

The Dangers of Gambling

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Gambling is legal or illegal betting. Most gambling takes the form of casino slot machines, race track betting, or state lotteries. Gambling is a \$35.8 billion a year industry (Edwards, 1999). People like gambling for many reasons. Gambling is essentially a game, and most people enjoy games. Some like the thrill of knowing that the next pull of the slot machine or the next ticket on the Lotto may be a winner. The only certainty about gambling is that it is a danger on economic, social, and psychological levels.

On an individual level, gambling poses a threat to the personal or household income. Some people have lost everything to gambling. One survey done in a homeless facility “found 85 percent said they had gambled and played the lottery, 70 percent said that gambling made it more difficult to get off the streets and 18 percent believed it was a factor in their homelessness” (Edwards, 1999, p. 18).

On a regional level, gambling can cause controversy and discord among citizens, business owners, and the government. One example is the area of Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey. Casino gambling is legal in Delaware, and New Jersey is the home of the famous Atlantic City Boardwalk. However, neighboring Maryland’s residents believe that as much as hundreds of millions of dollars are lost to businesses in neighboring states that either offer gambling or cater to gamblers (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003). Another example of the discord that can result over the gambling debate is the anti-gambling politicians who have lost their jobs because they could not battle the lobbyists hired by the powerful gambling industry (Edwards, 1999).

Similarly, state governments must contend with the debate over whether to allow a risky form of entertainment within their borders. In 2003, lotteries existed in 37 states (Vatz &

Weinberg, 2003). Sometimes, citizens feel misled over politicians' treatment of state lottery issues. Many states—including Florida—claim that the lottery funds education. Studies have found, however, that these states more often than not reduce their appropriation for education once the lottery is up and running (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003). Therefore, the public feels deceived when they realize that the lottery only generates more money for the state budget but not for education.

In addition to the economic reasons gambling is a dangerous habit, there are social reasons, as well. One of the most compelling issues surrounding the gambling controversy is the disproportionate participation of African Americans in gambling activities. Some researchers believe that African Americans play the lottery four times as often as whites (Edwards, 1999) and others note that when African Americans gamble, they do it with greater intensity and lose higher sums of money than whites (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003).

Not only minorities, but the poor also suffer disproportionately from the dangers of gambling. Over half of the revenue generated by state lotteries comes from only 5% of players (Edwards, 1999). This means that for people chasing a big win, they are spending exorbitant sums when compared with their incomes. Another shocking statistic is that the players who play the lottery most frequently are people whose household income is less than \$10,000 per year (Edwards, 1999). Critics of gambling call this a regressive tax. There is even an example of a state that unwittingly made poorer citizens subsidize the education of wealthier students. Georgia's HOPE scholarships were funded through state lottery dollars. An examination of the finances behind the scholarships showed that lottery sales were higher in poorer neighborhoods, but the average income for families of scholarship recipients was \$13,000 per year higher than the state average (Edwards, 1999).

The fact that gambling's risks have destroyed people's lives is the best evidence that betting money is a dangerous game. Gambling actually transitioned from an illegal activity to a legal one in 1963 when New Hampshire became the first state to adopt a lottery (Edwards, 1999). Since then, horror stories like Rev. Lawrence Wright's have become more common. The reverend used \$140,000 of his church's money to finance a personal gambling habit because he believed that his next bet was the one that would get him out of debt and pay back his church (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003). Instead, he was indicted for bribery and money laundering.

Rev. Wright's lawyer claimed he was the victim of a psychological condition known as gambling addiction. Such a diagnosis proves that gambling is a dangerous behavior. What happens to victims is that they abandon the goals they have set and their plans for achieving those goals to chase the possibility of getting rich quick (Rambeck & George, 2005).

Adolescents who lack direction and strong parenting, individuals who are in recovery from drugs and alcohol, and people experiencing grief are all vulnerable to the progressive addiction to gambling (Rambeck & George, 2005).

Gambling is dangerous because it creates fear and desperation—even for the few seemingly lucky winners. One Virginia couple feared after winning a jackpot that their children would be kidnapped and held for ransom (Edwards, 1999). Other winners have complained about ceaseless calls from solicitors and salespeople. Imagine the horror of winning a huge prize, and because of a lack of self-control or a lack of any perspective on how much is being spent, all the money is gone! These examples all show that even for the winners, gambling brings with it the possibility of psychological problems.

Another psychological problem associated with the risks of gambling is the previously-mentioned clinical diagnosis of gambling addiction. Psychologists identify victims as “problem

gamblers” or a more severe label, “compulsive gamblers” (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003, p. 57). Problem gamblers have difficulty resisting the temptation to gamble while compulsives are literally unable to stop (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003). Psychologists have identified causes, symptoms, and treatments. Treatments include developing higher self-esteem, greater capacity to trust, and a better understanding that everyone struggles with life’s problems (Rambeck & George, 2005). Obviously, if addiction to an activity is severe enough for the medical establishment to label it with a formal diagnosis, that activity poses a threat, psychologically, to potential addicts.

Clearly, gambling is a danger; the economic, social, and psychological problems that can result prove that it is dangerous. Yet it is legal in all but two states, and 82% of people gamble in some way from time to time (Vatz & Weinberg, 2003). Why people sustain such a risk is an area for future study. Similarly, science should work to understand the brain activity that creates such an incentive to continue when a gambler catches betting fever.

## References

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