

Debate Series

Gambling in jails and prisons: abstinence or management?

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Gambling within correctional institutions is believed to be a common activity (Jarvis, 1988; Martinez, 1983; Williams & Hinton, 2006; Williams, 2008). However, despite its reported popularity, researchers have not yet extensively studied this phenomenon. Indeed, gambling in correctional institutions is difficult to study because of various accessibility issues (e.g., researchers gaining institutional access) and because offenders are reluctant to disclose their gambling activities.

A recent study of incarcerated Canadian male federal offenders (N=254) found the prevalence rate of disordered gambling using the PGSI, DSM-IV-TR, and SOGS to be 9.4%, 6.3%, and 13.0%, respectively (Turner, Preston, Saunders, McAvoy, & Jain, 2009). In their excellent review of the literature on offender gambling, R. J. Williams, Royston and Hagen (2005) found many offenders (33% overall) meet subclinical or clinical criteria for problem or pathological gambling prior to prison (27 studies). However, there was considerable variation between studies in estimated rates of both problem (5% to 42%) and pathological gambling (2% to 39%). This variation may be explained, at least to some degree, by differences in sample characteristics, diverse geographic locations of studies, and measurement instruments. Additionally, we should not be surprised if some future studies may show rates toward the high end, since opportunities for legalized gambling are increasing.

Also in their review, Williams and colleagues (2005) found only six studies that have examined gambling directly inside prisons. These six studies illustrate a wide range of percentages (26% to 100%) of incarcerated offenders involved in gambling activities, but rates of problem and pathological gambling within prisons remain unknown. Across studies, Williams and colleagues reported an in-prison gambling prevalence rate of 40%.

It is clear that a substantial number of incarcerated offenders engage in gambling inside prisons and jails, despite official prohibition. It appears that offenders commonly gamble to alleviate boredom, to provide excitement and risk, to socialize, and to gain things of value. Many gambling episodes in prisons and jails seem to be relatively benign, although in a small minority of cases extreme violence (i.e.,

beatings or stabbings) may result from unpaid gambling debts (Williams & Hinton, 2006).

When the available literature is considered, it seems that two primary issues warrant careful consideration. First, if the offender population has the highest estimated rate (33%) of problem and pathological gambling yet known (Williams, Royston, & Hagen, 2005), correctional professionals should screen offenders for gambling risk when they enter the system, and ensure that appropriate treatment options are available within correctional institutions. Because gambling problems can be difficult to recognize, many institutions may not be aware of the need for such offender services. However, as legalized gambling has become increasingly available within North America over the past two decades, we should expect that more offenders likely will have gambling issues upon entry into the correctional system. Offenders with significant gambling issues may face added complications after their incarceration while attempting to re-integrate into the community, such as lack of treatment resources and difficulties re-establishing healthy social support networks (Williams & Walker, 2009).

The second issue that deserves careful attention involves motivations for gambling specifically within jails and prisons. Some gambling within jails and prisons apparently fulfills essential definitional criteria for meaningful and legitimate leisure experience, such as providing a sense of personal freedom, enjoyment and positive emotions, use of skills, and self-expression (Williams, 2008). This observation is particularly noteworthy since over the past dozen years correctional programs within the U.S. have been eliminated on a large scale (for a review, see Williams, Walker, & Streat, 2005). Thus, if gambling offers a meaningful opportunity for recreation and leisure and other opportunities are not available, we should expect many offenders will gamble while incarcerated. A perspective from classic behavioral economics research on addictive behaviors would suggest that problem gambling within prisons should increase if there are few significant constraints on it, and also if there are significant constraints for choosing alternative activities (in this case, appropriate leisure and recreation opportunities) (see Vuchinich & Tucker, 1988).

However, if much of prison gambling within some correctional settings is relatively benign with only rare cases of associated violence, and if gambling for some contains meaningful leisure properties and brings social and psychological benefits, then it should be allowed to some degree. Additionally, allowing limited forms of gambling among offenders while providing plenty of opportunities for other leisure and recreation experiences may nourish a climate of openness and communication between offenders and staff. In such a climate, many offenders may be helpful in recognizing cases of problem gambling among themselves, and they may be more open to working together to address such issues that may be unrecognized by staff.

Given this knowledge, it becomes necessary to consider whether or not casual gambling—contrasted with serious gambling—in prisons and jails should be permitted to some degree (not necessarily in all locations), and thus managed, rather than being expressly forbidden. Intolerable serious gambling might include continuous frequent gambling (excessive), gambling for large amounts of money or for items of substantial worth, or gambling for items that are already prohibited, such as drugs, medications, etc. Rules delineating casual and serious gambling may vary somewhat according to specific facilities and specific individuals (e.g., problem gamblers would be required to develop other leisure pursuits), but allowing some forms of casual gambling (which are already popular among offenders, but occur secretly) may be a reasonable consideration. Perhaps a stance of openness and education would acknowledge the potential value of casual gambling as a social and recreational activity, while encouraging offender cooperation in reducing violence as a consequence of serious gambling.

Based on my current knowledge of the research literature and experience as a practitioner in correctional settings, the following suggestions for consideration are offered:

- (1) Increased opportunities to engage in a wide range of health-promoting leisure and recreational experiences should be available and strongly encouraged for offenders throughout their correctional experiences. Freely-chosen leisure experiences relieve stress, provide an important coping mechanism, and promote rehabilitation and successful transition into the community.
- (2) Because of relatively high rates of problem gambling among offender populations, correctional staff should provide some form of efficient screening for offenders entering the system.
- (3) Appropriate resources to treat problem gambling for offenders should be available within correctional institutions, and education directed toward the prevention of problem gambling should be offered.
- (4) Correctional institutions should develop their own specific policies, taking into account the above recommendations, concerning whether or not to allow limited forms of gambling within their institutions. Problem gambling rates among offenders seem to vary with location and demographic variables. Overall, correctional professionals should create an environment to help offenders learn to recognize and manage their own specific risks. In some institutions, policies that generally allow limited forms of recreational gambling may be reasonable.

Currently, although prison gambling is apparently commonplace, it often remains unaddressed at least partly due to its formal prohibition. This means that problems associated with serious prison gambling receive inadequate attention and will likely continue. Given what we are discovering about this issue, it is unreasonable to assume that many offenders will not participate in some form of gambling within correctional institutions. It is time to acknowledge the issue of gambling within correctional facilities, and to facilitate further exploration of this neglected topic.

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