Problem gambling among incarcerated persons

Studies show that two out of three pathological gamblers commit crimes in order to pay debts or to continue gambling (Brown, 1987). While the majority of crimes are non-violent, they contribute to higher insurance payments, higher taxes and greater societal mistrust. More often than is reported in the news, underlying gambling problems are at the root of embezzlement and fraud cases that make the headlines.

Many of Oregon’s pathological gamblers end up in the prison system. Once in prison, pathological gamblers typically do not improve. Gambling is common in the prison culture, and is accepted as a way to alleviate boredom. Although research and literature on incarcerated problem/pathological gamblers are limited, the literature suggests that a significant number of inmates have problems related to gambling and many want help to stop. Unfortunately, prisons rarely have education and treatment for gambling. The prison setting could be an excellent venue for gambling addiction education and treatment.

According to a 2006 Oregon Department of Justice report, the extent of illegal gambling activities occurring within the state is currently unknown. Most of the reported illegal gambling has involved individual cheaters instead of organized criminal groups. Law enforcement resources currently devoted to the investigation of this crime are extremely limited.

At the local and county level, current efforts to regulate and investigate suspected criminal activity are decentralized and spread thinly among many agencies. Many city prosecutors and district attorneys’ offices lack sufficient expertise in local social gambling ordinances or state gambling laws to effectively advise law enforcement or the public. (Myers, Hardy, [2006]. Organized crime in Oregon. Salem, Oregon: Department of Justice.)
A review of current literature reveals:

- One-third of criminal offenders meet criteria for problem or pathological gambling. This is the highest rate yet found in any population. Approximately 50 percent of crime by incarcerated problem and pathological gamblers is reportedly committed to support gambling. The prevalence of gambling within correctional facilities (40 percent) appears lower than in the general population. However, inmates who do gamble tend to do so regularly, and problem and pathological gamblers are disproportionately represented among this group. Inmate screening for problem gambling and provision of specialized treatment are currently lacking in most correctional facilities. (Criminal Justice and Behavior, Vol. 32, No. 6, 665-689 (2005) Gambling and Problem Gambling Within Forensic Populations, A Review of the Literature, Robert J. Williams, Jennifer Royston, Brad F. Hagen.)

- Crime increases over time in casino counties, and casinos do not just shift crime from neighboring regions, but create crime. The study also shows that casino-related crime is not confined to the community in which the casino is located. Ultimately, the research determined that 10.3 percent of violent crime and 7.7 percent of property crime in communities with casinos is linked to gambling. (Aborn, Richard and Bennett, John. (May 2005). Gambling: Who’s really at risk? The connection between gambling and crime. Constantine & Aborn Advisory Services: New York, NY.)

- A year 2000 University of Illinois report using data from every U.S. county concluded that rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and auto theft increased as a result of casinos. In sum, across the nation, the result is the same over and over; communities with casino gambling experience more crime than communities without. This is confirmed by a U.S. News & World Report analysis that found average national crime rates in casino communities to be 84 percent higher than communities without casinos. (Addiction and criminal involvement 1: Differential prevalence; and Addiction and criminal involvement 2: A model. (2000, January 18 and 25) The Wager, Vol. 5 Issues3 and 4).

- Pathological gamblers are more likely to have had involvement with the criminal justice system. Most common offenses were fraud, theft and embezzlement or crimes associated with the immediate procurement of funds necessary to continue gambling. (Meyer, G. & Stadler, M. A. [1999].)
Criminal behavior associated with pathological gambling. Journal of Gambling Studies, 13, 29-43.)

- Pathological gamblers had higher arrest and imprisonment rates than non-pathological gamblers. A third of problem and pathological gamblers had been arrested, compared to 10 percent of low-risk gamblers and 4 percent of non-gamblers. About 23 percent of pathological gamblers have been imprisoned, as have 13 percent of problem gamblers. One subcategory of this report is crime and gambling. The report cites a survey of nearly 400 Gamblers Anonymous members, in which 57 percent admitted stealing to finance their gambling. Those with gambling problems tend to commit more white-collar crimes, such as fraud, credit card theft and employee theft. (National Gambling Impact Study Commission. [1999, June]. Gambling impact and behavior study. National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

References


