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NEWS

What happens when a casino is built? Gambling addiction rises, study shows

Rolling the Dice: A look at the impact of casinos on communities, and the politics of the decision-making process.

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As Petersburg considers bringing in a casino, The Progress-Index is reporting on the factors which could contribute to the overall impact on the community.

On Feb. 5, 2001, Billy Hoffman came home feeling hopeless. He had just gambled away his last dime and hit rock bottom. At 30 years of age, his gambling addiction had taken everything from him, bankrupting him twice and tearing apart his first and second marriage. It even threatened to take his very life from him countless times. He had gotten together with a third woman, but his patterns of lying and deception continued. His life was spiraling out of control.

"For whatever reason, I got super scared and it came to me that, 'Billy you know, it doesn't matter who the woman is, it doesn't matter what's going on. This is the rest of your life. You are always going to be sneaky and you are always going to do these things.'

"It shook me up enough to call the hotline."

That night was the last time he placed a bet.

About 6 to 8 million people in the U.S. experience an issue with gambling. Though many can gamble and not get hooked, those who have dealt with trauma, loss, substance abuse, financial and familial instability, or mental health issues put them at a higher risk to developing an addiction.

"Gambling addiction is mostly connected to other factors," said Dr. Lyndon Aguiar, a licensed clinical psychologist and an international certified gambling counselor at Williamsville Wellness in Hanover, VA.

“There can be certain traumas that they've had when they were younger. Or they could have had another type of addiction before that. Individuals are struggling often with anxiety, depression, very high levels of stress and isolation, loneliness, financial stress. And then they add exposure to gambling, so then they're gambling. And then it gets to that point where they're trying to self-medicate with gambling.”

What happens when a casino enters a locality?

Studies have shown that an increased availability of gambling also leads to an uptick in addiction. People living within a 10-mile radius of a casino are 90 percent more likely to develop a gambling addiction and have twice the rate of problem gambling. The likelihood of addiction is also significantly higher for those who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, according to a study done by the Research Institute on Addictions and State University College at Buffalo, New York. Another survey found that out of the six most gambling-addicted states, three of them had the highest number of casinos per capita in the nation.

“Once you have that opportunity to gamble, you develop problems. Just like at a bar, once you have alcohol around, people are going to develop problems with that,” said Dr. Carolyn Hawley, president of the Virginia Council on Problem Gambling.

Casinos will have the most negative impact on those who already have or are at risk of developing a gambling addiction.

Hoffman was only 8 years old when his grandma started taking him to the Ruritan club in Suffolk, Virginia where they played Bingo. One time, he won \$25 by scoring a “Y” shape on the Bingo card. The young Billy was ecstatic.

“I can still remember,” he said.

Gambling was a way for his family to have fun and pass time. His father and mother also dabbled in gambling. As he got older, he would go to restaurants that had video poker and slot machines in the backrooms and play by himself.

By the time Hoffman was 18 years old, he knew he had become addicted to gambling. But he refused to stop. Gambling had become a panacea for him, a way to escape the tension in his home. As the years went on, he threw more money and time into the gambling vortex and got sucked into every kind of gaming: lottery tickets, casinos, and horse betting.

Though gambling may appear less harmful than drugs and alcohol, it can be more insidious. It's become normalized in society and families as a form of entertainment, but there's less awareness about gambling addiction and less being done to curb it than other addictions like drugs and alcohol, says Dr. Aguiar.

In fact, studies have shown that gambling alters the brain in ways very similar ways as substance abuse. The dopamine released into the brain when someone takes drugs occurs in similar areas when gambling, and the reward pathways become hypersensitive. Gamblers feel that "high" because the body is releasing dopamine and producing endorphins and adrenaline. Just as someone addicted to drugs will increasingly need more, impulsive gamblers also will need to take riskier bets to feel that hit. The craving grows and the ability to control it weakens.

"A compulsive gambler is almost always going to play until all the money is gone," said Hoffman. "And then when the money is gone, immediately the brain kicks into, 'how can I get more money in and then as soon as I figure out a way to get more money, I go do that.'"

Hoffman's addiction was all-consuming. Before coming home from work, he would stop by multiple convenience stores to buy lottery tickets. He would drive to Charles Town, West Virginia for horse betting. On weekends and days where he didn't have to work, he would take trips to the nearest casino—which, back in the early '90s, was a 6-hour drive to Atlantic City in New Jersey. It was all he could think about and what he centered every activity and decision of his life around.

"I was broke all the time," Hoffman said. "But I enjoyed the feeling, that promise of the money. I saw gambling as a great way to escape just about anything. As long as I had money or could get some, I was gambling that day."

Some days, that would be as much as 10 times a day. He would even be at the off-track parlor in Richmond from the minute it opened to the moment it closed placing bets on horse races—for 14 hours straight. The initial euphoria he got when he won his first bets wore off; he needed greater wins and participated in riskier bets.

Like Hoffman, many who develop an addiction use gambling as a means of escape while simultaneously seeing it as a one-ticket solution to miraculously fix their issues. Unfortunately, they rarely will turn in a profit because whatever money they do have will be used to feed their compulsions.

For addicted males, an average of \$55,000 to \$90,000 gets drained from their pockets every year; females average \$15,000 in losses. Many have trouble paying back their surmounting debt. In 2016, Americans lost a total of nearly \$117 billion to gambling, a majority of that which has been eaten up by slot machines.

Hoffman's addictive behaviors carried into his marriages, making it difficult for him to be truly engaged in any relationship. Lying pervaded every facet of his life, from lying to his wives about his whereabouts, what he was doing, what he was spending money on. He kept separate bank accounts so that they wouldn't know the extent of it.

"For years and years and years, I had rarely gone a day without telling a lie of some sort because I was always covering up something trying to get money," Hoffman said.

One night, he got into a heated argument with his first wife.

"I remember I took off and went a few miles down the road to a convenience store," Hoffman recalled. "And I bought a bunch of lottery tickets. I'm sitting in the back just scratching tickets. And she comes flying through the door and said, 'You son of a bitch! I knew you'd be here!'"

Compulsive gambling affects the entire family system.

"There's financial consequences, there's emotional consequences, and it creates a downward spiral for the person and their family," says Dr. Aguiar.

From recovery to peer counselor, Hoffman offers help

Billy Hoffman's road to recovery was filled with struggle, experiencing withdrawal symptoms similar to those on drugs. His body was shaking, his head was aching, he couldn't sleep at night, he battled intense urges to gamble. His anxiety was sky-high.

The main difference between a gambling addiction and substance abuse is that there is a physical limitation with drugs. There's only so much the body can take before shutting down. There are also very clear physical signs that someone is using drugs or drinking alcohol. Families may not even be aware that someone has a gambling addiction until credit cards have been maxed out or he/she becomes bankrupt.

It's an addiction where people genuinely believe that by gambling more, they can eventually solve their problems, so it may take longer for people to admit they have a problem.

“We’ll say often that it’s the only addiction that offers hope,” said Hoffman. “It’s false hope of course.”

Additionally, around one in five addicted to gambling attempt suicide.

The weight of what’s been lost and the realization that gambling will never save them, along with the shame of unveiling the addiction to loved ones, becomes utterly soul crushing. In fact, problem gamblers have the highest rate of attempted suicide among all other types of addiction.

“They can go further in their addiction because it’s more hidden,” says Dr. Aguiar.

Hoffman started changing step by step as he went through intensive therapy and sought help through his peers with Gamblers Anonymous. In 2007, Hoffman joined Williamsville Wellness as a peer counselor to help others out of addiction. He’s now been free from his addiction for over 20 years.

“So many programs want to put all addictions on the same line,” Hoffman says. “You have to specifically address gambling addiction, otherwise people won’t get help.”

Yes or no to casino? Either way, the city can prepare, says experts

Educating communities on the propensity of developing a gambling addiction is necessary, as are prevention efforts, says Dr. Hawley. Making sure there are enough professionals available to provide treatment and that people know what resources are available to them is also essential, as is limiting advertisements that target vulnerable people and offer false hope.

Within families themselves, Dr. Aguiar says it’s important for people to pay attention to each other’s mental health and recognize the signs of depression so people can get help before it becomes something worse. Families and friends should pay attention when the person doesn’t get their bills paid on time, when they open separate bank accounts, when they take out a lot of loans, or if they are spending a lot more time away.

“If there’s issues with a family member appearing more depressed or disengaged or just having a lot of problems functioning, talk about it and get them to treatment,” says Dr. Aguiar.

“There needs to be serious discussion about some of these social costs and how we are going to reduce that,” says Dr. Hawley.

If you think you may have a gambling problem, call the hotline at 1-888-532-3500 for confidential help, or find a Gambler's Anonymous meeting in your area.

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