



AS MORE TEENS GAMBLE, EXPERTS URGE PUBLIC EDUCATION

April 25, 2005

The first generation to grow up with legalized gambling is creating a rising number of teens with gambling addictions.

While other addictions such as cigarettes and drugs are fought with warning labels and celebrity ads on TV, parents and educators have not figured out how to reach teens addicted to gambling.

More teens are gambling

Recent studies indicate that more than 70 percent of youth between the ages of 10 and 17 gambled in the past year, up from 45 percent in 1988.

Almost one in three high school students gamble on a regular basis, according to the National Academy of Sciences. Playing cards, the lottery, and scratch tickets as well as betting on sporting events are the most popular forms of gambling among teenagers.

"This is the first generation of kids growing up when gambling is legal and available virtually nationwide," George Meldrum of the Delaware Council on Gambling Problems told CBS News.

Illegal before 1978

Gambling used to be illegal.

During the early and middle of the 20th century, organized crime syndicates such as the Mafia controlled much of the gambling in the United States, often using it to "launder" (make to appear legal) the profits from other illicit activities, such as drug trafficking.

Nevada had a monopoly over legal casino gambling in the United States until 1978, the year casinos were legalized in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

New Hampshire introduced the first state lottery in 1963 and many states followed suit.

In the past few decades, gambling has grown into a giant corporate industry. Spurred by the legalization of gaming on Native American reservations in the late 1980s, gambling revenues grew from \$8 billion to \$15 billion from 1988 to 1994.

Seeing the potential for huge profits, more states and began to legalize gambling and creating lottery games.

Television shows featuring poker tournaments attract high ratings, as does the annual World Series of Poker.

Harmless entertainment?

Now legal in all but two states, gambling -- whether it's the lottery, bingo, or poker night -- has gained significant popularity and is seen as a generally harmless form of entertainment.

Researchers say parents do not worry about exposing their children to this habit as they might with alcohol or smoking.

"It is a situation where many parents still do assume that it's better for a kid to be gambling than to be out on the streets doing drugs or whatever," Dr. Rachel Volberg, president of Gemini Research, which specializes in gambling studies, told the Christian Science Monitor.

But gambling is addictive. Studies show that problem gamblers exhibit similar functional changes in their brain's decision-making center as drug addicts and alcoholics.

"The neurobiology of what happens when somebody is gambling is much the same as what happens when they are taking cocaine," said gambling addiction expert at the Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse at the University of South Florida Linda Chamberlain on MedicineNet.com.

Researchers have also found that the more exposure a child has to gambling, the more likely he or she will become a compulsive gambler -- as a teen and into adulthood.

While 4 percent to 5 percent of adult gamblers will develop a serious gambling problem, underage gamblers are three times as likely as adults to become compulsive gamblers.

Teens' gambling habits can lead to stealing from others and abusing their parents' credit cards.

Researchers at the National Council on Problem Gambling suggest that teens with a gambling problem are more likely to engage in risky behavior such as unsafe sex, binge drinking, smoking marijuana and skipping school.

Gamblers also have the highest suicide rate of any addicted group. In 1997 a 19-year-old New Yorker killed himself, leaving a suicide note blaming a lost \$6,000 bet on the World Series.

Addressing the issue

For underage gamblers, gaining access to gambling outlets is often easier than buying alcohol or cigarettes. The availability of Internet gambling sites makes age regulations increasingly difficult to enforce.

With a growing number of teens at risk of developing compulsive gambling habits, experts are pushing the government to hold hearings to address the issue. They want public service announcements or warning messages to educate the public on the dangers of excessive betting.

"It is a major, growing issue," said Barbara Raimundo, a mother of a recovering gambling addict who now counsels other parent in Connecticut.

"Our youth need major help, and someone has to be willing to step up to the plate before they start getting really devastated."

--Compiled by Monica Villavicencio for NewsHour Extra

© 2005 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions