

## **Indian Gaming In San Diego County**

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### **Frequently Visited, Widely Accepted and Positively Perceived**

Since 1983 when the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation opened the first casino in San Diego County, Indian gaming has proliferated. Our research shows that almost 60% of current County residents have visited a local Indian casino and 13% are “regulars” who visit once a month or more. As visits have increased, so has the feeling that Indian gaming has benefitted the County as a whole and, even more so, the tribes themselves. Most folks do not believe gambling problems have increased with the onset of the casinos and residents generally feel that decisions on where the bands build their casinos and what they look like should be left up to the tribes themselves.

### **Broad Reach**

The most fascinating aspect related to visitation is that almost every demographic subgroup visits casinos with roughly the same frequency. That is, Indian casinos have become so pervasive and so well marketed that the survey turned up few pockets of “resistance.” The lone major exception to this is geographic. Residents of the East County region (east of El Cajon) are twice as likely as others to frequently visit local casinos. They are also much less likely to have never set foot in one. Conversely, folks in the North Coastal area (the I-5 corridor north of Del Mar) are less likely to visit and much more likely to have never been to an Indian casino. Since the County’s most prominent casinos are located in the East County and none are situated along the coast, a resident’s proximity to a casino goes a long way toward determining whether or not and how often someone participates in Indian gaming. We have found this phenomenon in other studies.

The tantalizing question is whether situating a casino in a certain area drives up the number of gamblers or visitors in that area or whether casino patrons relocate to areas where casinos are located. There could also be a “push” factor: Non-gamblers may avoid those areas or move out when casinos enter the area. The survey does not answer this question and perhaps both factors are at work, but it is clear that powerful forces are at work.

The survey also found that folks who label themselves as conservative on social and political issues are less likely than moderates and liberals to have visited a local casino. It is interesting, however, that conservatives who have visited a local casino are just as likely as moderates and liberals to be frequent visitors.

The survey also found that frequency of political participation (voting) correlates negatively with frequency of Indian casino visitation. That is, the more often one votes the less frequently they visit casinos. While the electoral implications may be tenuous, this does suggest that, along with the finding related to ideology, gaming issues will tend to have political legs.

### **Perceived as Good for the County, Better for the Tribes**

Almost half of all residents feel Indian gaming has had a positive effect on the County and only one-in-six residents feel it has mainly rendered a negative effect. But a significant number are either uncertain of their effect or say the casinos have had no influence on the County as a whole.

The survey found that as one frequents casinos more often, one's impression of their impact improves. Among those who have never visited local casinos, 39% say they've had a positive effect on San Diego County and 23% say their impact has been negative. But the simple act of visiting a local casino can apparently change a person's opinion because 56% of those who have at least entered a local casino say they have seen a positive influence and only 12% feel they have had a negative impact.

The survey found no differences based on ethnicity, but it did find that political affiliation and ideology play a role. Republicans and conservatives are less convinced than other residents that the County is better off with Indian gaming. There is also a small geographic element with those residing in the City of San Diego south of I-8 registering significantly less approval than those in other areas.

When it comes to the tribes, residents are even more convinced that Indian gaming has positively affected them. Over 62% feel the County's tribes have benefitted from the casinos (38% say they've had a "great deal" of positive impact). Only 10% feel there has been a negative effect on local tribes and 28% are either unsure what the impact has been or say there has been none.

Again, frequency of visiting a local casino drives much of the opinion as to how much benefit the tribes have really derived from them. A whopping three-quarters of those who regularly visit say casinos have had a positive impact on the tribes, with almost half saying there has been great deal of benefit. That feeling stays strong even among casual casino patrons before dropping a bit among those who have never visited. Still, even those who have not made it to one of the casinos are more likely to say the tribes have benefitted than not.

Again the survey found similar partisan and ideological drivers are at work. Democrats are more convinced that the gambling has helped the tribes and conservatives are less convinced.

Interestingly, the results show that whites are significantly more likely to believe that the tribes have been helped by gambling even though there was no such significant relationship between ethnicity and benefit to the county as a whole. Fifty-two percent believe the effects of Indian gaming on the County are positive (22% “a great deal”) while 15% say it has been negative; numbers right in line with non-whites. When it comes to the effect on tribes, 66% of whites say the casinos have been beneficial (41% say “a great deal”) and only 9% say they have had a negative impact. These opinions are far more positive than those of non-whites. In other words, whites step out to much higher levels of acceptance when the effect on the tribes is considered. Is this evidence of white guilt?

There were too few Native Americans in the sample to derive confident conclusions about them, but the results suggest that they might not perceive as much benefit to the tribes as do whites.

### **Do Indian Casinos Contribute to Addictive Gambling?**

While many San Diegans do see positive benefits flowing from Indian casinos, some say it has led to an increase in problem gambling. Though 44% have seen no change, almost a third say gambling problems have indeed increased due to the influence of Indian casinos. From a political and marketing standpoint this could clearly be an issue for local casinos and one they seem to be addressing with gambling hotlines and other similar initiatives.

Republicans tend to believe the problem is more widespread and is more serious than Democrats and other folks believe. But this does not translate into an ideological

schism because very liberal and very conservative voters tend to be in agreement (incredibly). Both are *more likely* to perceive that Indian casinos have contributed to the increased problem gambling than political and social moderates. The inference here is that while right-wing conservatives frame gambling as a moral affliction, left-wing liberals see it as taking advantage of the poor.

Another interesting finding here is that, though large numbers of Hispanics are skeptical that casinos have caused an increase in problem gambling, African-Americans and Asians tend to take a harsher view. Over one-third say problems have increased greatly and another 7% say they have increased somewhat. Since these groups both visit casinos in about the same frequency, there must be something else driving such disparate opinions.

### **If Indians Build It, It's OK By Me**

A solid majority (61%) feel that only local tribes should have jurisdiction over the location and design of casinos on their land. However, there is moderate dissent on this issue as well, with 32% of area residents claiming non-Native Americans should have at least some say. Another 8% are unsure.

It is interesting that opinion does not vary significantly from region to region. Residents in areas which are home to most of the casinos are no more likely to say they want input in the planning process than are residents in other areas.

However, the survey did find substantial differences when it comes to age, party and ideology. As one ages, belief that non-Indians should have a say in the process increases dramatically. Among those under 40 years-old roughly 70% say "leave it up to the tribes." That decreases a bit among 40 to 59 year-olds and by age 70 barely a majority say the tribes should not be interfered with. This generational difference may be the result of shifting social attitudes regarding the rights of Native Americans.

Democrats and liberals tend to be significantly more supportive of Native American sovereignty than Republicans and conservatives.

### **Conclusions**

Indian gaming casinos have become a ubiquitous and accepted form of entertainment for most County residents, especially those in the East County. As Casinos have

proliferated, many people have come to perceive a social benefit that outweighs any social cost. Even more residents believe the influence on the tribes themselves has been beneficial. Though social conservatives may not fully buy into it, Indians are winning the hearts and minds of County residents as more and more of those who visit the casinos see the fruits of these establishments and enjoy their amenities. Some residents are concerned about a rise in addictive gambling caused by Indian casinos, but most do not see a connection. There is little support for moves to inject non-Indians into the casino planning and design process.