

Why Coach Bus Tours for Older Adults Often Encourage Harmful Gambling

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Every hour on the hour from eight in the morning until midnight a bus stops to pick up a group waiting on the side of the street in Toronto's Chinatown. The waiting passengers are mostly women over the age of 55 and, at this stop, speak Mandarin and Cantonese. They are also on average about 35 times more likely to be problem gamblers compared to other Canadian adults of a similar age. The bus gives equal billing to English and Chinese characters, and to poker chips. Most importantly, the bus is effectively free for regular customers — because it is a casino bus, the likes of which run 365 days a year.

Like much of the global North, the population of Canada is aging at a rapid rate. By 2031, one in four Canadians will be over 65. With land-based gambling activities decreasing over time in younger cohorts, casinos and other gambling venues are concentrating their marketing and promotion strategies on older adults. Their marketing activities include providing discounted meal rates for those over 55, hiring musical performers whose height of popularity was in the 1970s and 1980s, and, critically, providing discounted coach transportation to casinos from housing facilities and recreation centres for older adults.

Older Adults and Gambling Harm

Over the past ten years, all age groups in Ontario have reduced their participation in gambling except for older adults, who have remained relatively stable. In the past, problem gambling rates for adults over 55 have been lower than for the general population. But now research links a number of features of older adulthood with the risk that someone who gambles can develop a gambling disorder. Older people risk this condition because:

- Financial constraints for elders living on savings or fixed incomes can make recovering from gambling losses more difficult for them.
- Reduced social support as a result of increased isolation or experiencing widowhood can lead to emotional vulnerabilities and fewer resources to cope with them.
- Constrained options for other leisure activities can make it difficult for older people to find alternatives, once gambling becomes a problem.

While the overall incidence of problem gambling among older adults may not change, their consistent levels of participation coupled with the increasing age of the overall population mean that the real number of older adult problem gamblers will increase in the near future.

Bus Tours and Problem Gambling

As a recent study in Ontario makes clear, policymakers and advocates of the elderly should pay greater attention to the promotional activities of casinos and associated industries. Researchers collected information on older adults entering and leaving seven different gambling venues across southwestern Ontario, and found that the rate of problem gambling in the sample of older adults was far greater than that in a recent representative population of all older adults. This means that gambling venues are a crucial site for addressing problem gambling among older adults. And efforts that target practices at casinos and other gambling venues will be more effective in preventing harm than those that target the general population.

The use of coach bus tours is not equal among older people. Compared to those who had not gone on a bus tour in the last year, those who did go on bus tours were more often women, born outside of Canada, widowed, and over the age of 74. Promotional targeting of specific ethnicities is also apparent. Over the past

year, nearly one in seven bus users identified as “Asian” and three in four of those users identified as “East Indian,” while only three out of ten patrons self-identified as “white.”

Tellingly, bus coach tours were also related to several indicators of gambling involvement and harm. Bus tour users had higher rates of play on slot machines, more casino visits per year, and were nearly twice as likely to be problem gamblers.

Steps for Preventing Harm

For policymakers to have the data they need to help older people, more research on the gambling habits of older adults must be funded. In particular, researchers must study impacts from marketing and promotional activities in the gambling industry. Regulation of these kinds of promotional activities lags behind that of similarly-controlled products such as alcohol and tobacco, despite the rapid expansion of the gambling industry.

Because available data suggest that casino coach tours are associated with higher risk of harm for the elderly, policymakers should consider several immediate steps:

- Prohibit the use of explicit age-based incentives and reward programs that target potentially vulnerable groups.
- Clearly define and regulate the financial relationships between gambling venues and associated industries such as coach tour companies.
- Provide a greater range of easily accessible leisure options for older adults that address the needs currently being met by gambling.
- Regulate the advertising, transportation, and onsite gambling activities available at older adult care and recreation facilities.

Given the rapid spread of gambling in an aging population, advocates and policymakers have good reason to take immediate actions to prevent further harm vulnerable elders.

Read more in Mark van der Maas, Robert Mann, Flora I. Matheson, Nigel Turner, Hayley Hamilton, and John McCready, “A Free Ride? An Analysis of the Association of Casino Bus Tours and Problem Gambling among Older Adults” *Addiction* 112, no. 12 (2017): 2217-2224.