

When It's No Longer A Game: *Pathological Gambling in the United States*

by Charles Wellford



Even the most determined opponents of gambling cannot dispute its popularity. Anyone who succumbs to the temptation to play the lottery when the jackpot rises into the millions can attest to it. Anyone who resists the temptation to join a long ticket queue that promises fabulous, instant wealth can attest to it. Hard facts confirm gambling's pervasiveness as well as its broad appeal. It is now legal in all but 3 States, and 37 States have lotteries. More than 8 in 10 adults say they have played casino games, bet on the races on and off the track, bought lottery tickets, or in some other way engaged in recreational gambling. In a single recent year, Americans collectively wagered more than half a trillion dollars.

editor's note

This article summarizes a book-length report, *Pathological Gambling: A Critical Review*, by the Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling, National Research Council (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1999), National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The summary is published with permission of NAS. The full report is available from the National Academy Press and is online at its Web site: <http://www.nap.edu>. Readers who wish to consult the author's citations to the research literature will find them in the full report.

about the author

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The wider availability of gambling in the past two decades, the introduction of new forms of gambling, the rise in the number of people who play games of chance, and the increasing amount of money they are wagering have raised concerns about gambling's social and economic effects. One focus of concern is "pathological" gambling—the inability to resist the impulse to gamble. Identified as a psychiatric disorder, pathological gambling can have a number of harmful consequences for the compulsive gambler and his or her family. The justice system enters the picture when destructive behavior becomes criminal behavior.

Concern about the effects of gambling has been voiced at the highest levels of government, prompting the U.S. Congress to order a comprehensive study. Included in the study was an assessment of pathological gambling. (For details of the mandate, see "Why Study Pathological Gambling?" page 16.) The assessment covered the nature and extent

of the problem; its effects on individuals, families, and communities; treatment approaches and their effectiveness; and ways to improve the understanding of pathological gambling. The study found considerable gaps in what is known, concluding that pathological gambling requires further study.

Rapid Expansion of Legalized Gambling

When Americans gamble, they are observing a time-honored tradition. In this country, gambling predates the republic. Opponents have at times succeeded in banning or otherwise stigmatizing it, but even after protracted periods of interdiction, recreational or social gambling always revived, most notably with relegalization in Nevada in the 1930's.

The current era of legalized, socially acceptable gambling (or "gaming," as the industry terms it) dates from the 1960's, when the first State lottery was established. The advent of State lotteries marked a major policy shift—away from mere tolerance on the part of government and toward active sponsorship and aggressive marketing.

State sponsorship reflected a lifting of social and moral barriers and initiated an expansion of gambling that continues today. No doubt it lent added legitimacy to gambling. It did not mean that all opposition ceased. Many State legislatures, for example, oppose casinos and State-sanctioned sports betting. Still, the growth of legalized gambling

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Why Study Pathological Gambling?

The study of pathological gambling was conducted in response to a congressional mandate. Rapid expansion of gambling and new forms of gambling prompted Congress in 1996 to order a comprehensive study of its social and economic effects. Congress recognized that State, local, and Native American tribal governments were instituting gambling as a way to create jobs and generate revenue and that new forms such as Internet gambling could affect interstate and international matters that come under Federal jurisdiction. The most recent Federal Government study of gambling was conducted almost 25 years ago, so the jurisdictions that established gambling had no recent information about the impact of these new developments.

One of the missions of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC), the body established to conduct the study, was to assess the effects of pathological or problem

gambling.¹ Congress stipulated that NGISC contract with the National Research Council for assistance in studying pathological gambling. In response, the Council established the Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling, whose mission was to identify and analyze the full range of research on the nature of pathological and problem gambling, highlighting key issues and data sources that might provide evidence of prevalence and effects.

The Commission reports, including the report on pathological gambling, are available on its Web site at <http://www.ngisc.gov>.

1. In addition to pathological gambling, the Commission examined Federal, State, local, and tribal government policies on gambling; the relationship between gambling and crime; the impact of gambling on individuals, families, businesses, and the economy; the extent to which gambling generates government revenue; and interstate and international effects of electronic gambling.

continues apace. The Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, passed in 1988, allows Indian tribes to operate any form of gambling that is legal in the State where the tribe lives. New forms of gambling are emerging, most notably those based on advanced electronic technologies (Internet-based gambling, for example).

Benefits of Gambling

If the opponents of gambling cannot dispute its popularity, they would also be hard-pressed to dispute its benefits. The States earn revenue from taxes on commercial gambling enterprises and from the proceeds of government-sponsored

gambling. In fact, State budgets have become increasingly dependent on these revenues. Economically depressed communities in which gambling is offered appear to have benefitted from it.

If a gambling enterprise is operating in a community, that can mean more jobs and higher incomes, enhanced opportunities for tourism- and recreation-based business, and higher property values. Indian communities in particular have benefitted socially and economically from gambling enterprises. Unquestionably, gambling produces numerous economic benefits, although there is not enough information available to calculate the amount or to

determine with any accuracy whether they exceed the costs of gambling, including those associated with problem and pathological gambling.

When Does Gambling Become Pathological?

If gambling has benefits, it also has costs. Pathological gambling, with its adverse effects for individuals, families, and communities, is one of them. Most adults who gamble view it solely as entertainment, and they wager only small amounts of money. Pathological gambling is different. Someone with this problem is unable to control the urge to gamble, and that inability may grow progressively worse. The condition has been defined by the psychiatric profession as a mental health disorder. (More details of the definition are in "A Mental Health Problem.")

About 1.5 percent of adults in this country have been pathological gamblers at some point in their lives. In a given year, 0.9 percent of adults in this country (1.8 million) are pathological gamblers. There are differences by gender and age, with men more likely than women to be pathological gamblers, and adolescents more likely than adults.

In the currently expanding gambling environment, it might seem likely that the number or proportion of pathological gamblers would increase. Although public health and policy officials are concerned about that possibility, studies thus far offer no certain answers.

Links to Crime

Pathological gamblers engage in various forms of destructive behavior. They may amass large debts, damage their relationships with

A Mental Health Problem

Pathological gambling is a mental health disorder. The condition is difficult to define, but the American Psychiatric Association (APA), an authority on mental problems, developed criteria that can be used to diagnose it. APA first classified pathological gambling as a definitive diagnosis in 1980, including it among impulse-control disorders.¹

The condition can be described as a disorder characterized by continuous or periodic loss of control

of one's gambling behavior, a preoccupation with gambling and obtaining money with which to gamble, irrational thinking, and a continuation of this behavior despite adverse consequences. The inability to resist the compulsion to gamble can produce undesirable outcomes ranging from borrowing excessive amounts of money from family or friends, to losing time from work, to being arrested for offenses committed to support the gambling habit.

The APA criteria appear to have worked well for clinicians who treat the disorder, but because they are based only on populations who seek treatment, they cannot be used to define the nature and causes of pathological gambling or to estimate prevalence.

1. See the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). Pathological gambling also was included in the 1994 edition, DSM-IV.

family members and friends, and even kill themselves. They also may commit crimes, including theft, embezzlement, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect. Precise tallies of these social costs of pathological gambling are needed, but again, the current state of knowledge makes it impossible to identify the extent to which legalized gambling affects crime rates. (For an examination of crime in several communities where this form of gambling has been introduced, see "Casino Gambling: Burden or Boon?" page 18.)

Pathological gambling can co-occur with such problems as substance abuse. Substance abusers admitted to treatment programs are three to six times more likely than the general population to be problem gamblers. A study of people seeking treatment for cocaine abuse revealed that those who had gambling problems were more likely than those who did not to have additional drug problems, such as overdosing or using opiates.

Heavy use of alcohol is linked to multiple gambling problems and increased spending on gambling, and

pathological gambling increases with the number of illicit substances used.

The link to crime is often a byproduct of the financial losses incurred. Pathological gamblers may spend inordinate amounts of money on their addiction, tapping into family savings or borrowing money. As these sources are depleted and debts pile up, they may resort to crime to obtain money.

Attempts have been made to estimate the proportion of pathological gamblers who commit crimes such as fraud, theft, embezzlement, forgery, and blackmail, but the results vary widely. As many as one-half to two-thirds of pathological gamblers may have committed a crime to obtain gambling money. Evidence also suggests that a sizable proportion of pathological gamblers have criminal charges pending as a result of illegal activity to fund their habit.

More Questions Than Answers

Much of what is known about pathological gambling is limited in scientific value. The extent and

causes of pathological gambling are not well understood. Neither is it possible to determine whether the number of pathological gamblers is rising. Nor is there enough information to state with certainty whether particularly vulnerable populations—the elderly and people who are economically disadvantaged—tend disproportionately to be pathological gamblers. Although there is no doubt that gambling creates certain economic benefits for communities, these too are difficult to measure precisely, as are the social costs of gambling. Problem gambling is linked to crime, but exactly how legalized gambling affects local and national crime rates is unknown.

This information deficit means that the assessment of pathological gambling is greatly influenced by a relatively small number of newer, better studies. Notably, information about the onset and progression of the disorder is beginning to come to light. It reveals, for example, that the earlier someone starts to gamble, the more likely he or she is to become a pathological gambler and that pathological gamblers are more likely than other gamblers to have

Casino Gambling: Burden or Boon?

The research described below was conducted independently of the study of pathological gambling. It is based on *Effects of Casino Gambling on Crime and Quality of Life in New Casino Jurisdictions*, by B. Grant Stitt, Mark Nichols, and David Giacompassi, November 29, 2000, draft report of grant 98-IJ-CX-0037, submitted to NIJ.

Proposals to establish casino gambling often have generated rancorous debate among community residents, with proponents touting the anticipated economic benefits and opponents predicting inevitable social problems. Residents' perceptions are important, because the establishment or continued existence of a gambling enterprise can depend on them. Nevertheless, though these opinions are forcefully expressed, they have not been based on hard data, because studies of many key questions about the effects of gambling have been incomplete or nonexistent. A recent NIJ-sponsored study, which examined crime data as well as residents' opinions, showed that perceptions of gambling's effects on crime can be at odds with more objective measures.

The study covered seven communities where casino gambling (on riverboats or barges) had been introduced in the past 10 years: Alton and Peoria/East Peoria, Illinois; Sioux City, Iowa; St. Joseph, St. Louis, and St. Louis County, Missouri; and Biloxi, Mississippi. Community leaders and residents were asked their views of the impact on crime, and more objective sources of information in the form of crime data also were examined.

Community residents and community leaders were divided in their views, with residents believing casinos increased crime and community leaders seeing little effect and believing casinos enhanced the quality of life and benefitted the economy. Perhaps not surprisingly, communities most heavily dependent economically on gambling were the ones that embraced it most warmly.

Perceptions did not reflect reality. There is no single "casino effect" on crime. The impact of the casinos varied from community to community. Three communities experienced a significant increase in several types of crime, while the opposite was true in three others.

One other saw no change in the vast majority of crimes. The mixed results suggest that certain factors may be operating in some communities and not others. One factor might be tourism. Biloxi, with its nine casinos drawing tens of thousands of visitors annually, saw the largest increase in crime of all the communities studied.

Interviews with the police chiefs of these communities revealed that law enforcement agencies need to prepare to make changes in their operations when a casino comes to town, because crime patterns may change and crimes once unknown to the community may appear. Several chiefs stressed that preparedness is the key to avoiding problems. For example, the department might want to develop communications with other casino communities and cultivate a good working relationship with casino security staff. Where citizens' perceptions of increased crime do not square with reality, the police will want to make doubly sure that accurate information about crime rates is widely reported so as to alleviate unfounded fears. Where crime has increased, the police will want to find additional resources.

parents who were pathological gamblers.

The origins and nature of pathological gambling and the changes taking place in it over time could be better understood through long-term studies and cross-sectional studies (which examine a population at a specific point in time). One way to obtain this kind of information would be to include

measures of pathological gambling in the annual surveys conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health.

The effects of pathological gambling (debt, for example) could be added to other long-term studies of health or mental health. Prevention and treatment of pathological gambling need to be aggressively pursued. For

that to happen, a great deal more light needs to be shed on the subject by filling in the many information gaps identified in the assessment. In short, pathological gambling is a problem significant enough to warrant more sustained, comprehensive, and scientific research than now exists.

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