

Commentary on Williams (2013)

Response to the commentaries by Marotta, Plecas, and Turner

D. J. Williams

Idaho State University, Pocatello, Idaho, USA

My hope in writing the original article in this series – *Gambling in Jails and Prisons: Abstinence or Management?* – was to facilitate further exploration on an important but until fairly recently overlooked topic. Given that goal, I was delighted at the invitation of the editors to utilize the paper as the focus of this special debate series. I greatly appreciate this opportunity, and furthermore, I appreciate the thoughtful and well-informed commentaries of each of the authors in this series. In this final paper of the series, I will briefly address major points of our discussion on gambling in correctional facilities before responding to major concerns by my fellow authors about the possibility of allowing, to some degree, gambling inside correctional institutions.

We all seem to be in agreement, generally citing excellent research evidence (i.e., Turner, Preston, Saunders, McAvoy, & Jain; Williams, Royston, & Hagen, 2005), that relatively high percentages of offenders are at risk for problem gambling. Given this knowledge, we obviously should proceed carefully when considering gambling policies that directly impact offenders. In my original paper, I offered four suggestions for consideration regarding gambling in correctional settings. All authors seem to be in agreement with the first three points, specifically (a) promoting increased opportunities for healthy recreation and leisure, (b) efficiently screening offenders for gambling risk, and (c) providing appropriate resources to treat problem gambling among offenders. However, all three authors disagree, with reasonable explanation, with the fourth point of the original paper, which is for correctional institutions to examine and develop their own specific policies concerning whether or not to allow some forms of gambling in the correctional environment. Thus, I now will turn attention to these authors' primary concerns.

First, it should be emphasized that any consideration by correctional institutions regarding whether to allow some forms of gambling is inextricably connected with the first three recommendations. Specifically, it likely would be a major mistake to allow gambling inside facilities that do not provide an adequate range of healthy recreation and leisure opportunities, screening to assess risk, and access to treatment interventions.

Regarding permitting casual gambling to some degree, Plecas reported that in his professional experience as Independent Chairperson in Serious Court and hearing over 5,000 cases, he has dealt “no more than one dozen” that involved gambling in any form. Turner observed that allowing casual gambling to some degree is more or less the current situation. He added that a check of records in Ontario for institutional charges revealed none that were explicitly related to gambling, but that CPGI/PGSI scores are statistically correlated with other specific institutional charges. However, in institutions where some forms of casual gambling might be tolerated, individuals with high CPGI/PGSI scores could be screened and perhaps not allowed to gamble, or at least be monitored far more closely. Such screening would also identify inmates at high risk for problem gambling that are targeted by predatory gamblers, a further concern raised by Turner. By implementing screening, corrections professionals could better monitor those at risk for problems associated with gambling. Thus, it may be possible to still allow limited casual gambling while reducing gambling-related problems.

This brings us to a primary concern identified by Marotta. Marotta cited Steiner (2008) in emphasizing the importance of inmates’ perceptions of fairness and consistency in successfully managing the correctional environment. Indeed, the correctional milieu is a critical consideration in both the management of day-to-day inmate behavior, but also helping motivate offenders to engage in rehabilitation efforts that ultimately will help them to live crime-free upon their release. In order to successfully transition from incarceration back into the community, offenders must be aware of their own specific risks and learn to manage them effectively. Offenders differ, sometimes markedly, in their criminal histories and their risks for certain problematic behaviors. At the same time, the reality for offenders upon release is that gambling opportunities are widely available within mainstream society. Thus, while some offenders in moderate or minimum level correctional institutions may be correctly identified as being high risk and perhaps not allowed to gamble in correctional settings, a standard of fairness and consistency potentially can be met in the sense of accurately assessing risk and helping offenders recognize and manage their unique risks. This approach already exists with other classifications of offenders. Sex offenders and substance abusers, for example, often have specific restrictions based on risk and criminal history that other classifications of offenders do not have.

Furthermore, there remains therapeutic value in establishing an institutional climate of realness and openness between correctional professionals and offenders. The secrecy and inconsistency in which offender gambling is both prohibited and yet tolerated is problematic in an environment that attempts to be, at least to some degree, rehabilitative with a goal of ultimately reducing future crime.

Authors in this series, and I include myself here, seem to agree that there are instances where prison gambling is associated with violence, particularly violence directed at offenders who fail to pay their debts. Turner reminded us that many

offenders are not known for playing by the rules; similarly, Plecas warned that offenders may find ways of exploiting casual gambling that may be tolerated. These are legitimate concerns, but they continue to exist now even as gambling, in any form, is not sanctioned. Unfortunately, it is probably not possible to prevent all violence inside (or outside, for that matter) correctional settings. However, the important question here is whether there may be alternative solutions that could be more effective in reducing such harm.

Research on gambling in correctional settings is still in its infancy, which is why scholarly discussion is critical. Might increasing leisure opportunities, providing problem gambling screening and treatment resources, yet strategically allowing some forms of gambling help offenders manage their risks and reduce, to some degree, problems associated with gambling? We do not yet know. We need more research and diverse theoretical analysis. What might harm reduction theorists contribute to understanding this issue? What insights might critical criminologists provide? How might we approach this issue, and possible solutions, with a “discursive sensibility” as advocated by Strong (2011) in a recent issue of *Journal of Gambling Issues*? At present, we are left with questions, legitimate concerns and possibilities, but at least we are exploring the issue and asking important questions. For now, that is a good start.

References

- Strong, T. (2011). Approaching problem gambling with a discursive sensibility. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 25, 68–87.
- Turner, N.E., Preston, D.L., Saunders, C., McAvoy, S., & Jain, U. (2009). The relationship of problem gambling to criminal behaviour in a sample of Canadian male federal offenders. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 25, 153–169.
- Williams, R.J., Royston, J., & Hagen, B.F. (2005). Gambling and problem gambling within forensic populations: A review of the literature. *Criminal Justice and Criminal Behaviour*, 32, 665–689.
