

4 May 2021

Victorian pokies spiking post COVID, some areas at record highs

Gambling harm is undoubtedly on the increase around Victoria as losses on poker machines continue to spike much higher than pre-COVID averages around the state.

The [latest monthly data](#) shows some staggering increased losses compared to just one year ago, even taking into account the shortened opening period in March last year.

For example, the Brimbank area recorded average daily losses of \$473,752 in March 2021, compared to \$344,206 daily last year, a massive and clearly unsustainable 37.6 percent increase. Dandenong also recorded a huge jump of 32 per cent in the same period. Geelong's losses of \$11.056m in March 2021 were the second-highest ever monthly losses since the 1992 introduction of poker machines.

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.

"These losses continue to rise month-on-month post-lockdown, and the Victorian Government is failing to take action," Rev Costello said. "Communities like Brimbank and Dandenong cannot sustain these kinds of losses. 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 2020, 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, but their call was ignored. Reduced hours are a sensible and relatively easy reform that will have a huge impact on gambling harm. November's data shows us this worked to lower losses, and reduce gambling harm.

"I urge the Victorian Government to take note of these massive spikes, to act now on what we learned from the November 2020 experiment and capitalise on a real benefit to 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 listened and learned from the pandemic.

"I spoke with 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 and Dandenong 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 March. 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 very 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.

"The Victorian people and our economy suffered enough during our lockdowns. It's time the government took gambling harm seriously, treated it as the grave public health issue that it is, and acted with conviction, just as they did when it came to the coronavirus.

"Wouldn't it be great to have Daniel Andrews come back to work after recovering from his back injury and have him announce shortened poker machine operating hours? That would be amazing!"

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