



# GAMBLING RESEARCH REVEALS

## Prisoner gambling: Correctional considerations and implications for re-entry

by Dr. DJ Williams

Prisoners have among the highest rates of problem gambling in the world when compared with other sub-populations. A recent study led by Dr. Nigel Turner at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto found that 10% of their sample of 254 prisoners met criteria for problem gambling<sup>1</sup>. In a comprehensive review of research conducted by Dr. Robert Williams and colleagues at the University of Lethbridge, up to one-third of prisoner populations met criteria for problem gambling and approximately 50% of crime by these individuals was committed to support their gambling<sup>2</sup>.

Prisoners are a vulnerable population. Many struggle with managing impulsive behavior and identifying fallacies and potential problems associated with “quick fix” solutions. It is not surprising that these difficulties can impact to the development and progression of problem gambling. Compulsive gambling has huge personal and social costs—high rates of bankruptcy, domestic violence, divorce, depression and suicidal behavior. The costs of crime are also high and bring tragic consequences. Therefore, research on prisoner gambling warrants careful attention from policy-makers, health care professionals, and those involved in the legal and correctional systems.



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<sup>1</sup> Turner, N. E., Preston, D. L., Saunders, C., McAvoy, S., & Jain, U. (2009). The relationship of problem gambling to criminal behavior in a sample of Canadian male federal Offenders. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 25(2), 153-169. doi:10.1007/s10899-009-9124-1

<sup>2</sup> Williams, R. J., Royston, J., & Hagen, B. (2005). Gambling and problem gambling within forensic population: A review of the literature. *Criminal Justice & Behavior: An International Journal*, 32(6), 665-689. doi:10.1177/0093854805279947

The Alberta Gaming Research Institute is a consortium of the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge. Its primary purpose is to support and promote research into gaming and gambling in the province.\*

#### OUR MISSION

To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society

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### **The nature of prisoner gambling**

In light of this background, it is critical to consider the nature of prisoner gambling and the complications it brings to the correctional process. Investigations have found that problem gambling primarily precedes the commission of crime but it should be pointed out that crime also can precede problem gambling involvement. In either scenario, it is important to understand the basic relationship between gambling and crime so primary issues can be identified and addressed. Furthermore, although gambling and crime relationships are commonly developed prior to prisoners entering correctional institutions, the distinct possibility exists that complex gambling issues develop during incarceration.

My specific research program focuses on gambling during incarceration as well as upon re-entry into the community. Consistent with other studies on gambling within prisons, I have found that about 40% of prisoners in our research samples report gambling<sup>3</sup> while incarcerated. In research conducted with female prisoners concerning prison gambling, we found that gambling was used as an emotional escape from the harsh realities associated with incarceration<sup>4</sup>. Females in our study reported that gambling sometimes occurs in women’s correctional facilities in order to obtain psychotropic medications, particularly antidepressants, from other inmates. This is, of course, potentially dangerous and there are medical and health implications that arise from these startling findings.

### **Leisure experiences and prisoner re-entry into the community**

Correctional professionals should be aware that gambling during incarceration affects the re-entry experiences of prisoners. It is a concern that institutions across the United States have reduced, and sometimes eliminated, prisoner opportunities for healthy and productive experiences. Leisure and recreation provide people, including prisoners, with ways to express themselves in positive ways, reduce stress, and obtain important physical and psychological benefits. Thus, healthy leisure experiences need to be established in the transition from incarceration to the community. A 2008 study<sup>5</sup> we conducted with 150 prisoners who were transitioning into the community found that of those who gambled during their incarceration, 45% did so as a form of recreation. Participants reported

<sup>3</sup> Forms of gambling include: card games, bingo, sports betting, and betting on occurrences within prison. Participants gamble for money, cigarettes, commissary items, food, specific tasks, or sexual favours. Severe violence may occur when debts are not paid. Prisoners report the following common reasons for gambling while incarcerated: to pass the time, provide excitement, and to socialize.

<sup>4</sup> These findings were reported in the April/May 2007 issue of *Women, Girls & Criminal Justice*.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, DJ. (2008). Offender gambling in prisons and jails: Is it hidden leisure experience? *Correctional Psychologist*, 40(3), 7-10.



“It is important that professionals working in capacities within the correctional system become more aware of the potential for prisoner gambling problems at all stages of the correctional process; that essential prisoner needs are adequately addressed, and; that opportunities for positive recreational and leisure experiences are provided.”

that their gambling experiences brought them enjoyment, a sense of personal freedom, positive emotions, and were a form of self expression. These psychological properties are all associated with positive leisure and recreation.

It is worrisome that prisoners, a group at high risk for problem gambling, have few opportunities for healthy recreation experiences. Documented evidence (unpublished) from several cases indicates problem gambling has developed during re-entry into the community without having been evident during incarceration. Without healthy recreational experiences in jails and prisons, it appears that some individuals who begin gambling in prison for recreation may continue to gamble frequently upon release, thus becoming at-risk for problem gambling. It is important that specific prisoner needs that motivate them toward engaging in gambling are identified, and that there are healthy alternatives available to meet those needs.

### **Case study: Utah-Nevada prisoner gambling during re-entry process**

A recently published investigation into prisoner gambling<sup>6</sup> by myself and Dr. Gordon Walker of the University of Alberta focused specifically on prisoner gambling issues during the re-entry process. It involved a group of 15 experienced correctional professionals from the neighboring states of Utah (which has no legalized gambling) and Nevada. All participants were working with parolees and most had worked previously in prison environments. Our interviews related to their field experiences with prisoner gambling issues, and specifically with potential issues concerning gambling and re-entry.

Participants from both Utah and Nevada, with few exceptions, reported gambling in prisons and jails was common. However, while correctional professionals in Nevada were aware of the potential for gambling problems for prisoners transitioning into the community, their counterparts in Utah reported that such potential had escaped professional attention. Despite known cases of Utah prisoners with gambling problems, it was assumed that treatment for issues such as substance abuse or sexual offending would simultaneously address a gambling problem.

Important findings from the study found that prisoners with gambling problems had particular difficulty in re-connecting and building their social support systems upon re-entry. In many cases, those with problem gambling issues had taken money from loved ones in order to support their gambling. Learning to manage money and develop financial stability were additional re-entry complications noted for prisoners with gambling issues. Correctional professionals in both Utah and Nevada reported the need for affordable and accessible resources for prisoners with gambling problems. Gamblers Anonymous was mentioned almost exclusively as the sole practical treatment option for parolees with gambling issues. Other clinical programs in the community designed to treat problem gambling simply were far too expensive for most prisoners according to several Nevada participants. Lack of treatment resources for prisoners was a major concern.

### **Final recommendations**

In conclusion, a growing body of research has established that large numbers of prisoners across diverse geographic locations have gambling problems, and that these problems tend to go unrecognized and untreated by professionals in the correctional system. Attention is more often focused on criminal behaviour itself while its precursor, compulsive gambling, remains hidden and untreated. New research suggests that large numbers of prisoners also gamble during their incarceration, and that some continue to struggle with gambling issues upon release.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, DJ, & Walker, G. J. (2009). Does offender gambling on the inside continue on the outside? Insights from correctional professionals on gambling and re-entry. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 48, 402-415. doi:10.1080/10509670902979561



It is important that professionals working in capacities within the correctional system become more aware of the potential for prisoner gambling problems at all stages of the correctional process; that essential prisoner needs are adequately addressed, and; that opportunities for positive recreational and leisure experiences are provided. Additionally, it is imperative that affordable and accessible treatment options are made available within the correctional system for those who struggle with problem gambling.

*Dr. DJ Williams was co-principal investigator for the Institute-funded research grant #44 "Exploring Offender Gambling from Prison through Re-Entry: A Cross-National Investigation". He is currently an independent researcher based in Los Angeles, CA.*

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\* The Institute is funded by the Alberta  
government through the Alberta Lottery  
Fund.

ISSN 1499-2647  
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## AGRI Annual Report 2008-09 Released

The Institute is pleased to announce that the *2008-09 Annual Report* and *2008-09 Report Card* are now available on the Institute web site as .PDF files.

## 2010 Conference Location, Date and Theme

**The Institute's ninth annual conference will take place Thursday, April 8 (Opening Reception), Friday, April 9 & Saturday, April 10, 2010 at the Banff Centre, Banff, Alberta, Canada.**

The conference theme is "Emergent Clinical Issues in Problem Gambling." Presentation and discussion topics will include competing perspectives on etiology and conceptualization of gambling disorders. Research into problem gambling issues was begun to develop an evidence-base for understanding what treatments work. But how do we make these treatments work even better? How can we maximize the number of people who are exposed to these treatments? How can we "sell" our treatments to those that could benefit? What new approaches are worthy of further investigation? What are the most effective knowledge transfer approaches—getting research to influence policy and practice?

The conference registration form, call for poster/oral presentation submissions, and preliminary program information are posted on the Institute website—see [http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/2010\\_conference.cfm](http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca/2010_conference.cfm) .

## 2010/11 Call for Scholarship and Research Allowance applications

The annual call for scholarship and research allowance applications has now been posted on the Institute website—see [http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca//pdfs/Scholarship\\_Guidelines\\_2009.pdf](http://www.abgaminginstitute.ualberta.ca//pdfs/Scholarship_Guidelines_2009.pdf) for the guidelines and eligibility criteria.

Applications are being received for graduate and doctoral level studies at one of the Institute partner universities (U of Alberta, U of Calgary, U of Lethbridge) to commence in September 2010. The deadline for submissions is Monday, February 1, 2010.