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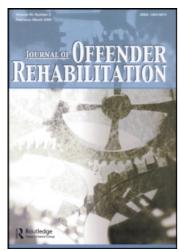
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Does Offender Gambling on the Inside Continue on the Outside? Insights from Correctional Professionals on Gambling and Re-Entry

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Does Offender Gambling on the Inside Continue on the Outside? Insights from Correctional Professionals on Gambling and Re-Entry

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This study brings to light a neglected topic of particular importance—offender gambling issues within the context of re-entry into the community. Fifteen correctional professionals from Nevada (high gambling availability) and Utah (no legalized gambling) participated in semi-structured interviews to provide insights into how gambling may impact the offender re-entry process in their respective locations. While gambling in prisons and jails may be common, offender gambling issues upon re-entry reportedly are associated with substance abuse and the commission of crime. Participants in both Utah and Nevada reported a lack of resources for dealing with offender gambling issues. Implications for offender re-entry are discussed.

KEYWORDS correctional process, offender gambling, offender re-entry, offender rehabilitation, prison gambling

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for legalized gambling across North America have increased dramatically over the past two decades. As a result, there has been a critical

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need to explore gambling and its issues among a variety of populations within society. A rapidly-growing population that recently has received attention from gambling researchers is offenders—those who have spent time incarcerated.

Researchers have measured disordered gambling among offenders using established instruments such as the South Oaks Gambling Scale (SOGS, Lesieur & Blume, 1987, 1993), clinical criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), and the Canadian Problem Gambling Index (CPGI, Ferris & Wynne, 2001). A thorough review of the literature across several countries found that offenders have high rates of problem gambling (33% overall), higher than any other known population (Williams, Royston, & Hagen, 2005).

Compulsive gamblers sometimes commit crimes, which result in their entry into the criminal justice system (i.e., Blaszczynski & McConaghy, 1992; Rosenthal & Lorenz, 1992; Sakurai & Smith, 2003; Yeoman & Griffiths, 1996). Although pathological gambling may lead to criminal behavior, not all crimes committed by pathological gamblers are gambling-related (Lahn & Grabosky, 2003; Meyer & Fabian, 1996; Meyer & Stadler, 2002). It seems that in some cases, pathological gambling contributes to the commission of crime, while in other cases crime precedes the development of pathological gambling.

In considering offenders' behaviors, it is important to recognize contextual and process issues. Visher and Travis (2003) pointed out that although much research with offenders has focused on *factors* related to criminal activity, the *process* of offender transition has been ignored. Similarly, research on offender gambling has been directed at preprison experience with only a few studies examining in-prison gambling. In their review of the literature on offender gambling Williams and colleagues (2005) found only six studies that focused on gambling within prisons with a prevalence range of 26% to 100%. Besides these studies, additional reports also suggest gambling during incarceration is not uncommon, and that it may be a way of passing the time (Jarvis, 1988; Martinez, 1983; Williams, 2005; Williams & Hinton, 2006).

Virtually no research yet has considered offender gambling postprison. Gambling upon re-entry is likely to be different from gambling at prior correctional stages. Offender gambling prior to incarceration occurs, of course, without monitoring by the correctional system, and gambling during incarceration may include somewhat unique motivations (such as to pass the time). Because offenders have such high rates of in-prison gambling and preprison problem gambling, it is important for researchers and professionals to begin exploring postprison gambling. For example, it is possible that some offenders with problem gambling issues prior to their incarceration may return to compulsive gambling during re-entry. Or, perhaps some offenders who gamble regularly while in prison may continue their frequent gambling upon release. It is also possible that some offenders who gamble regularly at

some point prior to re-entry discontinue such behavior upon release. We do not know if postprison gambling is (or might be) a significant correctional problem, or how offender gambling may influence the re-entry process.

In light of the above background the purpose of this study is to gain insights into how gambling may influence the re-entry process for offenders. The focus here is primarily on the latter stages of the correctional process, specifically from incarceration through re-entry, rather than preprison. Although there are many important questions and potential issues regarding offender gambling upon re-entry, this project is intended to be a starting point for future research on this novel topic. The primary research question for this project is: Is gambling during incarceration and upon re-entry perceived by correctional professionals working in the field to be a significant correctional issue—and why or why not? The responses generated may then be used to guide future research.

METHODS

Participants and Locations

Fifteen correctional professionals currently working with offenders in the re-entry process agreed to participate in one-time semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Semi-structured interviews are especially useful in gaining a detailed perspective about a particular topic (Smith, 1995). Using this format, it was possible to ask a few general questions about offender gambling at preprison, during incarceration, and upon re-entry without the interviewer leading them toward particular answers. More details could then be obtained by probing further, asking clarifying questions, and obtaining explanations and examples.

Participants were selected based on Patton's (1990) concept of maximum variation sampling. However, a few potential participants declined to participate due to time constraints. Participants had a wide range of experience working directly with offenders, and included administrators, supervisors, and parole officers. Years of experience ranged from 4 to 30 years (mean = 15.5).

Legalized gambling availability is likely to be significant to re-entry, thus participants were selected from urban centers in Utah (Salt Lake City-Ogden) and Nevada (Las Vegas). Utah and Nevada border each other, yet Utah is one of very few locations where there is no legalized gambling. On the other hand, opportunities for gambling in Nevada are plentiful. Specifically, 10 participants worked for the Nevada Division of Probation and Parole and 5 worked for the Utah Department of Corrections. Nine participants were male and six were female. Ages ranged from 30 to 60 years (mean = 44.5). Interviews were conducted in order to obtain insights regarding gambling issues from incarceration to re-entry.

Interview Procedure

All interviews were conducted by the first author on site at corrections locations. Participants were given a brief explanation about the purpose of the study, and it was explained that the project takes a broad view of gambling that may include many possible forms, both legal and illegal. They were told that gambling may include, but is not limited to: betting, sports-betting, card games or games of chance (to win money, services, or items of value), and various casino activities. Although multiple examples were offered, a strict definition of gambling was not provided.

Participants were asked basic demographic questions regarding professional background and experience, current job title and function, and information on their specific correctional institutions and programs. They were then asked about the prevalence of offender gambling within their prisons/jails and any associated issues—essentially, how common gambling is, what it looks like and any significant effects. Finally, participants were asked about whether or not gambling is a problem when offenders re-enter the community following incarceration—again, how common is it, what it looks like and any significant effects. Following these broad questions, they were asked to provide explanations and examples when relevant, and to discuss how any reported gambling issues are addressed. Participants' responses yielded detailed information regarding their beliefs and experiences surrounding gambling issues within correctional settings.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, and responses to questions were coded and subjected to a categorical-content analyzing procedure (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The purpose of this procedure is to develop basic knowledge about core themes that emerge from participants' responses. During the interview process and specifically during content analysis of data, attempts also were made to identify potential frameworks that guided participants' understanding of issues. For example, a few respondents used the word "triggers" when discussing gambling and substance abuse, which signaled that a relapse prevention framework might be guiding those respondents' views. Potential meanings associated with the data were then further considered from within such a perspective. This process was helpful given that participant member checking to obtain clarification only occurred during the interview itself.

We have included several quotations by participants in the Results and Discussion section to reflect general emergent themes that summarize responses. Although quotes are organized around emergent themes, we have chosen to privilege participants' voices rather than including extensive commentary about them. Descriptions by participants may be particularly useful given that that this project is a first at exploring offender gambling as it may impact re-entry.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. Foremost, we are obtaining participants perceptions, rather than measuring actual offender gambling behavior. Offender gambling is prohibited within correctional facilities, and it is impossible to measure accurately due to its secrecy. Offender gambling upon transition into the community may also be hidden and is difficult to assess. Although extensive correctional experience is represented herein, this sample is small and specific, so generalizations across locations cannot be made. Finally, single interviews with each participant were utilized, thus extensive follow up was not possible. However, despite these limitations, the data obtained are valuable in helping to understand the possibilities of how offender gambling may impact re-entry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to maintain discussion structure herein we have divided this section into a brief summary of findings regarding gambling in incarcerated settings before presenting a summary of findings concerning offender gambling post-incarceration.

Gambling in Prisons and Jails

Several participants from both Utah and Nevada believed that gambling in prisons and jails is common. However, a few reported that they were not sure how prevalent gambling is. Sports betting, betting on recreational activities, card games, and board games were all mentioned as types of gambling. Participants reported that offenders gamble for money (when possible), commissary items, personal favors, extra supplies, and cigarettes. A Utah administrator who had worked at multiple levels of the correctional system reported:

It's [gambling] very common. It's not openly seen at all times as, uh, a gambling episode...You don't actually see individuals rolling dice on a dice table anymore. You don't see people playing 21...They disguise it very well as different types of, uh, games of chance...There are all different types of gaming going on constantly.

A Utah parole officer who had worked for several years in and out of the prison system agreed:

It's very common. They bet on about anything...I think it's more prevalent in the general population areas of the prison...In halfway houses we find groups of gambling, what we call gambling rings that get going and then someone gets beat up because they can't pay a debt.

While the parole officer believed gambling is common in both the Utah State Prison and halfway houses, he thought that gambling problems were reported more in the halfway houses:

I think it's reported more outside (of prison). Inside it's, you know, you're apt to get a much more severe punishment from other offenders if you tell on them, and it's a stronger code (inmate code of conduct). 'Cause in the halfway house environment you have parolees and probationers and they're both different animals.

A parole officer in Nevada who had worked previously inside the prison stated, "Inside the prison it's [gambling] a daily occurrence." A Nevada correctional supervisor who had worked in various locations believes gambling in Nevada prisons and jails is no more common than in any other state. He added,

I believe you have to look at the institutions as a small city where you have your vice issues—gambling, book making, prostitution, drug sales, uh, exchange store. It's just, you know, you have to look at it as a smaller segment of society that is divided up the same way that society is.

Participants' perspectives regarding offender gambling in prisons generally are consistent with other reports suggesting that gambling is common, may be part of the culture of prison, and that it occasionally results in violence (Martinez, 1983; Williams & Hinton, 2006). It should be expected that offender gambling would be prevalent in a relatively monotonous, predictable, highly structured environment inherent to incarceration. A recent study found that gambling in prisons and jails may be considered leisure experience for many offenders (Williams, 2008a). In other words, such free-time gambling may bring a sense of freedom and various positive emotional states.

Offender Gambling upon Transition into Community

Findings suggest that gambling issues during transition into the community may be varied and complex. Most participants seemed to believe that gambling can be a problem for some offenders upon re-entry. Utah correctional professionals generally acknowledged that gambling occurs within halfway houses, but were aware of only rare cases where parolees or probationers drove out of state (often to Nevada) to gamble. An officer at a Utah day treatment program stated, "We don't see a lot of gambling. They [offenders] come in for classes. We don't see a lot here." However, a supervisor noted that the Utah Department of Corrections does not look for possible problem gambling when offenders are living on their own in the community. Because gambling is illegal in Utah, the possibility of some offenders having gambling problems seems to have escaped the attention of many correctional professionals.

Responses revealed that specific behaviors were paired with gambling, which seemed to legitimize some gambling as being problematic. The links mentioned were (a) gambling and substance abuse, and (b) gambling and crime. Interestingly, despite significant differences in gambling availability, correctional professionals in both Nevada and Utah reported a lack of feasible treatment resources to address cases of problem gambling. Finally, several re-entry difficulties for offenders with gambling histories (preincarceration) were reported.

Gambling and Substance Abuse Connection

Correctional professionals are aware of the need to manage closely offenders who are at risk for substance abuse relapse. Findings reflect perceptions of a strong link between gambling and substance abuse. Several interviewees in the Nevada correctional system reported that offenders in their state with substance abuse histories are likely to have a "do not enter casino" clause in their parole or probation agreements. A Nevada supervisor with two decades of police and corrections experience stated, "I would say that maybe, uh, 50% [of transitioning parolees] would start gambling, but it always seems to fall in line with alcohol use and abuse and drug use and abuse." He believes that problem gambling is "connected with alcohol and drugs" and if low substance abuse risk offenders gamble, then, "they are able to control it and stay to their twenty dollar limits or whatever on paydays." A Nevada probation officer suggested,

I think that [substance abuse and gambling] might coincide with each other somewhat. I think that it's possible that it [substance abuse and gambling] might be a lot higher than what is actually documented, and they [offenders] probably get convicted of something else.

One Nevada officer had considerable experience working with a drug court program, and he discussed specific recent cases of re-entry where risky gambling was linked with substance abuse. He summarized:

... Issues that I've had usually involve the use of methamphetamines. The amphetamines keep them awake for a few days at a time, and one of the things they do is go drink andgamble. You know, they're awake and they gotta do something and they're in Las Vegas. The only thing to do is to go to the casino...I think methamphetamine was the problem, and then the gambling was just they had something they needed to do...It's hard to tell, I guess when I'm dealing with substance abusers, it's hard to tell which one's first. Um, I've had them say they use meth, that's the trigger. They have something they need to do; they need to go gamble. While they do the gambling they drink. I've also had it the

opposite way where they've said they started gambling. As a result of gambling, they started drinking. As a result of drinking, they next step is using their dope. I've seen both sides. I've seen it both ways where the gambling triggered the drug use, and I've seen it where the drug use triggered the gambling.

Comments by a Utah administrator also reflect a prioritization of substance abuse. He stated:

What we'd like to try to say is that you [offender] have other problems. You have a problem with alcohol or drugs. So, if it's alcohol, that probably led you into the gambling and you could go through the 12-step program with alcoholics anonymous. But that does not focus on the individual with a real gambling problem. The individual with a real gambling problem needs specific help. And, there are very few states that have programs specifically designed for those gamblers who have the addiction.

Comments by several participants reflected a belief that substance abuse contributes to problem gambling. However, some accounts also indicated that non-problem and problem gambling can contribute to substance abuse. A review of the literature does reveal a strong association between problem gambling and substance use disorders (Argo & Black, 2004). Given that many offenders have histories of substance abuse problems, it seems reasonable that "do not enter casino" clauses would be common in Nevada parole and probation agreements.

Gambling and Crime Connection

Nevada participants were aware of numerous re-entry cases when gambling was related to criminal activity. Mostly, these were cases when problem gambling lead people to commit crimes to support their gambling problems. A Nevada supervisor noted:

They're [offenders] out there committing crimes to feed the gambling. It's like one addiction is feeding the other. So, that's why, where most of the problems are...You know, they're gambling, they're committing the other crimes to support the gambling habit...The gambling itself is leading to the crimes they're committing, because they're trying to support the [gambling] habit.

An experienced Nevada parole officer observed, "They've stolen from their employer or written bad checks or whatever to get money to gamble. Or, [they've] missed work or lied to a family member, stolen from family members, things like that to support their gambling habit."

Although an awareness of the potential for problem gambling among offenders seemed to be somewhat less in Utah than Nevada, there were a few reported instances of an association between problem gambling and crime. A Utah supervisor recalled a specific case, "For him [offender] to end up here for gambling, that would have meant that he had stolen something, or [committed] a forgery, as a result of the gambling." Unfortunately, it is not clear whether this case refers to an apparent original crime prior to incarceration or a violation (new crime) of parole or probation.

One Nevada supervisor recalled an unusual parole case where a new crime seemed to precede the development of problem gambling:

I think of one drug dealer who, that [gambling] was her way of getting rid of cash. And, she started making so much [money] she was gambling because she had too much cash all the time. And, and she says gambling became very addictive to her, but then she'd sit there [gambling] all day long because she'd sell drugs all day long.

The relationship between problem gambling and crime is complex. However, a thorough literature review found that about half of all crime committed by incarcerated problem and pathological gamblers was reportedly committed to support gambling behavior (Williams et al., 2005). It would be expected that some offenders with preprison gambling problems might struggle with gambling problems again upon re-entry, particularly in environments where gambling is readily available. Insights from Nevada correctional professionals in this study confirm that expectation. Although gambling issues pertaining to re-entry in Utah are less clear, recent data from offender self reports in Utah suggest some offenders are at high risk for problem gambling upon re-entry despite not having gambled prior to their incarceration (Williams, 2008b). In these relatively few cases, frequent gambling behavior seemed to originate during incarceration.

Need for Offender Gambling Treatment Resources

Most participants mentioned that they were aware of few resources for offenders who might have gambling problems. Gamblers Anonymous was mentioned almost exclusively, but a couple of Nevada participants also mentioned counseling within the community for impulse control disorders. A Nevada parole officer reported:

I don't think there are sufficient resources here in Vegas, particularly, and if there is, it's not out in the open where offenders or even some staff would be made aware of the resources that are available. So, no, I think there's a need for more programs and I think there's a need to market those programs so everyone's aware of what's available.

Talking about treatment programs for gamblers, a Nevada supervisor with over 20 years of experience stated:

I would say there are none [programs] in the prison that I know of. Informally, there may be some of the guys sitting around talking about it, but I kinda doubt it. Out here [parole and probation] depending on whether or not you have insurance, there's Gamblers Anonymous. Depending on if you have very good insurance, the hospital has a program but it's hours and hours a day.

A Nevada parole officer reported:

I think that Vegas is lacking. I think that being a gambling state, when we do have offenders that need rehabilitation as far as gambling resources needed, it's extremely hard to find facilities that have Gambling Anonymous. It's more impulse-control type counseling instead of focusing on the addiction of gambling.

A field supervisor in Nevada added:

The state's pretty weak when it comes to social services. You know, when they [offenders] come out [of jails/prison] we don't have a free place for them to go. So they gotta like, they gotta pay to go to the counseling, you know. We don't really have anything that we can offer on itself. It's not a real great state as far as social [services] goes.

Utah correctional professionals interviewed were aware of few resources. An experienced officer in Utah stated, "The only thing I know about is Gamblers Anonymous." She added that, "if they're serious in their programming, they're utilizing their substance abuse or sex offender treatment to help with the gambling problem as well."

Although cases of offender problem gambling in Utah appeared to be rare, Utah professionals interviewed tended to view it as a type of addiction. However, Nevada professionals seemed to be divided, or perhaps unsure, regarding whether problem gambling was an addiction or an impulse control disorder. Pathological gambling is classified by the APA (1994) as an impulse control disorder. However, compulsive gambling also has been conceptualized as an addiction, similar to substance use disorders but without the drug, and as an obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorder (Moreyra, Ibanez, Saiz-Ruiz, & Blanco, 2004). Thus, it is not surprising that responses reflect differences in how problem gambling is understood.

Offender Financial and Family Support Issues

Participants reported financial and family support issues that impact re-entry. Some of these apparently result from gambling inside of prison (mostly from

unpaid debts), but other issues stem from offender gambling pre-or post-incarceration. Regarding issues from gambling while incarcerated, a Utah administrator reported:

The hardest part is that it's not always the offender committing the act of gambling; it's those support systems that he has on the outside. Those are the ones that have to come up with the money to maybe pay off his debt, or they have to deliver the dope, or it's them that have to do other degrading acts in order to pay off those debts.

Family members on the outside may feel pressure to help offenders with gambling debts on the inside, which may add considerable stress to these relationships including later when offenders are released.

Problem gambling and its adverse consequences prior to incarceration may strain family relationships later in the re-entry process. A Nevada supervisor noted that offender problem gamblers sometimes "don't have support of the family." He added that upon re-entry, some offenders with problem gambling histories don't want help for their gambling issues, and they may "live by themselves, their families have kicked them out, their wives have left them." Regardless of whether or not offenders are motivated to try to manage their gambling upon re-entry, particular attention by correctional professionals toward strengthening family and positive support systems during reintegration into community may be warranted.

It is to be expected that offenders with histories of problem gambling are more likely to have significant clinical issues associated with their gambling, and that these issues may carry over into the re-entry process. Offender gambling during any phase of the correctional process may have an impact on offenders' re-entry experiences. A summary by Shaffer and Kidman (2004) of the potential adverse consequences of gambling include family dysfunction and domestic violence, alcohol and drug problems, mental health issues and potential for suicidal behavior, significant financial problems, and of course, crime.

CONCLUSION

Research has demonstrated that offenders have very high rates of problem gambling prior to incarceration (Williams et al., 2005). However, research on offender gambling within prisons and jails and upon subsequent release is lacking. Given the many potential adverse consequence of gambling, it should be expected that various gambling issues may continue to influence the offender re-entry process. Findings here show that according to correctional professionals interviewed in this study, gambling in various forms may be common during incarceration, while offender problem gambling occurring in the community often is paired with substance abuse or crime. Furthermore, offenders with gambling problems may alienate family members and drain financial

resources specifically due to compulsive gambling. Building support during re-entry is crucial for offenders under the best of circumstances, but it seems problem gambling further complicates this process.

We are in need of much research that addresses multiple forms of offender gambling and how these affect re-entry. This project, drawing on "real world" accounts of correctional professionals in Nevada and Utah, is a starting point for future research. Although there is a stark contrast in gambling legality and availability in these two states, the potential for significant offender gambling issues is present in both. Perhaps a next step for qualitative researchers might be to identify a group of offenders who have struggled with gambling issues upon re-entry and conduct interviews or focus groups for more insights. Projects might be designed that build from findings here, such as learning more about potential relationships between gambling and substance abuse or crime, or how to rebuild social and financial support systems more effectively. Surveys designed to gain statistical information about gambling behavior during re-entry could be administered to a large sample of offenders at the end of the correctional process. Because offender gambling remains largely unseen but brings sanctions when discovered, it is always a challenge for researchers to obtain accurate information while protecting participant confidentiality.

The significance of offender gambling issues easily may be overlooked and resources for offenders with gambling problems seem to be lacking. We suspect that perhaps gambling issues to those identified here may be present in other states that fall between the extremes of gambling legality and availability that are represented herein by Utah and Nevada. However, the insights provided via this investigation may be worth considering for correctional professionals in various locations. Given the widespread availability of gambling across North America and our findings herein, we urge correctional administrators and policy makers to look closely for gambling issues within their jurisdictions and work to develop sound policies to address them. Similarly, we encourage parole and probation officers to monitor the potential for gambling problems among the offenders they supervise. Gambling can be enjoyable to many people, but it also can bring huge costs to human lives. It is important to work together to understand and manage it as best we can, especially among those who are most vulnerable.

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