

Commentary on Williams (2013)

Gambling in jails and prisons: a researcher's commentary

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In the paper *Gambling in Jails and Prisons: Abstinence or Management?* D. J. Williams examines the issue of problem gambling in the correctional system and makes a number of recommendations about the issue:

- (1) Increased opportunities to engage in a wide range of health-promoting leisure and recreational experiences should be available and strongly encouraged for offenders throughout their correctional experiences. Freely-chosen leisure experiences relieve stress, provide an important coping mechanism, and promote rehabilitation and successful transition into the community.
- (2) Because of relatively high rates of problem gambling among offender populations, correctional staff should provide some form of efficient screening for offenders entering the system.
- (3) Appropriate resources to treat problem gambling for offenders should be available within correctional institutions, and education directed toward the prevention of problem gambling should be offered.
- (4) Correctional institutions should develop their own specific policies, taking into account the above recommendations, concerning whether or not to allow limited forms of gambling within their institutions. Problem gambling rates among offenders seem to vary with location and demographic variables. Overall, correctional professionals should create an environment to help offenders learn to recognize and manage their own specific risks. In some institutions, policies that generally allow limited forms of recreational gambling may be reasonable (D. J. Williams, this volume).

In my own studies of this topic (Turner et al., 2009; Turner, et al., 2011) nearly 10% of offenders in the correctional system have a severe gambling problem and another 10% to 15% have a subclinical level of gambling problems. In a review of the literature Williams, Royston, and Hagen (2005) found that on average studies have found that 33% of offenders have some degree of gambling problems (moderate or severe).

In addition, Turner et al. (2011) found that gambling occurs frequently inside correctional institutions with as many as 40% of offenders participating in gambling. Moreover, half of those who suffered from gambling problems before incarceration continue to have gambling problems during incarceration. In our most recent study, (Turner et al., 2011) we found that problem gambling was most common in provincial offenders (12.5%). In federal prisons, gambling inside the institution was more common amongst offenders in maximum security and least common in minimum security. What is crucial is that in minimum security where the offenders are arguably freer to engage in some form of gambling, they appear to gamble the least. In contrast, gambling is much more common in the maximum security setting despite the higher level of security. This finding strengthens D. J. Williams' argument related to the importance of "health-promoting leisure and recreational experiences" to deal with problem gambling in prisons. Those offenders with more available leisure activities gambled less often.

I also strongly agree with his second and third points about the need for screening and education. It is likely that incarcerated problem gamblers will continue to struggle with gambling issues upon release. It is therefore important that professionals working within the correctional system become more aware of the potential for gambling problems at all stages of the correctional process (Williams, 2009). The larger numbers of problem gamblers in the correctional population means that affordable and accessible treatment options are needed within the correctional system for those who struggle with gambling problems (Williams, 2009). Another option that should be considered is a gambling court modeled after drug treatment court. Such a program has the potential of redirecting new offenders who engaged in crime to support their gambling problem away from the criminal justice and into mental health services. However, two major problems with this idea are the fact that many first time offenders with a gambling problem have engaged in theft well in excess of what is typically dealt with in a problem solving court setting, and second, there is no gambling equivalent to a urine screen that can verify compliance with the treatment and rehabilitation program.

The author's argument that gambling should be dealt with by education and treatment has substantial merit. I agree strongly with his assertion that "appropriate resources to treat problem gambling for offenders should be available within correctional institutions, and education directed toward the prevention of problem gambling should be offered." Currently, few offenders have an opportunity to participate in a gambling problem treatment group while in prison. The problem is that many offenders would not actually want another mandatory program – many would view that as an imposition of another hurdle to jump through before being released. It is likely that the same is true for those on probation. Even if they want treatment, it is likely that they would not want to be required to seek and attend treatment. Nonetheless, making services more readily available has the potential to reduce recidivism and decrease the cost of administering criminal justice.

We now turn to D. J. Williams' fourth and final recommendation which needs further consideration and research: "In some institutions, policies that generally allow limited forms of recreational gambling may be reasonable." He later elaborates that "it becomes necessary to consider whether or not casual gambling—contrasted with serious gambling—in prisons and jails should be permitted to some degree." Ironically, this is more or less the current situation. Although gambling is prohibited, gambling games are not interrupted as long as the offenders are not too obvious that they are gambling and it is peaceful. A check of the records in Ontario for institutional charges found no charges explicitly related to gambling suggesting that it is largely a tolerated activity. However, CPGI/PGSI scores while incarcerated were significantly correlated with several institutional charges including possession of contraband, $\rho = .33$, $p < .001$, disrespecting an officer, $\rho = .35$, $p < .001$, fights and assaults and aggressive behaviour, $\rho = .27$, $p < .001$, and possession of a weapon, $\rho = .25$, $p < .001$. CPGI/PGSI scores prior to incarceration were somewhat related to institutional charges, with the strongest association with fights, assaults, and aggressive behaviours, $\rho = .17$, $p < .05$, but that relationship was much weaker than with CPGI/PGSI scores during incarceration (Turner et al., 2013a; Turner et al., 2013b). None of the offenders were found to have been charged with gambling per se, but it is likely that some of the charges for fights or contraband may be a result of gambling. What is key here is that some of these offenders are not simply being charged with gambling, but with more serious behaviours that are definitely security issues.

The main benefit of allowing regulated gambling on site is that it could theoretically reduce the amount of illegal gambling engaged in by offenders. Four main problems with the idea of allowing regulated gambling on site are: first, is there any research that shows that legalizing gambling reduces illegal gambling? One also has to consider the population in question who are not known for playing by the rules. In addition, so much of offender gambling is carried out using an honour system that it would be difficult to ensure that the offenders using the legal gambling space were only engaged in casual gambling.

Second, some offenders see gambling in prison as a means of earning money that they can force another offender to then transfer (using external accounts) into his or her own account. According to one offender we interviewed, the offender's family can also benefit from his gambling by receiving gambling revenue while the inmate is in prison. As such, they are motivated to engage in serious gambling.

Third, according to Turner et al. (2009) nearly 10% of the offender population suffers from a severe gambling problem and another 15% has a subclinical level of problems. This means that a large percentage of the offenders who would engage in legal gambling in prison if it was available already have a gambling problem. However, currently only about half of the problem gamblers who are incarcerated continue to gamble in prison. This means that nearly half of those who suffer from a gambling problem prior to their sentence were able to quit gambling while

incarcerated. Allowing regulated gambling in prison may undermine the quit efforts of those in minimum security. Furthermore, Turner et al. (2011) found that the offenders most likely to quit are those in minimum security where recreational activities are more attainable.

Fourth, there are in fact a number of different types of gamblers. The first type is the problem gambler. A second type is the social recreational gambler who is not doing anyone any harm. The author's paper seems most clearly directed towards these first two types, providing therapy for the problem gambler and recreation for the social gambler. However there is a third, more predatory type of gambler who seeks out social and problem gamblers in order to take their money. Gambling games in prison are for the most part not random. Card games for example are only truly random if they are shuffled electronically. Even dice too are often weighted or just simply biased in the first place due to differences in weight or shape (e.g., if not perfectly square, the dice will favour some sides rather than others). The person who owns the dice likely knows the bias. It is likely that many means of cheating with cards and dice are practiced in the correctional setting. In addition, many private cards games such as various forms of poker, involve an element of skill. Sports games are a game of skill. Unlike commercially regulated casino games, most private gambling games are not truly random. Should we solve this problem by providing commercial games? We should keep in mind that the provision of recreational gambling to non-problem gamblers will likely not stop predatory gambling from occurring, and may increase its profitability by encouraging more gambling in prison.

So, in summary, I agree with the author that we need to become more aware of problem gambling in correctional facilities. In addition we need to provide offenders with more leisure activities, as well as treatment services and prevention education; however, I have serious doubt about the validity of his proposal to allow regulated gambling in the correctional system. A more effective way of reducing gambling would be to provide offenders with alternative leisure activities.

References

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