

**Leisure and Deviance Education/Research Services (LEADERS)
Brief Research Report (July 2010, Los Angeles USA)**

Offender Gambling Behavior and Risk during the Re-Entry Process

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Study Background

A recent review of scientific studies on offender gambling shows that offenders have the highest overall rate of problem gambling of any known population (Williams, Royston, & Hagen, 2005). According to that review, 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 (Williams, et al., 2005). Despite high rates of problem gambling among offender populations, Gowan (1996) suggested it is easy for corrections professionals to overlook problem gambling among offenders they supervise. Nevertheless, gambling among offenders remains a very important, though sometimes neglected, issue in criminal justice research and practice.

Visher and Travis (2003) suggested there are four sequential stages to the correctional process: pre-prison, in-prison, post-release transition, and post-release integration. Each of these stages contains important contextual differences from the others. In other words, offenders face unique issues and challenges within their psychosocial environments at each stage. Their motivation to comply and engage in programming also may differ at each stage. Risks related to the commission of crime can also vary. Thus, it is valuable for professionals to consider offenders' correctional experiences according to these sequential stages.

With the exception of a small handful of studies offender gambling research has focused almost exclusively on the pre-prison stage. While many studies have shown high incidence of offender problem gambling prior to incarceration, we know little about the nature of gambling that occurs within jails and prisons.

The few studies available on in-prison gambling suggest some common reasons for doing so—including to pass the time and relieve boredom, to socialize, and to provide risk and excitement (i.e., Abbott & McKenna, 2000; Lahn & Grabosky, 2003, Williams & Hinton, 2006). Gambling while incarcerated may function as part of the prison culture (Williams et al., 2005; Williams & Hinton, 2006), and for some it may provide psychological benefits associated with productive leisure experience, such as feelings of personal freedom, a sense of adventure, relaxation and stress reduction, and other positive emotions (Williams, 2008). Relatively benign gambling as potential leisure inside correctional facilities would appear to be common. In their review of the literature, Williams and colleagues (2005) found a prevalence rate of 40% having gambled during their incarceration.

It appears that pre-prison gambling differs considerably from in-prison gambling. However, problem gamblers (beginning at pre-prison) perhaps may gamble across all correctional stages. Or, perhaps their exposure to psychotherapy (targeting substance abuse

and/or criminal behavior) during incarceration may lead, somewhat synergistically, to a reduction of problem gambling upon re-entry. Conversely, perhaps some offenders who rarely gambled prior to jail or prison may engage in more frequent gambling during incarceration because of its specific contextual benefits at that stage. In such cases, it may be possible for these in-prison gamblers to continue their gambling throughout their transition and reintegration into the community. A recent study comprised of semi-structured interviews with correctional professionals in Nevada and Utah found that offender gambling during the later stages seems to have significant implications for some offenders upon re-entry (Williams & Walker, 2009). However, we still lack valuable data concerning offender gambling behavior across correctional stages, particularly as offenders re-enter the community.

Methods

This report provides quantitative information on offender gambling behavior according to the Visher and Travis's (2003) stages of correctional process. A group of 64 male, mostly Caucasian, adult probationers and parolees at a Utah community correctional center (halfway house) voluntarily completed two brief questionnaires to assess their gambling behaviors. All participants had been incarcerated in jail or prison for at least six months prior to their current placement. The sample represented individuals who had been convicted of various crimes, including sexual offenses, substance abuse, violence, and property crimes (participants were not subdivided according to crime categories for this report).

The first questionnaire was open-ended and essentially asked participants to describe their gambling behaviors before their first incarceration (pre-prison/jail), during their incarceration (in-prison/jail), and after their last incarceration (transition into community). Utah has no legalized gambling, thus participants who seek to gamble at this phase of re-entry would either have to do so covertly in small networks or travel across the state border on weekends during their approved leave time. A primary limitation of this report is that because data were collected among offenders in a halfway house, the focus is on transition, but not reintegration, into the community.

Questions from the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI; Wynne, 2003) were administered in order to assess problem gambling and risk level for problem gambling during transition into the community (see Table 1). Response options to questions ranged from "never" to "almost always." Often, problem gambling is assessed by the PGSI "within the past year." However, because the focus here is gambling from incarceration to re-entry, the beginning of each PGSI question was modified from "Within the past year..." to read "Since the time of your last incarceration..." The length of time from participants' last incarceration to the administration of the questionnaires ranged from one month to one year.

By using both questionnaires it was possible to obtain a general assessment of risk level for problem gambling during transition and participants' brief accounts of their gambling histories across multiple correctional stages could be considered. It should be noted again that legalized gambling is not available in Utah.

Table 1: *Problem Gambling Severity Index* (Wynne, 2003) Abbreviated Questions*

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1. Have you bet more than you could lose?
 2. Have you needed to gamble with larger amounts of money?
 3. Have you gone back another day to win back money?
 4. Have you borrowed or sold something to get money to gamble?
 5. Have you felt like you might have a problem with gambling?
 6. Have people criticized your betting or told you that you had a gambling problem?
 7. Have you felt guilty about the way you gamble or what happens when you gamble?
 8. Has gambling caused you any health problems, including stress and anxiety?
 9. Has gambling caused financial problems for you or your household?
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*All questions began with “Since your last incarceration...”

Findings

As a whole, offenders’ self reports concerning their gambling behavior tended to be brief. Nevertheless, a majority of participants described rare or occasional gambling at some time during their lives prior to their incarceration (mostly while visiting Nevada). Four individuals seemed to gamble frequently prior to incarceration, and twenty-six (41%) reported never gambling prior to their incarceration. Twenty-six (41%) admitted gambling while incarcerated, and a majority of the total participants stated they had not gambled at all following their incarceration.

Results from the PGSI identified six (9%) current problem gamblers in the sample, while 11 (17%) may be “moderate risk” gamblers. These two groups account for the portion of the sample that apparently had gambled during their transition. Surprisingly, descriptions of gambling behaviors of those identified as moderate risk or problem gamblers showed that 6 of the 17 had not gambled prior to their incarceration. This is an important finding. In other words, their elevated gambling risk during re-entry apparently originated from gambling that occurred during jail or prison and not prior. Interestingly, two at-risk individuals reported that they did not gamble while incarcerated. The other respondents seemed to have gambled at least occasionally across stages.

Summary

To summarize, in a sample from a rare geographic location without legalized gambling, there appear to be few frequent gamblers prior to incarceration and relatively few upon re-entry. Such findings are expected and run counter to high rates of problem gambling during the pre-prison correctional stage that is typically observed where legalized gambling is available (Williams, et al., 2005). However, another possibility is that many at-risk gamblers simply declined to participate in this project. Interestingly, the gambling rate (41%) during incarceration for this sample is consistent with existing research conducted in other geographic locations (Williams, et al., 2005). Perhaps the most important finding here is a confirmation that it is possible for some individuals to develop an elevated risk for problem gambling that stems from when they are incarcerated, even though they may not have gambled prior to their incarceration.

Problem gambling among offenders can have serious consequences, but it is often difficult to detect (Gowan, 1996). Correctional professionals should be aware of the possibilities in which gambling may develop among offenders, particularly at a time when legalized gambling opportunities are increasing. Although much more research is needed, problematic offender gambling seems to complicate the re-entry process due to its associations with substance abuse and further criminal activity, lack of treatment resources targeted at gambling issues, and rebuilding important financial and social support (Williams & Walker, 2009). Therefore, correctional professionals are encouraged to look closely for potential gambling issues among the offenders they supervise.

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