and stimulate the economy. It boggles the mind.

Imagine those billions circulating around local economies, being spent in cafes, restaurants, at bookshops and boutiques, helping small businesses get back to serving their communities. True gambling reform will benefit us all, not just those with gambling problems. By reducing poker machine operating hours, we will slow down what is a drain on the national economy. For every \$1m spent on pokies just three jobs are created; \$1m spent on food creates 20 hospitality jobs. That's to say nothing of the costs of repairing the damage caused by poker machines — mental health treatment and domestic violence refuges and other scars from gambling.

Victoria still has the chance to reduce this damage by limiting pokie machine hours. And other states should think about it. Poker machine losses skyrocketed elsewhere as the COVID-19 lockdowns were lifted; in Queensland by more than 30 per cent and Tasmania 20 per cent. This tells us Australians are still highly vulnerable to gambling harm. Victorians will likely suffer similarly if reforms are not enacted, and Premier Daniel Andrews needs to hear it.

There is nothing stopping Australia's premiers looking at these sickening increases and acting to reduce pokie operating hours — other than the money they receive from the gambling industry in donations.

It's time the premiers listened to the health experts once more and cut poker machine operating hours for wellbeing of Australians, and our economy.

*Tim Costello is chief advocate of the Alliance for Gambling Reform.*

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