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## A pokie-holic state

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VICTORIA now boasts enough pokie addicts to fill every seat at Telstra Dome.

The Bracks Government revealed yesterday a staggering 55,675 adult Victorians were officially addicted to gambling.

The vast majority of those are hooked on poker machines.

Gaming Minister John Pandazopoulos disclosed the statistic during questioning by a parliamentary committee. He said about 7750 gambling addicts were undergoing counselling.

Victorian gamblers are losing more than \$4.372 billion a year -- and more than half is going down the throats of poker machines.

The problem gambling figures are based on the Government's latest survey of the industry.

The problem gambling surge has prompted pokie giants Tattersall's and Tabcorp to launch their own Responsible Gambling Awareness Week.

Pokies punters will be warned and counselled about the dangers of excessive gambling during a week-long campaign at all the state's gaming venues, to be launched next week.

Staff will wear Responsible Gambling badges and T-shirts, and talk to patrons about the dangers of their product.

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The government-backed initiative will include a TV and radio advertising blitz.

But industry critics have slammed the move, saying that it has been conveniently timed to coincide with the Government's review of gaming licences.

The future of the Tatts-Tabcorp pokies duopoly will be decided early next year.

Last month's budget papers revealed the Bracks Government collected \$4.26 million a day in gambling taxes -- that's \$50 every second.

The pokies tax grab alone is more than \$1 billion.

Gambling losses at Crown casino total \$922 million, and \$615 million is lost on wagering and sports betting at TABs and other agencies and outlets.

More than \$435 million is lost by lotto players.

Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu has promised to slash pokies numbers by 5000 if he wins the November 25 state election.

The Government is expected to announce its own election policy on gaming machines in the coming weeks.

Mr Pandazopoulos told yesterday's committee that Cabinet was close to finalising plans to extend its regional cap system into five more of the state's vulnerable communities.

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