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Gambling attitudinal and behavioral patterns and criminality in a sample of Las Vegas area detained youth

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Abstract

This exploratory study seeks to better understand gambling patterns in a sample of incarcerated youth from the Las Vegas area. The study uses data derived from surveys administered to 269 incarcerated youth from two southern Nevada detention facilities. Respondents reported attitudes about gambling, frequency, and location of their gambling. In addition, we explored the link between gambling behavior and property crimes, socio-demographic variables, and gang membership. Results reveal a robust relationship between reported property crimes and the frequency of gambling behavior, as well as between gambling and gang involvement. Implications for future research are discussed.
Key words: gambling frequency, youth, delinquency, ethnicity, gangs, Las Vegas

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, as opportunities for legal adult gambling have increased, so have concerns regarding the prevalence of youth gambling behavior (National Research Council (NRC), 1999). While minimal or moderate gambling by youth might be part of typical exploration behavior in adolescence (Griffiths, 1990; Winters, Stinchfield, & Fulkerson, 1993), a proportion of youth

gamblers develop into problem gamblers. Shaffer and Hall (1996), in their review of adolescent prevalence studies, estimated that between 4% and 8% of youth have serious gambling problems, with another 10–15% being at risk of developing such a problem.

Problem gamblers are characterized by frequent gambling and by undesirable outcomes ranging from borrowing money from family members to being arrested for offenses committed to support gambling (NRC, 1999). These problem gambling patterns seem to emerge and develop, as do other risk behaviors like substance abuse, during adolescence (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998). Unfortunately, although many studies have examined patterns of gambling in youth, few have conducted these examinations with ethnically and socioeconomically diverse samples (NRC, 1999). Those who have employed more ethnically diverse samples have found signs of ethnic differences in youth gambling patterns (Zitzow, 1996; Stinchfield, Cassuto, Winters, & Latimer, 1997). Additionally, youth from lower socioeconomic circumstances may be more adversely affected by frequent gambling. Thus, there is a great need for more information regarding gambling patterns among "at risk" and ethnically diverse youth (Schissel, 2001; NRC, 1999).

A variety of factors seem to contribute to the development of frequent gambling behavior, including parental attitudes (Gupta & Derevensky, 1998), impulsivity (Vitaro, Arseneault, & Tremblay, 1999), and involvement in other risk behaviors (NRC, 1999). In addition to these factors, other aspects of youths' familial, peer, and community context may contribute to a pattern of frequent gambling. Of particular interest with a sample of youth from Las Vegas, Nevada, are contextual factors such as peer affiliation, familial composition, parental work schedule, or community attitudes regarding gambling. Since a significant proportion of both private and public revenue in Las Vegas is generated from gaming-related sources, this community has a strong connection and positive orientation to gambling. Youth raised in this environment may have a greater propensity for gambling as compared to youth raised in other areas. Moreover, many parents have work schedules that reflect the 24-hour operation of the tourist-related industries, making parental monitoring a challenge, particularly in single-parent families. In addition, due to the high prevalence of gang activity in the Las Vegas area, gang involvement also may play a role in the development of gambling behavior.

Frequent gamblers can suffer tremendous financial effects as a result of their gambling (NRC, 1999). Due to the financial pressures from gambling, youth can turn to crime to feed a gambling habit or pay off debt. Property crimes and drug trafficking can become likely sources of money to pay for gambling-related

expenses. Youth who are involved in a culture of risky behaviors may be particularly at risk to be involved in gambling and to turn to property crimes and other criminal activity as a way of paying for gambling debts. No studies known to the authors have directly examined this link among incarcerated youth, although it is known that such high-risk populations possess a variety of social, psychological, and problem behaviors (Lattimore, Visher, & Linster, 1995; Stahl et al., 1999). This exploratory study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the relationship between property crimes and gambling behavior within a sample of Las Vegas area incarcerated youth, as well as by exploring the relationship between multiple factors and gambling attitudes and behavior.

Methods

Procedures

The data for this study derive from surveys of incarcerated adolescents in two Nevada secure youth detention facilities during the winter of 2003. These two institutions were selected because of their status as the two primary detention facilities for the sentenced youth of Clark County (the county encompassing Las Vegas). The adolescents in these facilities are typical of the detained youth of Clark County, Nevada. The participants were selected based on their scheduling during the time of the survey administration. The selection of adolescents to be assessed was based on the times that were convenient to both the institutions' administrators and the researchers.

The surveys were conducted, in collaboration with the Clark County Juvenile Services (CCJS), to understand adolescents' perceptions of their detention experience and to aid in the development of community reentry programming. Adolescents responded to a 158-item survey designed to assess perceptions of the overall facilities, staff, and programming, as well as items related to anger management, gambling, violence, abuse, and gang affiliation. Surveys were administered by the authors and trained research assistants and completed during periods usually devoted to educational activities. Students who had difficulty comprehending the survey or specific items were read the survey by one of the survey administrators. Bilingual (i.e.: English- and Spanish-speaking) survey administrators were used.

Since the incarcerated adolescents in this study were wards of the State, parental permission was not obtained. All participants completed informed consent forms; however, to insure accurate and honest responses, the surveys were anonymous and confidential. No incentives were offered for participation. In

addition, participants were informed that the survey was voluntary and that they could skip any item they wanted. Ninety-four percent of the adolescents present in the facilities on the day of administration chose to participate.

Participants

The sample was composed of 269 male and female detainees. Sixty-five percent of the subjects were 16 years of age or older, 21% were 15, 11% were 14, 3% were 13, and 2% were 12 or under. Eighty-five percent of the sample were male detainees. The ethnicity of the subjects was distributed as follows: 31% Hispanic-American, 29% African-American, 25% European-American, 6% multi-ethnic, 2% Native American, and 1% Asian/Pacific Islander-American. Seventy-seven percent of respondents said they had lived in Las Vegas for four or more years before being detained.

Ninety-three percent of the respondents said they had been incarcerated in the detention facilities for six months or less, with 77% reporting that they had been arrested three or more times. The top five crimes that youth reported for which they were being detained were robbery or burglary (23%), violation of parole or probation (23%), stealing cars (17%), drugs (15%), and assault and battery (12%). Approximately 48% of the youth said that they are currently members of a gang, with 62% of self-described gang members reporting membership for more than two years.

Measures

The self-report instrument used in the subsequent analyses was developed for the purposes of this study and to provide information for CCJS about adolescent detainees. The scales and items used were based on prior research, focus group discussions with CCJS administrators, and focus groups with incarcerated youth. The survey was then piloted with a group of incarcerated youth for comprehension and readability. This piloting resulted in several content and formatting modifications (for more information on this instrument, see Evans, Brown, and Killian (2002)).

Sociodemographics Gender and age variables were each assessed by one item on the survey. Ethnicity was assessed by one self-report item on the survey.

Contextual factors Familial composition, mother and father work schedule, and time living in Las Vegas were each assessed by one item. In addition, individual items assessed gang involvement and length of time in a gang. A validity check, which had respondents list the name of their gang, was included for the gang items.

Criminality background Characteristics of the individual juvenile offender, including offense, the length of detention and number of arrests were assessed by individual items. In addition, category of offense and previous criminal behavior were all assessed by individual items. Prior property crime activity was assessed with a single item which asked, "Prior to being detained during the prior year how often did you steal? ('never,' 'once or twice,' '3–4 times,' or '5 or more times')."

Gambling attitudes and behavior Several items were used to assess gambling behavior. Gambling was defined for respondents as "gambling for money ('on the Internet,' 'at a casino,' 'with friends,' 'lottery,' etc.)". Respondents were asked whether or not they gambled ("yes" or "no"), and the frequency of their gambling over the past month ("never," "once or twice," "3–4 times," or "5 or more times"). Participants also were asked whether or not they had stolen money or property to pay for gambling. They also were asked to report where they had gambled and who helped them gamble. Lastly, participants were asked whether they agreed ("strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree") with the following attitudinal statements: "I think gambling is ok," "I think gambling often is ok."

Analysis

For purposes of understanding the patterns of gambling behavior in this sample, a series of frequency counts were conducted with the data. Additionally, these patterns were examined by group (sex and age). In order to test the relationship pattern between property crimes and gambling, a regression analysis was conducted predicting reported property crimes by gambling behavior, while controlling for background variables (time detained, age, sex, and number of times arrested). In addition, frequencies were used to determine the percentage of gamblers who reported stealing or borrowing money to gamble.

In order to determine the relationship between background variables (time in Las Vegas, parental work schedule, family composition, ethnicity, and gang involvement) and gambling attitudes and behaviors, a variety of statistical analyses were conducted, the particular statistical test depending on whether a variable was categorical or continuous. For all analyses, SPSS® version 11.5 was used.

Results

Gambling behavior patterns Frequency counts were conducted to illustrate gambling behavior patterns in this sample of detained youth. Fifty-four percent of the respondents reported gambling for

money (*n*=260). In response to a question of frequency of gambling over the course of a month, 37% reported *never* gambling, 20% reported *once or twice,* 16% reported *3–4 times*, and 27% reported *5 or more times* (*n*=240). Twelve percent of the respondents reported stealing money to pay for gambling (*n*=243), while 13% reported borrowing money to pay for gambling (*n*=241). When asked to report who helped them gamble, 28% said their *older friends*, 2% said *family*, 9% said *others*, and 61% said *no one* (*n*=179). When asked to write in where they gambled, 8% reported school, 42% reported streets, 23% reported private residence, 12% reported casinos, 5% little stores and gas stations, and 10% reported anywhere (*n*=118).

In order to further illustrate gambling patters, frequencies were conducted with two salient grouping variables, age and sex. For females, 34% reported *gambling for money* (*n*=35), while 60% of boys reported *gambling for money* (*n*=221). Grouping age variables into three groups, 47% of those 14 and under (*n*=36), 44% of 15 year olds (*n*=50), and 62% of those 16 and over reported *gambling for money* (*n*=161).

Descriptive statistics were conducted with each of the variables used in the relational analysis in order to better understand their respective distribution. The self-reported property crime item had a mean of 2.03, a standard deviation of 1.14, and a kurtosis of –1.01. The frequency of gambling item had a mean of 2.32, a standard deviation of 1.22, and a kurtosis of –1.53. The gambling attitude items ("Gambling is ok"; "Gambling often is ok") had means of 2.18, 2.40; standard deviations of .979, 1.02; and kurtoses of –.625, –1.04. As expected, both frequency of gambling and stealing were skewed, because of the "never gambled" or "never stole" options.

Gambling behavior and property crimes Of the youth who reported gambling, 9% reported stealing money or property and 14% reported borrowing money to pay for gambling. In a further test of the relationship between property crimes and gambling, a regression analysis was conducted predicting reported property crime behavior from frequency of gambling. The analysis revealed a significant relationship between gambling and stealing (*ß* [199] = 247, $p \approx .000$), despite the control of background variables (time detained, age, sex, and number of times arrested). Fourteen percent of the variance of reported property crime behavior was accounted for by the full model (see Table 1).

Table 1
Results from a multiple regression equation predicting frequency of reported property crimes from gambling behavior

Frequency of property crimes	
Frequency of gambling (ß)	.247***
Number of arrests (ß)	.028*
Time detained (ß)	.215**
Age (ß)	.063*
Sex (ß)	.102*
Adj. R 2	.142*

*p<.05; ** p<.005; *** p≈.000.

Note: Sex is coded Male=0; Female=1. While some variables were intercorrelated, there was no serious problem with multicollinearity.

Background variables and gambling attitudes and behavior

The second series of analyses considered contextual variables and their relationship with gambling attitudes and behaviors. Individual analysis of variance, comparing parental work schedules, familial composition, and gambling attitudes and behavior failed to reach significance levels. Only group differences between family composition and the attitudinal item reached significant levels (F [252] = 2.14, p< .04). Post hoc comparison failed to reveal a significant source of the difference. A Pearson's r correlation was conducted to test the relationship between time spent living in Las Vegas and gambling behavior and attitude. Time lived in Las Vegas did not seem to have a significant relationship with gambling attitudes and behavior (r = –.092, p<.166). Ethnic differences in gambling frequency (F [223] = 4.54 p ≈ .000), attitudes about gambling (F [243] = 3.50 p< .002), and attitudes about frequent gambling (F [242] = 3.07 p< .007) reached significance, particularly among African-American respondents, who had significantly higher rates of gambling and more positive attitudes about gambling and gambling often as compared with Hispanic-Americans.

Using gang members and non-gang members as independent groups, t-test analysis tested differences in gambling attitudes and behaviors. Gang members had significantly higher rates of gambling (t[219]=2.75, p≈.000), attitudes about gambling (t[235]= –3.62, p≈.000), and attitudes about frequent gambling (t[237]= –1.72, p<.086). In addition, a Pearson Chi square analysis tested differences between reported gang membership and stealing and borrowing to pay for gambling, with gang members

reporting higher levels of stealing to pay for gambling (X^2 [1] = 5.96, p<.015).

Discussion

Present findings reveal some of the gambling patterns of incarcerated youth. Firstly, approximately 50% of the sample reported gambling, with 27% reporting gambling five or more times a month. These rates of gambling were higher for males and older detainees. These rates are comparable, considering the divergent measurement, to those found in a study examining adolescent gambling behavior in a Las Vegas area sample, with 12.4% reporting gambling more than five days per month (Kearny, Roblek, Thurman, & Tournbough, 1996). These rates are similar to estimated gambling rates for adolescents overall (NRC, 1999). Kearny and colleagues (1996) suggest that gambling behavior patterns might not differ within an incarcerated and Catholic high school sample, particularly in a pro-gambling context such as Las Vegas. Further examination is needed to understand, if not delinquency involvement, which factors might contribute to the development of an adolescent gambling problem, particularly in a legalized gambling context.

Regression analysis suggested a strong relationship between reported property criminal activity and the frequency of gambling behavior. In addition, a small proportion of respondents directly reported stealing or borrowing money to pay for gambling, 9 and 14% respectively. These findings support and strengthen prior studies that have suggested a link between delinquency and gambling activities (Stinchfield et al., 1997). Clearly, gambling is not the sole cause of this type of delinquent behavior. Nevertheless, within this sample of incarcerated youth, some appear to be stealing in order to pay for their gambling activity.

Surprisingly, several contextual variables such as parental work schedule and time lived in Las Vegas were not significantly related to gambling attitudes and behavior. These variables, relating to the context that makes Las Vegas a unique environment for exposure to gambling and reduced parental supervision, did not seem to contribute to youth gambling attitudes and behavior. Although further study is needed to elucidate the contextual effects of settings where legalized gambling is a dominant industry, present findings suggest a pro-gambling context alone may not account for a significant proportion of youth gambling attitudes and behavior. Interestingly, among this sample of incarcerated youth, a preponderance of most gambling activities did not take place in legalized gambling settings (83%). Other studies have found parental and peer attitudes and gambling behavior are important predictors of children's gambling behavior (Gupta & Derevensky,

1998; Griffiths, 1990); these variables may be more influential than the community gambling context. In addition, African-American youth reported higher rates and more positive attitudes about gambling, particularly compared to Hispanic-Americans. Ethnic and cultural factors that influence gambling behavior among youth remain important ongoing research topics.

Gang involvement was a significant factor in both gambling attitudes and behavior. Particularly alarming is that gang members reported stealing money or property to gamble at higher rates than non-gang members. This finding has important implications for the identification of youth particularly at risk for the development of problem gambling behavior; however, this needs to be understood in the context that gang members in general are involved in more problem behaviors than other youth (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993).

Limitations of this study and suggestions for future research

Because this study relied on self-report data, our findings are vulnerable to over-reporting and under-reporting biases. Sensitive self-report data among youth, however, have been previously studied and accepted as valid and reliable (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1991). Additionally, gambling behavior was assessed through the use of individual items rather than previously published instruments, thus restricting a greater understanding of empirically defined "pathological" and "problem" gambling. The limitations of the present investigation suggest a number of avenues for future research. In particular, the cross-sectional nature of our data did not allow us to determine causal direction among the variables of interest. Longitudinal studies are needed in this regard, especially research that can track the developmental arc of how certain gambling attitudes and behaviors lead to problem gambling among youth. As present findings suggest, a better understanding of the connection between delinquency and gambling also is needed. This could be particularly important in relation to frequent or problem gambling and its role in recidivism. In addition, due to the nature of our sampling frame and the fact that young males predominately populate detention systems, we had few female respondents. Further research should examine the gambling patterns of "at risk" and delinquent females, particularly since the gap between the rates of risky behaviors among boys and girls continues to decline (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999).

In sum, we found a strong connection between reported property crimes and related criminal activity and the frequency of gambling behavior in this sample of incarcerated youth. In addition, the findings revealed interesting patterns of gambling behavior in this understudied audience. Future research efforts on this topic need

to focus on clarifying the nature and direction of the developmental paths among key variables considered in this study, particularly as they apply to factors such as recidivism, gender, and ethnicity. Continuing to identify and elucidate the interactive nature of risk and protective factors relating to youth gambling is critical to the prevention of this substantial problem facing youth today.

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