

Offender Gambling in Prisons and Jails: Is it Hidden Leisure Experience?

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The availability for participation in legalized gambling has increased worldwide over the past two decades, and researchers have also begun to explore relationships of gambling to crime, including rates of problem gambling among offenders (i.e., Blaszczynski & McConaghy, 1992; Rosenthal & Lorenz, 1992; Sakurai & Smith, 2003; Yeoman & Griffiths, 1996). Overall, existing research suggests that offenders have higher rates of problem gambling than the general population (Anderson, 1999; Abbott, McKenna, & Giles, 2000; Lahn, 2005; Templar, Keiser, & Siscoe, 1993; Walters, 1997). In their review of the literature, R. J. Williams and colleagues (2005) found that as many as one-third of criminal offenders meet criteria for problem gambling, and approximately 50% of crime by these individuals is reportedly committed to support gambling.

Despite high rates of problem gambling among offender populations, Gowan (1996) suggested it is easy for corrections professionals to overlook problem gambling among offenders. It should be noted that establishing links between gambling and crime is difficult. Controlling illegal gambling may be a low priority for law enforcement, and those affected by gambling-related crimes (family members, coworkers, etc.) may not report such acts to legal authorities (Crofts, 2003; Smith & Wynne, 1999). While problem gambling may lead to criminal behavior, not all crimes committed by pathological gamblers are related to their gambling (Lahn & Grabosky, 2003; Meyer & Fabian, 1996; Meyer & Stadler, 2002).

Although researchers have explored relationships of gambling to crime and problem gambling rates among offenders, surprisingly there has been very little study of gambling that occurs within correctional environments. In other words, research on offender gambling has focused almost solely on behaviors prior to incarceration. Gambling within jails and prisons is

difficult to study because of its prohibition and offenders may fear the implications or consequences of disclosing such information.

In their review of the literature on offender gambling, R. J. Williams and colleagues (2005) found only a few studies that considered gambling within prisons with an overall prevalence rate of 40% having gambled during their incarceration. Gambling in prisons occurs through a variety of means, such as card games, bingo, and sports betting. Some offenders may gamble to relieve boredom, to socialize, to provide risk and excitement, or to be accepted by peers (Abbott & McKenna, 2000; Lahn & Grabosky, 2003; Williams & Hinton, 2006). It has been suggested that gambling while incarcerated may be a significant part of the prison subculture (Bellringer, cited in R. J. Williams et al., 2005; Williams & Hinton, 2006). In short, gambling within correctional institutions seems to be common but it is not well understood.

Incarceration significantly restricts individuals' opportunities for leisure and recreation experiences, which are an important part of overall health and well being. A recent literature review by Caldwell (2005) suggested that leisure experience can contribute to physical, social, emotional and cognitive health through coping and transcendence. These psychological processes are particularly relevant to incarcerated offenders and the correctional process. Recreation and leisure opportunities for incarcerated individuals in the U.S. have decreased significantly, despite the potential for utilizing rehabilitative properties of such experiences (for a comprehensive review of this issue, see D J Williams, Walker, & Streat, 2005).

It should be noted that leisure, as understood by scholars, is not the same as simple free time. Leisure can be conceptualized as activity, setting, or inner experience, and includes important characteristics such as autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and various positive emotional states (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Leisure as a field of study appears to have strong, but largely

unrecognized, links with various aspects of criminology and forensic science that warrant further professional examination (Williams, 2006; Williams & Walker, 2006). Given the existing reported reasons for participating in prison gambling, it is important to explore if gambling in jails and prisons might be considered to be an important leisure experience for offenders. Such knowledge may help professionals better understand motivations for gambling during incarceration.

In light of this background, 150 participants, most of whom were Caucasian male probationers or parolees, volunteered to complete a survey (summarized below) asking about their participation (or lack thereof) in gambling while incarcerated. All participants had spent a minimum of six months incarcerated in either jail or prison within the state of Utah. This convenience sample was comprised of participants with a wide variety of differing criminal convictions, including property crimes, drug-related crimes, sexual offenders, and violent (nonsexual) offenses. Some offenders had current convictions in more than one crime classification.

Although an agreed-upon definition of leisure remains elusive among scholars, Mannell and Kleiber (1997) summarized various properties or dimensions commonly associated with leisure experience that have been proposed and researched by scholars. These properties include freedom or lack of a lack of constraint, intrinsic motivation, independence from work/employment, self-expression, enjoyment or pleasure, perception of time alteration, and sense of adventure.

Based on these multiple aspects of leisure, the survey included how gambling in jails and prisons may or may not correlate with specific leisure properties. For example, one survey question was: Did gambling in prison/jail provide you with a sense of personal freedom?

Another question was: Did you find pleasure and/or enjoyment through gambling in prison/jail? In this manner, multiple leisure criteria were explored regarding gambling in correctional facilities. Response options for these questions included “Not at all,” “Sometimes,” or “Most of the Time.” Each leisure property assessed and its results are reported shortly herein. This simple instrument to assess the dimensions of leisure was reviewed by two leisure scholars prior to data collection, and minor revisions were made.

Half (78) of the total sample (N=150) reported gambling while in jail or prison. This number is a little higher than the 40% overall prevalence figure reported by R. J. Williams and colleagues (2005). Of those who reported gambling while incarcerated, one-fourth did so four to five times per week. Thirteen participants reported gambling “everyday,” and 27 participants regarded themselves as “highly skilled” gamblers. Consistent with the few prior studies on this topic, common reasons cited for gambling in prisons/jails were to pass the time, obtain some excitement and/or risk, and provide a psychological escape from incarceration.

Results also suggest that gambling while incarcerated may fulfill multiple criteria of leisure experience for many who participate. Three-fourths of gamblers in our sample reported that gambling is leisure “sometimes” (36%) or “most of the time” (36%). Similar results were found in response to whether or not gambling is a form of recreation (Sometimes=27%, Most of the Time=45%). Results from each item of the survey assessing gambling as potential leisure are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Leisure Properties Associated with Gambling in Correctional Settings (n = 78)*

| Abbreviated Gambling as Leisure Question | Not at All | Sometimes | Most of the Time |
|---|------------|-----------|------------------|
| Sense of personal freedom? | 45% | 36% | 20% |
| Pleasure and/or enjoyment? | 23% | 45% | 32% |
| Sense of adventure? | 32% | 45% | 23% |
| Allow use of personal skills? | 23% | 36% | 41% |
| Help to feel more relaxed or less stress? | 36% | 36% | 27% |
| Did time seem to be altered? | 28% | 33% | 38% |
| A way to explore, understand, or express self? | 49% | 38% | 13% |
| Produce positive emotions (i.e., fun, happiness)? | 22% | 41% | 36% |
| Participation due to intrinsic motivation? | 27% | 41% | 32% |
| Is prison/jail gambling “leisure”? | 27% | 36% | 36% |
| Is prison/jail gambling “recreation”? | 27% | 27% | 45% |

* Rounding was used in determining percentage points.

It appears that among these participants, gambling in correctional facilities fulfills many of the dimensions of leisure at least sometimes, and many leisure properties seem to be present during these gambling experiences.

Of primary interest here was simply whether or not gambling that occurs in prisons and jails might be considered legitimate leisure/recreational experience for some offenders. Results show that although various forms of offender gambling often are assumed to be problematic within the correctional environment, a leisure approach may yield new insights to the motivations and functions of gambling behaviors. Simply forbidding gambling within correctional institutions does not explain nor adequately address the issue. If such gambling could be leisure, then this understanding may run counter to common assumptions that these behaviors are always and necessarily problematic. Although violence and victimization associated with gambling in prisons and jails may be severe and effort should be taken to prevent these occurrences, such cases may be rare compared to the amount of gambling that takes place and differing motivations for it (Williams & Hinton, 2006).

Considering gambling within prisons and jails from a leisure perspective has implications related to correctional recreation, offender health and well being, and rehabilitation. As correctional policy in the U.S. has become tougher over recent decades, correctional recreation is on the verge of becoming extinct and its associated potential rehabilitative and health promoting properties may be unrealized (D J Williams, et al., 2005). Correctional psychologists should recognize that positive leisure experiences can be important to offender rehabilitation. Additionally, for some incarcerated offenders it is possible that gambling may provide leisure experiences, particularly at a time when correctional recreation opportunities are limited, that make incarceration more bearable.

Finally, for those offenders who gamble frequently while incarcerated, we do not yet know whether or not they continue to gamble when they leave prison. Nevertheless, given the complex relationship of leisure experience to criminogenesis and rehabilitation (Williams, 2006; Williams & Walker, 2006), it is important for correctional psychologists to consider how gambling within prisons and jails may function for specific offender-clients.

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