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Study: More casinos, more gambling addicts

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By Eric Peterson

One university study shows that living near a casino can as much as double your likelihood of becoming addicted to gambling.

It's a temptation that may become stronger for some existing gambling addicts in the Northwest suburbs with the recent opening of the new Rivers Casino in Des Plaines.

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And it's a temptation that could spread even further through a plan to significantly expand gambling in Illinois — with tens of thousands of video poker machines coming soon to social establishments, and the possibility of five more casinos and slot machines at racetracks.



But experts say it's individuals, not the state, who ultimately are responsible to take whatever steps are necessary to resist the temptation.

"It's dependent upon the individual, and how serious they are about making the changes they need to make in their lives to abstain," said Steven Hart, president of the [Illinois Council on Problem Gambling](#).

Hart said his organization — while striving to provide a public voice for the issues of the problem gambler — is

neutral on gambling expansion.

Just as Prohibition was not a practical solution to problem drinking, eradication of gambling opportunities is viewed as an unrealistic approach to problem gambling, Hart said.

Much like the alcoholic has to live in a world filled with bars and liquor stores, the gambling addict has to find a way to maintain control in a world of casinos and race tracks, he added.

For some recovering addicts, the sudden proximity of a new casino may present a problem. But those addicts probably already know who they are and should be taking steps or engaging professional help.

"We would work out how you're going to handle the new situation," Hart said.

A study published in 2005 by John W. Welte of the University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions indicates the chance of becoming a gambling addict doubles if you live within 10 miles of a casino.

According to the study, someone living within 10 miles has a 7 percent risk of becoming a problem gambler — as defined by particular behavior patterns — compared to an approximately 3.5 percent risk among those 10 or more miles away.

He's the first to admit, though, that the study is based purely on statistical data and doesn't account for other individual traits that would make one more or less likely to become addicted to gambling.

In the dozen years since Welte's data was collected, gambling has expanded. He is now engaged in a follow-up study to compare new data to the old. But many areas that were more than 10 miles from a casino then are no longer. Welte's own office is now only a little more than a mile from a casino that didn't exist when he conducted his first study.

"It's making it more convenient," Welte said of the way gambling opportunities are changing in the country. "And if it's more convenient, more people are going to be getting into trouble."

[Self-exclusion](#) from casinos, a program offered by the [Illinois Gaming Board](#), is an opportunity many problem gamblers take advantage of, said program Director Gene O'Shea.

Under the self-exclusion program, problem gamblers risk arrest and the forfeiture of all winnings if they're caught on the grounds of a casino.

People from many Illinois towns, as well as locations around the nation, are represented on the gaming board's self-exclusion list. There are, in fact, 36 residents of Des Plaines already registered. Chicago has 385 people on the list. St. Louis has the most, with 927.

But even gambling addicts who signed up for self-exclusion in a rational moment may later get the irrational urge to sneak into a casino.

"They're a lot better at catching people than they used to be," said Scott Damiani, a recovering problem gambler who is head of the speakers bureau for the education-oriented [Outreach Foundation](#).

For example, he said, casinos have become savvy about checking their surveillance videos to make sure that people cashing in large winnings are those who actually won them.

A review of Elgin police reports shows self-banned players occasionally being arrested at the city's Grand Victoria Casino.

Damiani, 70, of Downers Grove, said he hasn't made a bet in 17 years.

Proximity to a casino might add temptation for a problem gambler because it makes it easier to account for one's time to others, Damiani said. But for someone in the throes of addiction, distance is no obstacle, he added.

His strongest advice for those recovering from a gambling addiction is to avoid temptation. Gambling addicts should avoid going to dinner at casinos. Sports gamblers should avoid sporting events. Recovering problem gamblers should certainly not seek employment at a casino.

Damiani said he doesn't even buy charitable raffle tickets anymore but simply makes a donation to the organization without receiving a ticket.

"The worst thing that could happen is that I would win, and would start gambling all over again," Damiani said.

The proximity of temptation can be a danger for all addicts.

Kathy Rein, who's the gambling addiction specialist for The [SHARE](#) Program in Hoffman Estates, said some members of her women's group swear they would never have developed a problem if there wasn't a casino near their homes.

She said some of the gambling addicts she treats say they're already experiencing some disquiet about Rivers Casino — not because of where it is but because everybody's talking about it and its billboards and advertisements are springing up everywhere.

If the possibility of an extensive expansion of gambling in Illinois comes true, such pressures will become even more prevalent, Damiani said.

But even as Gov. Pat Quinn considers whether to sign a bill allowing five new casinos and slots at racetracks, Illinois ranks notoriously low in its funding for treatment for addicts, Rein said.



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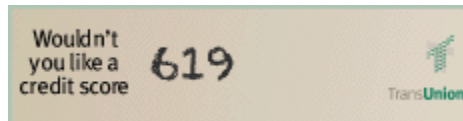


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