

Increase in legalized gambling is linked to higher suicide rates in UCSD study

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INCREASE IN LEGALIZED GAMBLING IS LINKED TO HIGHER SUICIDE RATES IN UCSD STUDY

The widespread increase of legalized gambling in the U.S. over the last decade has been linked to higher suicide rates in major gaming communities among both residents and visitors to the area, according to a new study conducted by suicidologist David Phillips, a professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego. The study is the first large-scale, statistical investigation to find a strong link between gambling and suicide.

The study, which appeared today in the December issue of *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, the official journal of the American Association of Suicidology, found that visitors to and residents of major gaming communities such as Las Vegas, Reno, and Atlantic City experience suicide rates about four times higher than do their counterparts in non-gaming communities.

Over the last decade, the U.S. has witnessed an enormous expansion of legalized gaming. In 1988, only two states Nevada and New Jersey had legalized gambling. Today, more than half of the states in the U.S. have made casinos and other gaming activities legal.

"This study shows that it is not a coincidence that Las Vegas, the premier gambling center in the U.S., displays the highest levels of suicide in the nation, both for visitors and residents," said Phillips. "While there are obviously clear economic benefits that have induced many states to legalize gaming activities, from a public health perspective, gambling may not be a very positive influence."

According to the study, "Elevated Suicide Levels Associated with Legalized Gambling," on which Phillips collaborated with UCSD graduate student Marisa Smith and UCSD undergraduate Ward Welty, in 1994 Americans spent about \$482 billion on legal gambling, substantially more than the U.S. government spends on Medicare and Medicaid combined.

To determine whether or not there was a relationship between legalized gambling and suicide rates, Phillips examined the suicide mortality rates in major gaming communities in the U.S. Las Vegas, Atlantic City, and Reno. Mortality rates for Atlantic City were analyzed both before and after gambling was legalized. The study compares the suicide rates of residents of and out-of-state visitors to these communities with those of other communities in the U.S.

While the average county in the U.S. had a suicide level of less than 1 percent (.97%) among out-of-state visitors, Las Vegas had a visitor suicide level of 4.28 percent of all deaths. Visitor suicide levels were also much higher than the norm for Reno (2.31 percent) and Atlantic City (1.87 percent). In Atlantic City, average suicide rates were maintained before the establishment of legalized gambling in 1978. After the introduction of casinos, suicide rates for visitors and residents climbed to abnormally high levels.

"Our findings suggest but do not prove that gamblers experience abnormally high risks of suicide," said Phillips. "These findings might also suggest that not just gamblers, but other groups including spouses, children and relatives of gamblers, as well as residents who work in the gaming industry, could also experience elevated risks of suicide. What is clear is that gambling or some factor closely associated with gambling settings is linked to increased suicide levels."

According to Phillips, previous studies have shown that people who are economically desperate and in substantial debt are more likely to commit suicide. On average, people who gamble lose money, and people who gamble a great deal can lose a great deal of money. While this may not lead to suicide by the gambler, it could lead to suicide by the gambler's spouse, son, relative, or business partner, he explained. Other studies have also found that gamblers are more prone to white-collar crime, substance abuse, and child abuse.

Phillips, an authority on mortality trends and statistics, is a renowned expert on suicide. Previous research has included the role of psychosomatic factors in delaying death in certain people; the incidence of hidden suicides; imitative or copy-cat suicide; mortality rates before and after special holidays and birthdays; and the effects of media coverage of suicides and homicides. His studies have been published in numerous professional and academic journals, including the Journal of the American Medical Association, the New England Journal of Medicine, Lancet, Science, and the American Journal of Sociology.

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