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Victorian pokies losses spiking since COVID restrictions eased

Victorian poker machine losses continue to spike at levels significantly higher than in the same period of previous years as COVID restrictions ease, with one council area recording a massive 51 per cent increase in losses.

New data shows that overall poker machine losses in Victoria were seven per cent higher in January 2021 compared to January 2020 -- before the coronavirus pandemic broke out in Australia.

Swan Hill recorded a 51 per cent increase in losses in January 2021 compared to January 2020, while the Brimbank area in Melbourne saw a 26.3 per cent rise, with almost \$14 million lost in that area in January 2021 alone. December 2020 and January 2021 represented the highest losses in Brimbank since poker machines were introduced in 1992.

Around Victoria more than \$7.7 million was lost on poker machines daily in January 2021, which is \$500,000 more a day than January 2020.

"These astounding losses are occurring at a time when the Victorian economy desperately needs stimulus, not an effective drain," said Alliance for Gambling Reform Chief Advocate, Rev Tim Costello.

"The thought of people being up in beautiful Swan Hill, finally out of lockdown, but sat in front of a poker machine losing money instead of enjoying the Murray River makes me so sad.

"These increases are hugely concerning and show just how important it is for the Victorian Government to reinstate the restrictions they had in place when poker machines were switched back on in November 2020, such as reduced poker machine operating hours. Those restrictions worked. 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 would have a huge impact on gambling harm. November 2020's data showed us that reduced hours do work on lowering losses, and reducing gambling harm."

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 spoke 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 \$30 million has been lost in Brimbank alone in just two months. 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."

Rev Costello said these recent high losses also showed why it was important the Royal Commission into Crown considered money laundering in pubs and clubs as well as at the casino.

"Crown is not the only place people are turning up with shopping bags full of cash to launder," he said. "Our local pubs and clubs are also being used by criminals as laundrettes for dirty money."

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

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