

Gambling Among Prison Inmates: Patterns and Implications

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Abstract There is an absence of research on gambling among prison inmates during their incarceration. Little is known about how prisoners organize gambling activities or the potential risks they face from gambling. Similarly, no empirical attention has been given to how correctional institutions respond to inmate gambling. This study employed interviews with 55 male prisoners and self-administered surveys with 159 correctional officers and staff, at two medium security prisons in Ohio. Data were gathered on prevalence and patterns of inmate gambling, perceived hazards of gambling, and perceived institutional responses to prisoner gambling. Findings suggest that inmate gambling is common and constitutes an important feature of the underground economy of prisons, yet little is done to deter or prevent this activity. Suggestions are made for more effective institutional responses.

Keywords Inmate gambling · Prisoner gambling · Prison culture

Introduction

Neither the field of gambling studies nor the empirical literature on corrections adequately addresses the phenomenon of in-prison gambling among inmates. To date, most research on gambling among corrections populations has examined problem gambling prior to incarceration, treatment efforts with inmates, or concerns other than the nature and consequences of inmate gambling during the period of imprisonment.

A number of studies focus narrowly on pre-prison crime associated with problem gambling that can or does result in incarceration, including the National Gambling Impact

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Study (1999); Meyer and Stadler (1999); Abbott et al. (2000); and Williams (2009). The general conclusion is that it is common for pathological gamblers to admit committing criminal offenses in order to generate gambling income, and that problem gambling is a significant criminogenic factor. Williams and Walker (2009) interviewed a sample of 15 corrections professionals in Nevada and Utah. These officials indicated that inmate gambling while incarcerated is common, and that continued gambling during imprisonment could have deleterious consequences for offender reentry into the community upon release. The small sample size and absence of data from inmates themselves, however, offers only a limited picture of gambling dynamics and consequences within prisons.

Other studies focus on the importance of screening inmates who may enter prison with gambling problems, and the need to provide them with interventions (Nixon et al. 2006). In addition, Williams et al. (2005) assessed 27 prevalence studies of prison populations in Australia, the UK, New Zealand, and the United States. They found a combined rate of pathological gambling of nearly 33%, thus revealing that prisoners have rates of problem gambling higher than any other population. Even so, these researchers found only 6 studies that provided limited data on inmate gambling during incarceration, with wide prevalence estimates from as low as 26% (Abbott et al. 2000) to much higher.

In an article published in *Prison Legal News*, Williams (2009) states that 40% of prisoners in his research samples report gambling during incarceration, often frequently. A journalistic account published in the *Muskegon Chronicle* notes that debt collection efforts caused by inmate gambling resulted in prisoner-on-prisoner violence in a state facility (September 22, 2010). Yet little is known about diverse forms of inmate gambling, its consequences within prison culture, and how prison officials respond to inmate gambling. Given that only a small number of studies offer even a cursory glimpse of offender gambling while in prison (Williams et al. 2005), the need for research in this regard is evident.

In light of cultural tolerance for recreational gambling and high rates of incarceration among problem gamblers, one would expect gambling activities to be a common feature of prison life. Gambling generates excitement that is a counterpoint to the monotony of prison routine. According to a recent study, many incarcerated offenders view gambling as a positive leisure experience associated with stress reduction (Williams 2008). Certain categories of inmates such as sex offenders may also gamble as a way to gain acceptance within the broader prison population (Williams and Hinton 2006). Even prisoners who did not gamble prior to their incarceration may feel pressure to conform to an inmate culture that promotes betting as a desired form of risk-taking. The extent to which inmates see potential risks connected to gambling with fellow prisoners, including the risk of violence as a result of gambling debts, is not clear.

Sadly, there are almost no data to answer basic questions. What is the prevalence and what are the patterns of inmate gambling in male prisons? What types of gambling occur and how often? What resources do inmates use to bet with and where do they acquire them? When and where does it occur? Why do inmates engage in gambling activities? What are the institutional responses to real or perceived prisoner gambling? How does gambling affect inmate relationships? What are the consequences associated with running up debts? Could the institution reduce inmate gambling, possibly by addressing it during prisoner orientation?

We know of no instance where any form of gambling among prisoners is permissible according to prison rules. No distinction between “social gambling” and “problem gambling”—a distinction common among researchers and clinicians outside of prison—necessarily applies to inmates. Violation of any prison rule carries potentially significant

consequences. In this sense, every instance of inmate gambling is, by definition, a problem. This suggests that prison officials should actively discourage the behavior. But do they? Is gambling seen by inmates and staff alike as merely a benign way for prisoners to pass time—a normal and acceptable feature of prison culture? Or is it perceived as a problem, but one that is so prevalent and innocuous that it is ignored?

Given the importance of such questions, the purpose of this study is to gain descriptive data on patterns and responses to inmate gambling. It is known that problem gambling among prisoners is correlated with offender demographics (e.g., young males), and with disorders that coexist with crime such as lack of impulse control and drug or alcohol abuse (Williams et al. 2005; Crockford and el-Guebaly 1998). As such, the focus of this study is exclusively on incarcerated adult males and on the correctional staff in two medium security state prisons who serve these inmates. Also considered are policy implications for corrections professionals charged with mitigating inmate gambling. We did not attempt to assess gambling patterns in facilities for juveniles or adult women.

Methods

This study employed semi-structured interviews with 55 adult male inmates at 2 medium security prisons in Ohio. Thirty inmates from each institution were selected randomly and asked to consent to an interview about prisoner gambling. Five inmates chose not to respond to questions and were excluded from the sample. Each interview was conducted on site at the prisons by a team of 2 trained researchers. Both researchers recorded responses. The length of each interview was approximately 25–30 min. No data were gathered on the inmates' age, length of sentence, or type of offense convictions as the correlations between those variables and gambling behavior are not the focus of this study.

The interviews focused on inmate perceptions of gambling patterns and institutional responses. In order to ensure forthright responses and to increase subject participation, respondents were not asked to describe their own gambling activities. Instead, they were asked questions about what they observed among other inmates and corrections staff. This method was chosen because subjects tend to be more honest about describing the behavior of their fellow inmates, rather than revealing personal conduct that is contrary to prison policy. It also seemed likely that respondents would refuse to be interviewed if they were asked to divulge personal behaviors they fear could have negative consequences.

In addition, 159 corrections officers and staff at the same 2 institutions completed a self-administered survey designed to parallel interview questions with inmates. Because both medium security institutions are in close geographic proximity and often collaborate, we made the decision to view the data in aggregate. The focus was on perceptions of inmate gambling patterns and possible staff responses to the behavior.

Findings

Prevalence, Patterns, and Economics

Both inmates and corrections professionals were in strong agreement that gambling is a common feature of prison life. Although estimates of prevalence varied from daily to several times a month, when given the choice of whether gambling occurred on a regular basis or occasionally, 50% of the corrections officers and staff (CO/Staff) claimed that half

or more of the inmates gamble on a regular basis. Similarly, 51% of inmates also estimated that half or more of their fellow prisoners gambled regularly (e.g., daily or several times per week). Not a single respondent said that inmate gambling did not occur.

Findings reveal 2 major types of gambling among inmates. The first is highly organized sports betting run by a small number of prisoners. (Inmates refer to this as “running a ticket.”) Specifically, 82% of inmates, and 87% of CO/Staff, indicated that organized betting on professional and college football, basketball, and other high profile sports was the most common form of gambling. Prisoners who wish to gamble place bets with a “runner” who keeps a “ticket” (a list) of the bets, which is delivered to those few inmates who cover the bets and collect fees for service. Thus, in any given week, those who run the sports betting operation can generate substantial sums of money and commodities of value. In referring to those who organize sports betting, one inmate stated “some guys make four or 500\$ per week.” (Note: Although 32% of the CO/Staff believed that such gambling activities were organized by prison gangs, we had no data from inmates to confirm this possibility.) Given the highly organized nature of sports betting, it seems likely that those inmates who control this activity have “hired hands” at their disposal to enforce payment of gambling debts.

The other form of gambling emerges spontaneously or semi-spontaneously and is not systematically organized (e.g., card playing and other activities such as betting on a pick-up game of basketball). Seventy-six percent of inmates identified card playing as the second most common gambling activity, and 87% of the CO/Staff agreed. There was general consensus about “regular” card players who gamble with one another, but not in a centrally organized fashion. One inmate referred to this as “small time friendly betting.”

When taken together, 91% of inmates said that betting on sports or card games occurs daily or several times per week, and 88% of CO/Staff indicated the same. This suggests that significant amounts of wins/losses are routinely at stake. Borrowing money or goods from fellow inmates with interest to pay gambling debts also comes into play. Thus, it is likely that inmate gambling is a significant feature of the underground economy of prisons, though its full impact is difficult to ascertain.

Although money in the form of IOUs, cigarettes, and food were reported as common types of gambling currency for inmates, anything of value can be used to place bets. This can include doing “favors”—a form of involuntary servitude. When asked specifically about incidents of winning or losing that involve “sexual favors” as payment at their institution, only one inmate admitted knowledge of such an incident, but 24% of CO/Staff indicated they knew of this. In addition, 14% of CO/Staff indicated their belief that betting sexual favors was common.

When asked where prisoners get money or other items with which to gamble, inmates agreed that family/friends and prison jobs were the two most common sources (91% and 92%, respectively). In addition, 77% also said that inmates borrowed from other inmates in order to gamble. Findings from CO/Staff were similar: family/friends (88%), prison jobs (72%), and other inmates (69%). When asked if the family members of inmates who gamble were aware of the behavior, 64% of the inmates and 71% of the CO/Staff responded “no.” Simply stated, it appears that family and friends on the outside may place money in a prisoner’s account without knowledge that he is using it to gamble or pay gambling debts. An additional source of betting money included savings (if available). No inmates indicated knowledge of others borrowing gambling money from prison staff, and there was almost universal agreement among inmates and CO/Staff alike that corrections officers do not gamble with inmates.

Inmates reported that gambling activity can and does occur during most times and at most locations in prison, with one exception. When asked if gambling occurs at work (prison job) or school, 100% of inmates said no, although 43% of CO/Staff believed it did occur there. Inmates also reported their belief that gambling would be less common if there were “more constructive things to do” during incarceration. As one respondent stated, “They ain’t got no programs going here.” This comment suggests the desire among prisoners for recreational or other programs that would provide a positive alternative to gambling.

The primary reason for gambling cited by inmates and by CO/Staff was entertainment. Many inmates indicated that gambling breaks up the monotony of institutional routines and helps to pass the time. Other reasons for gambling include repayment of debts (including gambling debts), to purchase goods, and to obtain status.

Controls on Gambling

Inmates and CO/Staff agree that *suspicion* of inmate gambling often is ignored. A common view is that CO/Staff “know” many inmates routinely place bets, but neither care nor believe anything could be done to effectively stop such conduct. When asked what corrections officers do when an inmate is suspected, 33% of inmates said officers “look the other way” or “give a warning,” while 27% said the CO “might investigate,” perhaps by asking what the inmates are doing. A number of inmates who were interviewed indicated that prison officials simply do not care if inmates gamble because, in part, of the time and paperwork involved in conducting a proper investigation. Still others indicated that the decision to ignore gambling or “investigate,” to some degree, “depends on the CO”.

Consistent with findings from the interviews with inmates, 50% of CO/Staff indicated that suspicion of inmate gambling often is ignored (i.e., “look the other way” or “give a warning”). Simply stated, there is agreement that a high percentage of the time, suspicion of inmate gambling is not given serious scrutiny by corrections officers. Only 3 out of 55 of inmates (5.5%) said the CO would report a suspected incident, and 25% of CO/Staff indicated the officer would report. The most common outcome if an inmate is caught (not simply suspected) is loss of commissary or recreational privileges. When asked what inmates thought should happen if someone gets caught, one respondent agreed with this approach and answered, “Take away commissary or [impose] isolation to [make him] think about behavior. If you can’t follow little rules here, how’re you going to do it on the street?” It is not clear, however, whether such loss of privileges constitutes an effective deterrent.

The prevalence of gambling as part of prison culture belies an ironic contradiction. When asked if they thought relationships between inmates are harmed by gambling, 66% of inmates and 87% of CO/Staff said “yes.” These responses, in part, reflect a realistic understanding of the risks associated with generating debts in a predatory environment and failing to pay. Accusations of cheating and resentment over losing bets also can spark intense and violent confrontations. One inmate stated the following, “Gambling creates a chaotic environment. It disrupts people who are not engaged in it.” Another replied, “It causes people to get beat up or get their cells robbed. Causes tension because they don’t have anything to do.”

Yet nearly a third of prisoners (31%) and CO/Staff (32%) thought it would be harder to control inmates if there was strict enforcement of anti-gambling rules. Both groups also were asked a hypothetical question: “Do you think this prison could effectively reduce inmate gambling?” Inmates were skeptical; 78% said “no.” CO/Staff were more

optimistic, with 62% answering “yes,” even though they offered no clear strategies on how to regulate or prevent inmate gambling.

Prisoners were asked an open-ended question: “What happens to inmates who run up gambling debts and fail to pay up?” Threats of beatings and actual beatings were mentioned most frequently. As one respondent stated, an inmate who fails to pay gambling debts could “end up in the infirmary or dead.” As another said, people “...check into the hole or risk getting beat up. Anything could happen in there.” In other words, an inmate with gambling debts might intentionally break prison rules so he could be removed from the population and placed in isolation as a protective measure. In such instances, prison officials would not know the true reason for the inmate’s behavior. We were also told that some inmates would quietly seek transfer to other institutions to avoid payment and beatings. But that too carries risks. If it is discovered that an inmate who owes money is seeking a transfer, that could be cause for a violent assault.

Finally, we wanted to know if prisoners had been warned about the dangers of gambling by CO/Staff upon entering the institution. There was nearly universal agreement among inmates that no discussion of gambling occurred during their prison orientation. Many inmates indicated that as a preventative measure, it would be beneficial if the prisoners themselves participated in such instruction during orientation. As one inmate states, “They give you a handbook. You’d have to get inmates who are interested in helping if you wanted to help the younger guys. The system’s got to show an interest in the people, not just numbers.”

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our findings indicate that inmate gambling is a common, perhaps a *normative*, aspect of prison life as evidenced by the fact that inmates and corrections officers/staff members agree that over 50% of inmates gamble on a regular basis. In effect, inmate gambling is a frequent and widespread activity that often goes unchecked. Although gambling violates prison conduct codes and carries significant risks, it is enabled by a perceived climate of indifference. Current attempts by corrections officers and staff to control inmate gambling, if they occur at all, do not appear to be effective. Inmates share the perception that corrections officers will “look the other way” or will merely issue a warning if gambling is suspected. This perception of staff indifference functions to reinforce the problematic behavior, thus increasing the probability that inmates can and will gamble without facing consequences from corrections officers. Clearly, the need for ongoing staff training on recognition and response to inmate gambling is paramount.

We found no evidence that prison authorities monitor the acquisition of significant gambling wins or debts among inmates. This is a particular concern when gambling revenue is pooled in the context of organized sports betting. Deposits and withdrawals from prisoner accounts could be matched against legitimate expenditures in the prison commissary. Revenue patterns that do not seem consistent with appropriate expenditures should be viewed with suspicion and investigated accordingly.

In addition, family members and friends from the outside may unwittingly enable inmate gambling when money is placed in prisoner accounts for what are believed to be legitimate reasons. Depositors from the outside who place money in prisoner accounts should be informed and educated about the possibilities and dangers of inmate gambling. For example, insistent and emotionally charged requests from an inmate to family members for an immediate infusion of money could signify a debt problem that places him at

risk. In cases where an inmate is caught gambling, persons placing money into his account should receive notification.

Although it seems unlikely that prison officials will be able to eliminate all forms of inmate gambling, highly organized sports betting run by a few inmates deserves special attention. The consequences of generating sizable amounts of both illicit revenue and debt from this form of gambling should encourage prison officials to investigate further and to consider more effective deterrence practices. Inmates who accumulate substantial revenue from running gambling operations in prison may be transferring money out of the institution into the accounts of family and friends. They may also transfer money into the accounts of fellow prisoners for safe keeping. Even though institutions vary in how they manage and track prisoner accounts, revenue transfers should be monitored and given careful scrutiny.

We also encourage corrections officials to explore more carefully the *reasons* for inmate infractions that result in solitary confinement (i.e. “getting checked into the hole”) or requests for a transfer. As we have learned from the interviews, some inmates intentionally misbehave in order to avoid attacks from fellow prisoners because of acquired debts. In addition, prison officials should include information about the risks of inmate gambling in their new prisoner orientations. In this regard, prison officials may also wish to consider the helpful role trusted inmates could play in the orientation of new prisoners. Peer education in this instance is likely to be more effective because of the increased credibility inmates carry with fellow inmates about the hazards of prison life.

We also support the view that screening new inmates for problem gambling and criminal activity associated with gambling is valuable. Routine use of instruments such as the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) could help identify prisoners who enter the institution at elevated risk. Further, treatment programs for all addictions, including gambling, should be available to inmates. The importance of universal screening and treatment cannot be underestimated.

We can offer one final recommendation, though one that may be a difficult sell politically and economically. Enforcement of anti-gambling policies in prison, although beneficial, in isolation may have limited value. In conjunction with enforcement, we believe that expanding opportunities for education, recreation, and prisoner employment may significantly reduce rates of inmate gambling. It is noteworthy that inmates claimed they do not gamble during work and school, and would be less likely to gamble if there were more constructive activities available.

In conclusion, we believe a thorough review of prison policies, staff training, and system responses to inmate gambling is in order. To the extent that prisons constitute a predatory environment, undeterred inmate gambling can add significantly to this climate of threat and violence.

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