

Findings



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Gambling With Our Future

How a State Lottery Will Harm Children

By Alysse M. ElHage

Everything comes with a price, and a state lottery is certainly no exception. Gambling proponents talk a lot about the programs lotteries can help pay for, such as education. What they fail to mention is the price of a lottery, which can be measured best in terms of the human cost. As the debate over the pros and cons of gambling continues in states across the country, the most important question policy makers and citizens should be asking is: What will state-sponsored gambling cost our children and is this a price we are willing to pay? The answer to this question is not something that lottery proponents want to hear or the gambling industry wants to admit. However, it is an issue that any state considering going into the gambling business cannot afford to ignore.

Perhaps legislators who are weighing the costs vs. the benefits of state-sponsored gambling should imagine the following scenario: A little boy's first introduction to gambling begins as a toddler, when he goes with his mom to the convenience store and waits impatiently as she stands in line to buy a lottery ticket. By age seven, that same boy is waiting eagerly for his mom to return home with her weekly stack of lottery tickets so they can scratch them off together. At 10, he is using his lunch money and weekly allowance to play poker with his friends. He even sells the bike he got for Christmas for more money, telling his parents it was stolen. His habit escalates until he begins stealing money from his parents to cover his growing gambling debts. By the time he becomes a teenager, he is betting on horse races and sports games and taking bets from his classmates at school. Eventually, he starts shoplifting to finance his increasing need to gamble and

quits the high school basketball team so he can gamble more. Meanwhile, his grades continue to drop, he stops hanging out with his friends, and he starts using alcohol and drugs more frequently. As he gambles his way into young adulthood, his moods swing back and forth from depression to anger, and he increasingly turns to gambling as an escape. His thoughts of suicide increase with each gambling loss until a failed attempt to end his life lands him in the hospital with a diagnosis that neither he nor his parents saw coming...¹ If this story sounds farfetched, it shouldn't. It is repeated

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in the lives of countless numbers of children every day and could become a reality for more if the expansion of state-sponsored and promoted gambling continues in states across this country.

More children are gambling and at earlier ages than ever before in the United States. According to a recent study, seven out of 10 middle and high school students have gambled in the past year.² Nationwide, the rate of adolescent compulsive gambling has also increased with as many as four children in an average size classroom possibly struggling with a gambling addiction.³ As one would expect, these numbers are lower in states without lotteries.

Children are at risk in another way as well. One out of every 20 adults who gamble will become a compulsive gambler, which means more children are growing up in homes with a parent who is addicted to

gambling.⁴ Gambling addiction touches every aspect of a child's world—from the quality of their home life, to their performance in school and their emotional, physical and mental well being. It is imperative for states considering a lottery to look closely at the powerful effects of state sponsored and promoted gambling on the young. This paper will examine how state sponsored gambling impacts children by encouraging more youth to gamble and by creating more gambling addiction among both adults and juveniles.

More 12-Year-Old Gamblers

One of the most significant ways that state-sponsored gambling affects children is by influencing more of them to gamble. The National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC), which conducted a two-year study into the social and economic effects of legalized gambling in the U.S., concluded in its report that “children are gambling, even before they leave high school.”⁵ The National Research Council's (NRC) survey of gambling studies put the median range of adolescents who have gambled in their lifetime at 85 percent.⁶ A more recent study published in the *Journal of Gambling Studies* estimates that 15.3 million of 12 to 17-year-olds in North America have been gambling with or without their parent's awareness or approval.⁷ Not only are more children gambling today—they are gambling at younger ages. Most studies put the age of onset for juvenile gambling between 11 and 13.⁸

A Growing Problem: It is important to note that the number of adolescent gamblers has increased significantly in recent years. According to Dr. Durand Jacobs, the former vice president of the National Council on Problem Gambling and the author of numerous studies on adolescent gambling, the percentage of middle and high school students who have gambled in the U.S. over

the past year rose from 45 percent to 66 percent between 1984 and 1999.⁹ This increase occurred during the same period that legalized gambling became more widespread. Dr. Jacobs writes: “The empirical data suggest that the extent and nature of juvenile involvement in any given jurisdiction tends to vary directly with: the length of time legalized forms of gambling have been available in that state or province and the ready accessibility of various gambling opportunities (particularly lottery outlets) in the local community where the juvenile resides.”¹⁰ To evaluate the effects of state lotteries on adolescent gambling, Dr. Jacobs conducted a three-state study in 1994. That study found that in each state after a lottery was enacted: 1) the prevalence rates for juvenile gambling increased significantly from pre-lottery levels; 2) the lottery had become the “favored wagerer,” when compared to other forms of gambling; and 3) expenditures on other forms of gambling had also increased from pre-lottery levels.¹¹ Dr. Jacobs also reported the results of a more recent comparison of the gambling habits of juveniles in states with and without lotteries. According to Jacobs, 67 percent of adolescents had been gambling in the states where a lottery had been operating, compared to 46 percent of adolescents in the states where no lottery had been operating.¹²

In light of these studies, it is important to consider how state lotteries impact the gambling habits of children. Not only do lotteries influence the way children view gambling, they also provide children and adults with more opportunities to gamble.

State Promotion: Through the lottery, gambling is not only made legal but sanctioned by the state. Even more importantly, the lottery is promoted by the state through savvy advertising techniques that are often misleading. The NGISC described lottery advertising as “persuasive, glitzy and humorous” and an “attempt to make gambling attractive.”¹³ In states with lotteries, ads promoting gambling are everywhere—on billboards, on the radio and on television. According to a Duke University study, some examples of the types of advertising themes used by states to promote the lottery include: size of the prize or jackpot; benefits of winning; sports themes; instant gratification; and benefits to the state of lottery dollars.¹⁴ Even if these ads are targeted at adults, juveniles see and hear the same commercials, and they are particularly vulnerable to advertising messages. The fact that lottery revenues in most states are earmarked to fund state

programs is an additional inducement for people to gamble. In this way, states send the message to the impressionable minds of children that gambling is not only an acceptable but a positive behavior.

Increased Accessibility: Another way that lotteries influence the gambling habits of children is by making gambling more accessible. The first national study on gambling in America in 1976 concluded that when one form of gambling is promoted by the state, all forms of gambling, both legal and illegal, tend to increase.¹⁵ This is especially true with the lottery, which brings gambling as close as the neighborhood gas station, convenience store or supermarket. In addition, children watch their parents, other adult family members and acquaintances play the lottery. Unlike most other forms of gambling, the lottery is a game in which the entire family can participate. Children are as eager as their parents to find out if they picked the “lucky” numbers. Studies have found that children often begin gambling with their parents or older relatives. “Kids not only mimic their parents, but parents are also the pushers,” says Dr. Jacobs. “They, with the best of intentions, teach their kids how to gamble, take them to gambling venues and open the door quite wide.”¹⁶ Many children even report receiving scratch lottery tickets in their Christmas stocking.¹⁷ Ultimately, a lottery makes it easier for children to participate in gambling activities because it brings gambling closer to home. The result is that more children gamble and do so earlier. It is interesting to note that attempts to restrict ownership of lottery tickets to those over 21 have been opposed by gambling interests.

How Kids Gamble: What children are playing when they gamble is as important as why they begin gambling. According to a study conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), games of skill, sports pools and lotteries are the most common games played by adolescents.¹⁸ Lotteries, especially those with scratch-off tickets, are the most favored legal form of gambling among youth.¹⁹ Even though it is illegal in every state for minors to play the lottery, young people still manage to get their hands on lottery tickets, either by purchasing the tickets themselves or by getting someone else to do it for them. A statewide study of juvenile gambling in Louisiana in 1998 found that 65 percent of those surveyed had played “scratch-off” lottery tickets, as well as other lottery games, and that lottery play exceeded all other forms of licensed and social gam-

bling.²⁰ In Massachusetts, where lottery tickets can be purchased through vending machines, one study found that 47 percent of seventh graders and 75 percent of high school seniors reported having played the lottery.²¹ Interestingly, the lottery is often where children begin to gamble. “A lottery, in many ways, is the ‘Pied Piper’ of gambling among juveniles,” says Dr. Jacobs. “It’s where they start.”²² What may begin with scratching off a few lottery tickets often develops into more serious forms of gambling among youth.

More Child Gambling Addicts

When most people think of a gambling addict, they are more likely to picture an adult playing video poker at a casino or buying too many lottery tickets, rather than a child who steals from his parents to get more gambling money. Once they start gambling, adolescents are twice as likely as adults to develop serious gambling disorders.²³ Researchers vary in their estimates of the number of adolescent compulsive gamblers. A Harvard study of gambling behavior found that an estimated 7.9 million adolescents in North America have a gambling disorder.²⁴ The NRC reports that 20 percent of all adolescents who gambled in the past year could be classified as pathological or problem gamblers.²⁵ In his review of several gambling studies, Jacobs concluded that as many as 15 percent of middle and high school students in North America today may be struggling with a gambling addiction.²⁶

Profile of an Addict: So what does it mean to be an adolescent gambling addict? “They repeatedly lie to family and friends, borrow and steal money to support their gambling behavior, preoccupy themselves with gambling, and sacrifice school, parents and friends in order to continue their gambling,” write Drs. Jeffrey Derevensky and Rina Gupta, co-directors of the Youth Gambling Research and Treatment Clinic at McGill University in Quebec.²⁷ According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA), a person with a gambling disorder exhibits behaviors such as: a preoccupation with gambling; unsuccessful attempts to stop or control their gambling; lying to their family and friends about their gambling; using gambling as a way to escape problems; and committing illegal acts to finance gambling. The APA classifies a person with a gambling disorder as either a pathological or problem gambler, with pathological gambling the more serious of the two.²⁸

More Than Gambling: A child with a gambling addiction is not just someone who

loses money and occasionally steals from family or friends to finance their habit. Adolescents with gambling disorders are more likely to smoke, and use drugs and alcohol.²⁹ “Gambling now precedes with these kids the expected onset of the use of cigarettes, hard liquor and marijuana,” says Dr. Jacobs. “In this way, it’s kind of a gateway drug into other forms of exploration.”³⁰ They also perform poorly in school, have higher rates of truancy and are more likely to commit crimes and get into trouble with the law.³¹

Gambling addiction impacts the mental and emotional health of young people as well. Adolescent problem gamblers report higher levels of unhappiness, have lower self-esteem and are more likely to contemplate and attempt suicide.³² In fact, suicide rates are higher among pathological gamblers than for any other addictive disorder, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling.³³ The NGISC report includes the story of a 16-year-old boy in Atlantic City who attempted suicide after losing \$6,000 on lottery tickets.³⁴

Early Beginnings: A child’s downward spiral into gambling addiction begins with an early introduction to gambling. Children who begin gambling at a young age are more likely to develop serious gambling addictions.³⁵ Adolescent problem gamblers typically begin gambling earlier than their peers. Adult pathological gamblers also report beginning to gamble seriously as early as age 10.³⁶ This is particularly troubling because children are beginning to gamble at younger ages.

The numbers of children with this addiction can be expected to increase if the promotion and availability of gambling continues. For states considering going into the gambling business, this is one of the consequences of legalized gambling that cannot be overlooked.

Gambling Addicts Raising Kids

A lottery will impact children in another way as well—one that is just as harmful to their health and happiness. The promotion and availability of gambling in a state also results in more gambling among adults and more adults with gambling disorders. According to a Harvard study, there were 7.5 million “past year” adult problem and pathological gamblers in 1997.³⁷ This presents even more of a danger for children because many of these adults will be parents, and it is their families who will be affected the most by this addiction.

Dr. Norman Geisler, the president of Southern Evangelical Seminary in Char-

lotte, N.C., whose own father was a gambling addict, wrote: “When either parent becomes a gambler, the whole family suffers.” In his book, *Gambling: A Bad Bet*, Dr. Geisler tells how his dad, who was also an alcoholic, would spend his evenings gambling and drinking, and then come home to a family fight. “On at least one painful occasion, my father threatened to jump out the upstairs window and end his life,” Geisler writes. “The children were all pulling at his clothes and screaming, “Don’t Daddy, Don’t!”³⁸

Family Strife: When a parent who is a gambling addict returns home from an unsuccessful night of gambling away the family’s finances, it is often the spouse and children who pay the price. Life at home for these children is an unstable and painful environment, with family strife and violence common. According to two studies cited by the NRC, between 23 and 50 percent of the spouses of compulsive gamblers have been physically and verbally abused.³⁹ Children are at risk as well. The same studies estimate that between 10 and 17 percent of the children of compulsive gamblers have been abused.⁴⁰ Sometimes, families pay the ultimate price and lose their lives at the hands of a desperate and hopeless parent who is gripped by this addiction. After losing \$25,000 at a Las Vegas casino and taking \$500,000 from his business to finance his addiction, one man murdered his pregnant wife and three children and then took his own life. In the suicide letter he left behind, he wrote: “There is nothing more destructive to life than gambling.”⁴¹

Not only do the children of compulsive gamblers have to deal with a parent who is addicted to gambling, they also have to cope with the emotional problems and addictive behavior of the other parent. Spouses of gambling addicts usually suffer from serious emotional and physical problems. Two studies of the spouses of compulsive gamblers found that in addition to being angry and depressed, most had resorted to drinking, overeating and impulse spending. They also had a variety of physical problems, such as headaches, stomach problems, dizziness and breathing difficulties.⁴²

Broken Homes: For children of compulsive gamblers, the chances of their parents divorcing is also high. The financial devastation that results from gambling addiction is often too much for the spouses of compulsive gamblers to bear. According to a 1998 study of Gambler’s Anonymous members, between 26 and 30 percent attributed their divorces or separations to their gambling problems.⁴³ The lifetime

divorce rate for pathological gamblers and problem gamblers is 53.5 and 39.5 percent, respectively, compared to the lifetime divorce rate for non-gamblers, which is 18.2 percent.⁴⁴ The NGISC heard testimony from one Colorado woman who had divorced her gambling addict husband after 17 years of marriage. In addition to becoming violent, lying, cheating and committing crimes, he had lost nearly \$40,000 to gambling in just three months. “The husband I divorced is not the man I married,” she said. “He is a total stranger to me.”⁴⁵

Economic Hardship: The financial impact of parental gambling addiction can be devastating to a family. Compulsive gamblers often do whatever it takes to feed their addictions, even if that means taking the grocery money or stealing from their children’s college fund. In a letter written to Dr. James Dobson, who served on the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, an Indiana mother of six described how her husband’s gambling habits had escalated when a gambling parlor came to town. Her husband went from stealing small amounts of cash from her and the children to stealing entire paychecks. He also threatened to commit suicide so that his wife could pay back the \$25,000 he had embezzled. “If the state of Indiana had not legalized gambling,” she wrote, “it would have been so much more difficult for my husband to feed this ever growing habit.”⁴⁶

Some gambling addicts steal from their employers, skip work and write bad checks. Many end up losing their jobs or spending time in jail. About one-third to one-fourth of Gambler’s Anonymous members report losing their jobs as a result of their gambling problem.⁴⁷ According to a NORC study, about 21 percent of pathological gamblers and 10 percent of problem gamblers have been incarcerated.⁴⁸ Some also end up homeless. A survey of over 1,000 clients at Rescue Missions nationwide found that 18 percent said gambling was the cause of their being homeless.⁴⁹

Other Effects: The effects of parental gambling addiction on children do not end with a volatile and disruptive home life. Not surprisingly, children of compulsive gamblers are more likely to drink, smoke, overeat and use drugs and to describe their childhoods as unhappy.⁵⁰ One study cited by the NRC found that children of pathological gamblers frequently reported feelings of sadness, anger, and depression.⁵¹ According to Dr. Jacobs, who conducted one of the first studies on the children of compulsive gamblers, these kids are twice as likely to acknowledge suicide attempts.⁵²

As with other addictions, sometimes the gambling addiction of the parent is visited upon the child. Children who grow up with a parent who is a compulsive gambler are more likely to begin gambling earlier and to develop a gambling disorder of their own. A 1989 study conducted by Jacobs found that 75 percent of children of problem gamblers reported their first gambling experience before age 11, compared to 34 percent of their classmates.⁵³ The earlier a child begins gambling puts them at greater risk for developing a gambling disorder. In addition, adult pathological gamblers often report that their own parents gambled excessively.⁵⁴

Life for the child of a compulsive gambler is one in which they are more likely to suffer abuse, have their parents divorce and experience financial hardship. It is also a life which puts them more at risk for engaging in addictive behaviors, including gambling. Is this the kind of life a state would inflict on even one child?

Conclusion

One of the strategies used by lottery proponents in states across the country is to link the lottery to worthy causes, like education. Under some plans proposed in North Carolina, lottery revenues would go toward creating smaller class sizes and pre-school programs for at-risk children. This is rather ironic in light of the fact that in the average size classroom—particularly in states with legalized gambling—at least four children may be struggling with a gambling disorder. What good are smaller classrooms and pre-school programs when the state is insuring with a lottery that as many as 15 percent of these children will become compulsive gamblers and even more will be at risk because they will be growing up in homes with a gambling addict as a parent? This only creates more problems for the children these programs are supposed to help.

The most important issue before policy makers is not what benefits a lottery could bring to a state, but what it will cost the citizens of the state, especially the children. The responsibility of government is to protect its citizens—not to put them at risk. By legalizing and promoting gambling through a lottery, a state not only creates an

environment where more children are raised by gambling addicts, but one in which more children are at risk of becoming compulsive gamblers themselves. Gambling addiction affects more than just the gambler—its destructive force impacts the entire family. This leaves only one question for states contemplating a lottery to answer—are they willing to gamble with the lives of future generations just to provide an additional source of funding for state programs?

Alyse M. ElHage is Director of Communications for the North Carolina Family Policy Council.

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Endnotes:

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