Op-Ed/Editorials – Sex Offenders on Prison Gambling: Harmful Addiction or Opportunity for Leisure?

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Crime and Addiction Series Part 2

Sex Offenders on Prison Gambling: Harmful Addiction or Opportunity for Leisure?

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Research has shown that offender populations have a higher rate of compulsive gambling than the general population (i.e., Anderson, 1999; Templar et al., 1993). However, although many offenders may have had compulsive gambling problems prior to their incarceration, research is scant on the phenomenon of gambling inside prison. In the context of the process of offender transition into the community (Visher & Travis, 2003), much of the research on gambling – crime relationships has been focused on pre-prison experiences, while gambling, and its implications, in the subsequent sequential correctional stages (i.e., imprisonment, post-release transition, and post-release integration) have been neglected. However, learning about offender gambling and its implications relating to imprisonment, offender transition and integration into the community is important and warrants scholarly attention. It has been suggested that gambling in prison is common (Jarvis, 1988, Martinez, 1983). Might prison gambling contribute to problem gambling upon release? Is offender gambling a relatively benign free-time activity? What are the costs? Benefits? How do individuals experience it?

To gain more insights into the nature of prison gambling that could generate

specific research questions, I (in the role of forensic psychotherapist in an aftercare program) decided to ask some offender-clients their thoughts on prison gambling, and specifically, why offenders participate in it. With informants' permission, I figured I could listen, write and learn from them. This could help guide future formalized research. Informants were treated sex offenders at the end of the correctional process (i.e., post-release integration), and each had spent significant time in prison.

As an overview, these offender-clients believed that prison gambling is common, there are varying levels of inmate gamblers (e.g., from "hardcore" or "professional gamblers" down to recreational and inexperienced gamblers), and that participation in prison gambling likely is motivated by a number of different reasons.

It was clear that some inmates apparently participate in gambling as a way to make money, which sometimes contributed to violence. However, other reasons for gambling included having fun, coping, and simply passing time. "Marvin," a 49 year-old, Hispanic, who had spent nearly a decade in prison, reported:

> *Gambling is a big thing in prison. That's most guys' hustle (way of making money). Some guys draw, some do tattoos, a lot of guys were building log cabins out of popsicle sticks. They have their hobbies. Every guy has a hustle—some guys wash clothes, some sew, shit like that. Gambling increases when they (Department of Corrections) cut hobbies.*

Marvin also commented on serious prison gambling:

> *The guys that played for big money were mostly Blacks and Mexicans—they were the top dogs—the 'heavies.' White guys would gamble too, but mostly for push-ups, or a debt, or something like that. The Blacks are the biggest gamblers in the prison…Most of the hardcore gamblers are in for your drug dealing, your robberies, gangbangers—the tough guys—the 'I'm here for attempted murder'. You have your professional gamblers in there, man. Guys would sucker new guys in and let them win a few. Then, oh my God, new guys would owe them everything! When guys didn't pay up, then it was 'let's go to the shower' (slang for violence when someone cheats or doesn't pay up).*

"Darren," a 41 year-old, African-American participant reported, It's (gambling)

common," but then added, "We'd play for money sometimes, but sometimes we'd play for fun. The loser would do push-ups or something, no big deal." Another participant, "Daniel," a 37 year-old Caucasian, noted that "Guys play (gamble) to pass the time." He then added, "You get bored; there's nothin' to do all day." It is interesting that gambling, or at least some form of it, was viewed as a hobby or perhaps a recreational activity. Whether or not prison gambling actually increases as a function of decreased availability of other recreational activities is not known. However, this is an important question at a time where correctional budgets are tight and many recreation programs are threatened with elimination.

Gambling also was perceived to have a coping function for some. Marvin observed, "Gambling is a way of surviving for some of 'em (inmates). They don't have no family or anything. From the time of breakfast on, it's gambling. They'd rather sit there and play cards than anything else…"
Ted, a 40 year-old, Caucasian, who had experienced serious life disruptions from substance abuse and problem gambling prior to his incarceration for a sex crime, reported:

> *It's a way to pass the time, but some guys get sucked in. It's more of survival for most people. But, I guess the people who get sucked in might be addicted. I can say from my own addiction (that) I got addicted with gambling. I'd go from the horse track (prior to incarceration) to Nevada. It was all about the win. I'd also do the lottery, but it didn't do it for me (didn't provide enough excitement).*

Ted stated that he spent $200 to $300 (each trip) betting on horse races, and he would drive over a hundred miles to Nevada up to three times a week to gamble, mostly playing blackjack. Apparently this pattern occurred for about six months. He reported, "Drugs kept me going. I used meth at that time to keep me awake, to keep me going at work…But it all came to an end by going to prison." However, Ted acknowledged that in prison, gambling was his "hustle," and that he would gamble "what was on my books" (whatever money he had available).

Apparently gambling was common in this prison, like others, but it was against rules of the institution. Offender-clients were asked how prison officers responded to inmate gambling. According to participants, disciplinary action sometimes occurred, other times it didn't. "James," a quiet, 38 year-old male, who apparently rarely gambled in prison—unlike others in the sample—explained that gambling could result in a visit with OMR: "Offender Management Review Board—or

something like that. They usually hand out punishment, or they give advancement if you're doing well. They map you—whether you complete programs, your GED, that kind of stuff…" Marvin added that visits to OMR were not that frequent, "Most of the time, officers would say something (to us) and we'd have to shut down. But after a little while, it'd (gambling) come right back up though. Some officers know but turn their backs. They don't care."

It appears from the perspectives herein that prison gambling is a complex phenomenon that may function in very different ways for various individuals. Since the time when this information was obtained, I have changed occupations from forensic psychotherapist to university researcher. Still, this information provided a starting point for a formal research project to be funded by the Alberta Gaming Research Institute on the nature and meaning of prison gambling. My hope is that given the lack of research attention on gambling within prison and at subsequent stages of correctional process, the information in this brief article also will alert other researchers to consider exploring important offender gambling issues beyond pre-prison.

What do you think? You can address comments to D J Williams, LCSW, PhD.

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