

# Public Domain

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## Beware the Sucker Bet, Part 6

*"Gambling is an addictive behavior, make no mistake about it... Gambling has all the properties of a psychoactive substance, and again, the reason is that it changes the neurochemistry of the brain... Today, there are more children experiencing adverse symptoms from gambling than from drugs... and the problem is growing."* – Howard J. Shaffer, Ph.D., Harvard Medical School Division on Addictions

The case against casino gambling so far: it breeds crime and corruption; distorts local politics and encourages end-runs around proper procedure; drains resources and revenues from local governments and businesses; and fails to deliver promised jobs and economic development to the community.

Though social costs to a town, region, or state can be measured in the dollars and collective pain borne by the community-at-large when casinos arrive, the costs to certain individuals and their families can become overwhelming, even all-encompassing.

According to Earl L. Grinols, "There is abundant evidence that increased gambling opportunities increase problem and pathological gambling"; there is a "tremendous increase in the numbers of gamblers seeking help when casinos enter a market"; and "a small number of pathological gamblers accounts for a significant portion of casino revenues." It is a disease that, according to the *National Institute of Mental Health*, afflicts at least 4% of America's adults; experts believe that the number of problem gamblers is on the rise. In 1996, the *New York Council on Problem Gambling* commissioned a study to determine the prevalence rate of problem gambling in New York State. That study found that 7.3% of New Yorkers are lifetime problem gamblers or potential problem gamblers, the highest rate in the country, and translates into 1.4 million New Yorkers; about half that number, 3.6%, were found to be actually experiencing a problem with gambling. A casino within 10 miles of a home yields a 90% increased risk of its occupants becoming pathological or problem gamblers. Neighborhood disadvantage increases that risk another 69%.

In mature gambling markets, more than 5% of the population will develop some problem with gambling, a prevalence rate about five times that of schizophrenia and more than twice that of cocaine addiction. A study of America's 11- to 18-year-olds showed a 4-7% prevalence rate of problem gambling behaviors.

Valerie C. Lorenz, executive director of the *Compulsive Gambling Center* in Baltimore, Md., has stated: "The formula is quite simple: Availability leads to more gamblers, which leads to more compulsive gamblers. Casino gambling is particularly onerous because of the allure of escaping into fantasy, the fast action, and emphasis on quick money, all of which are basic factors in gambling addiction."

According to Carl G. Bechtold of the *National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling*, "The risk of gambling is not so much in losing one's money, but rather the danger of losing control of one's life. Like other substances and activities which become addictive, games of chance too often turn on their players and transform frivolity into a nightmare."

"Gambling causes excitement, often leading the participant to forget about outside problems and the stresses of everyday life," says Mark Dickerson, author of *What if There Were No Problem Gambler*. "Electronic gambling devices in particular offer a seemingly non-competitive diversion from reality. Gambling establishments usually serve and often encourage the use of alcoholic beverages, which further loosens players' inhibitions. The games themselves are made to satisfy the demands of excitement; and the ensuing 'loss of control' is part of the 'enjoyable' experience of gambling. Gambling environments, specifically within casinos, are scientifically and socially designed to transport players beyond the realm of rational decisions. Presentations by one prominent international researcher concluded strong emotional/physiological responses during a session of play is a natural human experience. The expectation that the player will be able to continue to make controlled, informed, rational

decisions during such a session of continuous gambling is ill-founded."

A recent Canadian study found that half of all problem gamblers reported that their gambling caused difficulties in relationships with family or friends. Four in 10 obsessive gamblers reported a high level of stress in their life. *Government Accounting Office* analyses found 53.5% of pathological gamblers reported having been divorced, while only 18.2% of non-gamblers were divorced. About 56% of problem gamblers had tried to quit gambling, but could not. About 18% of problem gamblers reported that they had contemplated suicide in the year prior to the survey, six times the proportion of non-problem gamblers. Two-thirds of *Gamblers Anonymous* members said in one survey that they had contemplated suicide. A Nevada study of addicted gamblers revealed between 20% and 30% of the respondents made actual suicide attempts (unknown how many were successful). No other addictive population has had as high a prevalence for attempts.

When a new casino is built, gambling addiction rates double within a 50-mile radius, and casinos are linked statistically with increasing debt, DUI arrests, and domestic violence.

The prosecutor for Lawrence County, which includes Deadwood, witnessed the "overnight transformation" of the town, and saw his caseload more than double. "Our office has also seen an increase in the number of child abuse and neglect cases as a result of gambling. These run the spectrum from the children left in their cars all night while their parents gamble, to the children left at home alone while their single mothers work the casino late shift, to the household without utilities or groceries because one or both parents have blown their paycheck gambling."

According to a 1990 *Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene* survey, 62% of problem gamblers in treatment had committed illegal acts as a result of their gambling, 80% had committed civil offenses, and 23% were charged with criminal offenses. A similar study of nearly 400 members of *Gamblers Anonymous* showed that 57% admitted stealing to finance their gambling. On average they stole \$135,000 each, for a total of more than \$30 million.

According to Dr. Nancy Petry, "*UConn Health Center* found that about one-third of all people in Connecticut who seek treatment for problem gambling have already filed for bankruptcy or are in the process of filing. On average, problem gamblers spend more than \$2,000 per month gambling. Some have legal problems stemming from credit card fraud or bounced checks. And their troubles spill over to their families. Each problem gambler may affect the lives of eight to 10 other people." Based on extensive studies of original research, social costs for problem and pathological gamblers average between \$14,006 and \$22,077. Thus, the costs for gambling addiction are born by the entire community, including the one-third of Americans who do not gamble at all.

Those who have studied the long-term impact of socially accepted gambling say the price for some individuals will be indebtedness, deteriorated relationships with friends and family, neglect, depression, and possibly suicide. In the work place and community, researchers say that over time, problem gambling contributes to a decline in productivity, unpaid taxes, increased crime, and a higher number of foreclosures and bankruptcies. Legalized gambling was the third leading (and the fastest growing) cause of individual bankruptcies in the United States in the 1990s. In the most recent nationwide survey of every county in the nation, *Creighton University* researchers found personal bankruptcy rates are 100% higher in counties with casinos than in counties without casinos.

Gambling is a regressive tax, which affects those least able to afford it. (In 1994, Americans lost what was then a record amount in gambling: \$30 billion annually; by 2000, that amount had more than doubled to \$61.4 billion, and by 2003 it had grown to \$68 billion.)

So, what's the bottom line? Crime and corruption will increase. Traffic and pollution will increase. Strain on village, town, and county services will increase. Tax revenue and property values will decrease. Local jobs will be lost. Local businesses will suffer. Social problems related to gambling addiction and substance abuse will increase.

Are casinos bad for us? You bet!