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Spike in Victorian pokies losses once COVID restrictions eased

Victoria has seen a jump in losses as poker machines returned to relative “normal”, with one local council area recording a 23 per cent increase in losses compared to the same month in 2019.

New data showed around \$1.5 million more was lost on poker machines across Victoria in December 2020, compared to December 2019.

But some local council areas saw massive jumps, with Brimbank recording a spike of almost double the entire Victorian increase -- a leap of \$2.7 million in losses compared to December 2019, equalling 23 per cent worse losses in December 2020.

Greater Dandenong and Hume recorded increases of \$1.6 and \$1.5 million respectively, and Darebin \$940,000. All these increased losses were against the backgrounds of less machines operating.

Alliance for Gambling Reform Chief Advocate, Rev Tim Costello, said the increases were hugely concerning and showed how important it was for reduced poker machine operating hours.

“Communities like Brimbank cannot sustain these kinds of losses,” he said. “These are stressed communities being exploited by the gambling industry, at a time when local families and businesses are trying to recover from months of lockdown.

“In November, when there were restrictions on poker machine operating hours and other limits, we saw a reduction in daily losses. That was a real time, real life experiment showing that gambling harm is reduced when opening hours are shortened.

“It’s simply absurd that Victoria has the worst pokies opening hours in Australia at 20 hours a day. In September 2020, 13 councils wrote an [open letter](#) to Premier Daniel Andrews requesting poker machines be closed between midnight and 10am when restrictions eased. This is a sensible and relatively easy reform that will have a huge impact on gambling harm. November’s data shows us that reduced hours do work on lowering losses, and reducing gambling harm.”

There was a ray of light in the December 2020 losses, with significant drops in the council areas of the Mornington Peninsula, Kingston, Melbourne and Manningham -- home of an [innovative RSL deal](#).

“Without the drops in these areas -- up to 13 per cent in Manningham -- the losses across Victoria would have been much higher,” Rev Costello said. “It’s heartening to see some people really benefited from the forced shutdown of pokies, and their communities will have benefited too.

“I urge the Victorian Government to learn from this and act now to capitalise on the benefits that have come out of COVID. The Victorian people and the economy win when gambling harm reduces.”

Gambling reform advocate Anna Bardsley, who lost ten years of her life to poker machines, said it was imperative that the Victorian Government learned from the pandemic.

“I’ve recently spoken to a gambling counsellor who had a client saving up for a bathroom renovation while the pokies were shutdown. They saved \$20,000 for that renovation with pokies off, and lost it all almost as soon as those awful, addictive, predatory machines came back on,” Ms Bardsley said.

“Their story will be far from unique. The amount lost in Brimbank says so much about how dangerous these machines are, and how much damage they do to our communities. Almost \$15 million was lost in Brimbank alone in just one month. Imagine the harm that is coming with that, and the loss that represents to the local economy. Our communities deserve better.

“I’ve been in poker machine rooms in the early hours of the morning. I can tell you, no one is having fun at 3am there. It’s a sad place to be. Closing these rooms between midnight and 10am makes sense. The only argument to keep them open is for the gambling industry to exploit people.”

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See [here](#) for a gambling language guide for journalists.