

Gambling with the Family?

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The dramatic rise in the availability of legal gambling in the U.S. over the past two decades has motivated a number of questions about its effects on families. There is convincing evidence that only a minority of gamblers develops problems, thus most families are affected only minimally by the gambling behaviors of their members. Yet, just as with any behavior that risks compulsion, the detrimental effects on a minority may lead to negative consequences not just for the individual, but also for family members and, more broadly, communities, thus increasing the overall negative impact substantially. In fact, a number of studies have demonstrated the harmful effects of problem gambling on family dynamics and child development. These effects include increased family stress, poor parenting, low marital satisfaction, heightened risk of marital disruption, financial problems, drug and alcohol abuse, health problems, and an increase in child behavioral and psychological problems.

Unfortunately, the current state of knowledge does not lend itself to an adequate understanding of gambling as an individual behavior, its potential role in family disruption and attenuated childrearing, and its broader implications for communities and how they affect and are affected by the well-being of families. This paper provides an overview of each of these issues, utilizing relevant data to illuminate important aspects of each, and attempts to bridge the micro-macro linkages that should be part of any comprehensive analysis of gambling's effects on families. It also points to shortcomings in our current level of understanding about these issues and provides suggestions for future research and thought about gambling and families.