

Problem Gambling: A Problem for the Gaming Industry and the Broader Community

An Editorial

Shannon Bybee, J.D.

*Michael D. Rose Distinguished Faculty Chair
Director, UNLV International Gaming Institute
William F. Harrah College of Hotel Administration
University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

As casino gambling has spread from Nevada throughout the country, increasing attention has been focused on those who gamble to the extent that it negatively affects their life and the lives of those closest to them, their family, friends, employers, and those who lend to them or sell to them on credit. A number of studies have been done attempting to measure the number of people who have a prevalence to become a problem or pathological gambler. There are, however, a number of theoretical and methodological issues surrounding these studies and the numbers they produce. The *Journal of Gambling Studies* devoted the entire Summer 1996 issue to articles discussing prevalence studies.

Most published estimates of the number of potential or probable problem gamblers come from telephone surveys utilizing the South Oaks Gambling Screen. They are believed to measure current prevalence and lifetime prevalence. Lifetime prevalence figures from such surveys range from 0.1 percent to 6.3 percent of the adult population. This includes anyone who has had a problem with gambling at some point in their life. Current prevalence, those who are most likely to have a problem now, constitutes 1.4 percent to 2.8 percent of the population. Thus, the highest projections are still well below 10 percent, or fewer than one in ten who gamble.

While these numbers may be small in the big picture, nevertheless, each individual is important and deserves consideration and concern. The most important issue should not be whether the percentage of people who may gamble to excess is 1 percent or 7 percent. The most important issue is what should be done about or for those for whom gambling becomes a source of pain rather than pleasure.

It must be acknowledged that the issue of problem gambling in past years has not received the attention in Nevada that it has in some other states. In part this may be because most of those who gambled in Nevada were visitors. They came only a few times a year and thus were not likely to become problem gamblers through their relatively brief and infrequent gaming activity in Nevada. Nor were the effects of their gambling problem felt in Nevada.

If a Nevada visitor has a gambling problem, it most likely developed gambling outside Nevada. Every state but Utah and Hawaii has some form of legal gambling. And of course, there is illegal gambling in many areas of the country. But it might be in the wide-open gambling environment of Nevada where the home-grown problem reaches a crisis stage. Concern for people as customers and as fellow human beings warrants an interest in helping them obtain information about their problem and where they can get help for it.

Moreover, as Southern Nevada has grown, the "local market" has become an important segment of the gaming market. With a million plus residents, there are a substantial number of potential and actual problem gamblers in Southern Nevada, and they are only minutes away from opportunities to feed their obsession. Times have changed. The gaming industry in Nevada has changed. Gaming has spread into new areas close to large population centers. It is time for the gaming industry and the communities that derive economic benefits from gaming to recognize that what for most people is an exciting and entertaining diversion from everyday life, is, for a few, a threat to their financial, mental, and emotional well-being.

A number of gaming companies have developed policies and programs over the last few years to deal with this issue, and more are presently developing their own "Responsible Gaming" programs relating to both their customers and their employees. Most such programs include educating employees concerning the subject, making available to customers information concerning problem gambling and its treatment, and providing information on a "Help Line" where the public can get more information and referral to treatment sources in their home community. These efforts should also include a review of employee assistance programs. Another challenge facing the industry and other employers is that most insurance programs cover treatment for emotional problems and for drug and alcohol abuse, but not problem gambling. Efforts should be made to correct this situation.

It is time for all gaming companies to explore this issue and formulate a "responsible gaming" program. This is not the time for all companies to have the same program. It is a time for creatively exploring what is appropriate for different sized companies in different communities, with different customer bases and different corporate cultures. There is room for differences. But there is no room for indifference.

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This may be the most important issue facing the gaming industry over the next year or two. It may be the only issue where opponents of gaming find common ground with people who generally support the legalization of gaming. Failure of the industry to acknowledge the problem and begin to address it could lose the support of those who favor legalization, but expect action on this issue. The American Gaming Association has formed a Responsible Gaming Task Force to explore ways in which the Association and its members are presently dealing with this issue and offer alternatives for those who have not yet focused on the issue.

Non-gaming businesses in Nevada communities should recognize that their employees can suffer from this problem. If a percentage of people who gamble are likely to suffer from gambling to excess, then every employer must consider the possibility that some of their employees, or their employees' family members, may develop a problem with the amount of gambling readily available in our communities. Non-gaming businesses should review their employee assistance programs and include problem gambling along with other mental and emotional treatment programs. They should also consider providing employees with information about the problem and its treatment.

Studies have indicated that people who gamble in their youth are more likely to develop a gambling problem as an adult. Nevada school districts and the University and Community College System should develop programs to educate students under age twenty-one that gambling for them is illegal and can lead to problems. It may also better prepare them to deal with the situation if their parents become problem gamblers. The University and Community College System should have counselors available who have been trained in the recognition and treatment of problem gambling.

Yes, "problem gambling" is a problem for the gaming industry. But it is a problem that is moving out of the darkness and into the light as responsible gaming operators and industry leaders grapple with the various issues related to the problem. Much has been accomplished, yet much more remains to be done. It is hoped that the momentum that has been building will continue as the industry continues to mature into a major national industry.