



Pathological Gambling

Some people have difficulty controlling their behavior in areas of life ranging from alcohol use to shopping. A very small percentage of individuals gamble in ways that harm themselves or their families. Those who are unable to control wagering on sports events, lotteries, casino games, pari-mutuel events, and bingo, and who experience significant negative effects from their gambling behavior, are referred to as "pathological gamblers."

According to a random survey of U.S. households conducted in conjunction with the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC), approximately 0.1 percent of American adults are currently considered pathological gamblers.¹ This estimate is significantly lower than previous national and statewide prevalence estimates, which used an older methodology that resulted in prevalence rates in the neighborhood of 1 percent. Even the studies that use the older methodology show that **pathological gambling is a far less common disorder than many people believe.**

Statewide prevalence studies show convincingly that pathological gambling exists even where there are no casinos, and that the presence of **legalized casino gambling doesn't necessarily translate to increased or inordinately high rates of pathological gambling:**

The NGISC report states that there has been a "massive and rapid transformation" of American life over the past two decades, during which gambling changed from "a limited and relatively rare phenomenon" to a "common feature of everyday life, readily accessible in one form or another to the vast majority of Americans." In the mid-1970s, the previous national commission which examined gambling estimated that 0.77 percent of Americans were "probable compulsive gamblers," and an additional 2.33 percent were "potential compulsive gamblers."² It would appear then, that **serious gambling problems are no more prevalent now than they were in the past**, despite today's relatively ubiquitous gambling opportunities.

- Prevalence studies conducted in Minnesota,³ Texas,⁴ Washington,⁵ and Connecticut⁶ have shown statistically **stable rates of pathological gambling, despite significant increases in the availability of gambling** in each of those states. For example, the Commission ignores the Connecticut study, which concluded that "it is worth noting that probably pathological gambling rates may actually have fallen in Connecticut, and have certainly not risen, during a period in which one of the largest casinos in the world was opened in the State."⁷
- The NGISC's nationwide, random survey of American adults concluded that **prevalence rates in places closest to casinos were no higher than prevalence rates in places further from casinos.** As its consultant's report stated, "The availability of casinos within driving distance does not appear to effect prevalence rates."⁸

- Although there are significant differences in the regional availability of various forms of gambling, a meta-analysis of the prevalence literature conducted recently by researchers at Harvard Medical School concluded that there were **no regional differences in the prevalence of gambling problems**.⁹
- The NGISC's community database analysis concluded that **rates of bankruptcy and crime were not related to the proximity of casino gambling. And spending on social services was actually lower in places that are closest to casino gambling than in places further from casino gambling**.¹⁰ These findings are additional evidence that there is a "background" level of pathological gambling in American society that is relatively unaffected by changes or differences in the availability of casino gambling.

The vast majority of Americans have no difficulty controlling their gambling.

However, the fact that only a small minority of the population may have a gambling problem is little consolation to an individual who suffers from the problem. The seriousness of the problem for the afflicted demands action from every entity involved in legal wagering -- including government lottery officials, pari-mutuel operators, charitable gaming operators, and casino companies.

Socially responsible companies in the gaming industry pay attention to pathological gambling because it is the right thing to do. It also makes good business sense. These companies make money by entertaining people, by making sure they have a really good time. Responsible companies have no desire to take advantage of persons with a psychological disorder or problem. There are steps that companies can, should, and do take in order to deal with pathological gambling, such as educating customers and employees on how to recognize the signs of pathological gambling and where to go for help.¹¹

¹ National Opinion Research Center, p. 25.

² Commission on the Review of the National Policy Toward Gambling, *Gambling in America* (Washington, DC: Commission on the Review of the National Policy Toward Gambling, 1976), p. 73.

³ Michael O. Emerson and J. Clark Laudergeran, "Gambling and Problem Gambling Among Adult Minnesotans: Changes 1990 to 1994," *Journal of Gambling Studies* 12 (Fall 1996), pp. 291-304.

⁴ Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, *Gambling in Texas: 1995 Surveys of Adult and Adolescent Gambling Behavior* (Austin: Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, 1996).

⁵ Gemini Research, Ltd., *Gambling and Problem Gambling in Washington State: A Replication Study, 1992 to 1998*, Report to the Washington State Lottery, May 11, 1999.

⁶ WEFA Group, *A Study Concerning the Effects of Legalized Gambling on the Citizens of the State of Connecticut*, report prepared for the State of Connecticut, Department of Revenue Services, Division of Special Revenue, June 1997.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, et al., *Overview of National Survey and Community Database Research on Gambling Behavior*, report to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, February 1, 1999, p. 26.

⁹ Howard J. Shaffer, et al., *Estimating the Prevalence of Disordered Gambling Behavior in the United States and Canada: A Meta-analysis* (Boston: Harvard Medical School Division on Addictions, December 10, 1997), p. 47.

¹⁰ National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, et al., *Gambling Impact and Behavior Study*, report to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, April 1, 1999, p. 71.

¹¹ For numerous examples, see American Gaming Association, *Responsible Gaming Resource Guide*, Second Edition, June 1998.