



# research reveals...

an update on gambling research in ALBERTA

## About The Alberta Gaming Research Institute

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. The Institute's identified research domains include bio-psychological and health care, socio-cultural, economic, and government and industry policy and practice. The Institute aims to achieve international recognition in gaming-related research. It is coordinated by a Board of Directors working in collaboration with the Alberta Gaming Research Council. The Institute is funded by the Alberta government through the Alberta Lottery Fund.

### OUR MISSION:

**To significantly improve Albertans' knowledge of how gambling affects society**

Your comments and queries are welcome either by e-mail [abgaming@ualberta.ca](mailto:abgaming@ualberta.ca) or phone 780.492.2856.

## Gambling in prison: A benign leisure-time activity?

*Gambling is a big thing in prison. That's most guys' hustle [way of making money]. Some guys draw, some do tattoos, a lot of guys were building log cabins out of popsicle sticks. They have their hobbies. Every guy has a hustle—some guys wash clothes, some sew, shit like that. Gambling increases when they [Department of Corrections] cut hobbies.*

— Excerpt from Dr. DJ Williams' interview with "Marvin", a 49-year old who had spent nearly a decade in prison



Gambling as a leisure activity reportedly runs rampant in prisons. Anecdotal evidence suggests that inmates will gamble on virtually anything that affords an element of skill, luck or risk—particularly card games, professional athletic competitions, dominoes, or other such events to which odds can be assigned. Gambling-related debts are reportedly settled between prisoners using items such as soap, hygiene products, cigarettes, currency and anything else of value. This passion for gambling amongst inmates first aroused the curiosity of Dr. DJ Williams while he was working as a forensic psychotherapist in an aftercare program for offenders.

After completing his B.Sc. (Psychology) from Weber State and M.Sc. (Exercise & Sports Psychology) from the University of Utah, Williams obtained employment as a counselor in forensics working at a community corrections halfway house. It was there that he initially became aware of how gambling had consumed the lives of many of his offender clients while in prison. It was also at this time that Williams' own career took a drastic turn when he returned to school to complete a Master's of Social Work specializing in forensics. Subsequently, Williams was accepted into the Ph.D. program at the University of Alberta where he studied crime through the lens of sport science, recreation, and leisure. His doctoral thesis was titled *Release from the 'us versus them' prison: Granting freedom by giving voice to multiple identities in physical activity and offender rehabilitation*. It examined how health and leisure opportunities in prisons impact offender rehabilitation.

Now a post-doctoral research fellow with the Department of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Williams is presently pursuing an Institute-funded project which is contributing to the scant research available on gambling and gambling behaviours in prisons.



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According to Williams, “an examination of individuals’ leisure-time activities can also provide important insights into their personal meanings, desires, and needs.”

## What do we know about leisure activity and prisoners?

It is commonly assumed that leisure activities are enjoyable for individuals who participate in them regardless of whether or not they provide specific health, social, or other benefits. According to Williams, “an examination of individuals’ leisure-time activities can also provide important insights into their personal meanings, desires, and needs.” Improving our understanding of why particular leisure activities such as gambling are attractive to prisoners can prove beneficial when re-integrating parolees back into society.

Despite individual preferences for assorted leisure activities, Williams states that, “we cannot say that some leisure activities are positive and others are negative with respect to rehabilitating offenders.” Because the personal circumstances of individuals in the correction system differ, Williams stresses that “context and motivational linkages are everything.” By way of illustration, he says that, “using an experimental design I have found that, for some offenders, strength training seems to have positive treatment effects, but for others who are not motivated to participate in the activity, it has negative effects since they may perceive it to be coercive... For cyclical sex offenders, many activities normally viewed as positive such as hiking or social activities with friends may be used, subconsciously, to maintain an image of normalcy, or to alleviate the emotional disturbance following the crime. The bottom line is that we have to be very, very careful about how leisure activities are utilized, and try to restructure activities to disrupt patterns of crime.”

## Gambling experiences of offenders in an “aftercare program”

Dr. Williams was able to gain many insights about the nature of prison gambling while providing counseling services in the aftercare program at the Center for Family Development Sex Offender Program in Ogden, Utah. His conversations with offenders revealed that there were varying levels of gambling intensity among inmates and that several major themes emerged with respect to their stated motivations. These included: 1) to pass time; 2) to relieve the monotony of prison life; 3) to socialize, and; 4) as a means of acquiring money or goods. In some instances, there even seemed to be a measure of physical benefit in the activity as several gamblers reported repayment of debts by doing push-ups or other physical tasks. When asked if there are similarities in gambling motivations between offenders and non-offenders, Williams explains that, “both groups seem to enjoy the excitement and ‘chase’ associated with the activity though the environment in prison is radically different than other settings.”

Experiences with counseling and interviewing offenders in the Utah<sup>1</sup> correctional system caused Williams to reflect upon the appropriateness of gambling as a leisure-time activity in prisons. For example, is so-called “mild” gambling simply a benign leisure-time activity for inmates? Are there costs and benefits related to the activity? Might an offender’s experiences in prison lead to future problem gambling

<sup>1</sup> The State of Utah is a rare geographic jurisdiction where virtually all gambling is against the law.

behaviours post-release? It is these and other questions that Williams is seeking to answer as he formalizes his investigation into the issue via a research grant from the Alberta Gaming Research Institute.

### Studying the gambling behaviour of Utah offenders

The Institute-funded study currently being undertaken by Williams will examine data obtained from a Utah sample of approximately 200 parolees. Only individuals attending community-based treatment programming who have served a minimum of six months in the Utah State Penitentiary are being recruited to be interviewed. Each participant will be asked to provide retrospective accounts of their prison gambling experiences. When asked why he isn't studying inmates while incarcerated, Williams says, "It's easier to gain access to facilities such as halfway houses and day-reporting centres than it is to get into prisons themselves... and offenders [outside of prisons] may be more willing to share information openly and honestly."

Interestingly, gaining the trust of prison officials may actually prove to be more difficult for researchers than gaining the trust of offenders. It is Williams' opinion that, "Some administrators are wary of reports that could be perceived as casting a shadow on their facilities. Therefore, it is important to try to show the possible benefits of the research and how participating could be helpful to their particular correctional system." With respect to the offenders, he finds that, "they are actually happy to share their stories, and I believe such opportunity should be a major function of correctional research."

### Potential applications for prison gambling research

Based on his conversations with correctional administrators, Williams says that, "prison gambling is considered to be a violation of institutional rules [in Utah] and is not considered a harmless activity." However, in his capacity as a forensic psychotherapist affiliated with the Utah Department of Corrections, he was surprised to have heard next to nothing about the issue. As such, Williams' research project would seem to have several potentially valuable implications. Specifically, the study may highlight possible changes or modifications to existing correctional gambling policy based on findings. In addition, Williams says that, "it may also highlight benefits and costs of prison gambling and illuminate important therapeutic issues that could impact offender mental health and recidivism."

In the future, Williams is planning to expand his initial study to include additional samples from Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, Utah, and Nevada. In this way, it will be possible to compare the similarities and differences in gambling's impact upon the correctional processes in different locales. He also anticipates undertaking future studies that would "target" gambling throughout the stages of the correctional process (i.e., pre-prison, in prison, post-release transition, and post-release integration). A thorough understanding of the development and progression of inmate gambling behaviours could provide important clues to aid offenders upon their re-entry into the community.

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## Furthering our understanding of leisure and crime

Williams' longer-term research plans include more wide ranging study in the area of deviant behaviour from both "criminal" and "non-criminal" perspectives. He also continues to be intrigued with the leisure and crime nexus and asserts that, "the recognition of crime as potential leisure activity provides insights into criminogenesis." He adds that, "leisure, carefully considered for each individual offender, may also have the potential to facilitate rehabilitation." Thanks to Dr. Williams' investigations we're poised to better understand how the richness of personal experience and leisure in its many forms, gambling included, shapes our sense of identity.

### Related Publications:

- Williams, DJ. (in press). Exploring the functions of leisure and recreational activities within a sexual assault cycle. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Prevention and Treatment*.
- Williams, DJ, Walker, G.J., & Strean, W.B. (in press). Correctional recreation on death row: Should pardon be granted? *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*.
- Williams, DJ. (2005, May 11). Sex offenders on prison gambling: Harmful addiction or opportunity for leisure? *BASIS Online: The Brief Addiction Science Information Source*. Retrieved May 19, 2005 from <http://www.basionline.org/backissues/2005/vol10pdf/editorialmay112005.pdf>
- Williams, DJ. (2005). An experiment on the inclusion of strength training in offender substance abuse treatment. *Offender Substance Abuse Report*, 5, 17-29.
- Williams, DJ, & Hanley, A. M. (2005). Thinking about thinking (errors). *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, 5, 51-58.
- Williams, DJ. (2004). Sexual offenders' perceptions of correctional therapy: What can we learn? *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity: The Journal of Prevention and Treatment*, 11, 145-162.
- Williams, DJ, & Strean, W.B. (2004). Physical activity as a helpful adjunct to substance abuse treatment. *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, 4, 83-100.



Photo credit: Cheryl Croucher, Innovation Alberta

## Institute Board Chair re-appointed

**INSTITUTE BOARD CHAIR**, Dr. Nady el-Guebaly, has been re-appointed for a second three-year term effective July 1st, 2005. Dr. el-Guebaly is a Professor in the Department of Psychiatry and the Division Chief, Addiction Division, Faculty of Medicine at the University of Calgary. He is also the Founding Director of its Regional Addiction Centre.

His introduction to mental health and addiction medicine dates back to 1969 during initial psychiatric training in the United Kingdom followed by training in Canada and the United States. Major research interests have included the offspring of alcoholic parents, treatment opportunities for the mentally ill substance abuser, pathological gambling, medical education and international delivery of care. These interests have resulted in 550 publications including, 172 peer-reviewed papers and 40 past and current research grants.

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