

Problem Gambling and Crime

Presentation to the U.K. Commission on Crime & Problem Gambling

July 22, 2021

Dr. Robert Williams; University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

- Professor Robert Williams; clinical psychologist by training; professor of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge, in Alberta, Canada and Research Coordinator for the Alberta Gambling Research Institute.
- I research all aspects of gambling, with a particular focus on problem gambling. I have conducted three lines of research pertaining to the issue of crime and gambling:

1. Review of the prevalence of gambling and problem gambling within forensic populations.

- Up to 1/3 of criminal offenders meet criteria for problem gambling, the highest rate found in any population.
- Incarcerated problem gamblers report that approximately 50% of their crime was committed to support their gambling.
- Prevalence of gambling within correctional facilities (40%) is lower than found in the general population.
- Williams, R.J., Royston, J., & Hagen, B. (2005). Gambling and problem gambling within forensic populations: A review of the literature. *Criminal Justice & Behavior: An International Journal* 32 (6), 665-689. <https://www.uleth.ca/dspace/handle/10133/411>

2. Assisting in the development of a prevention and treatment program for problem gambling in the Lethbridge correctional system.

- These programs are exceedingly uncommon, but obviously needed.
- Initial program was developed in conjunction with the John Howard Society: Nixon, G., & Leigh, G. T. (2003). *Developing a gambling awareness and prevention program in prison populations*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Lethbridge.
- Currently on a Ph.D. committee for a student who is also a correctional officer in the Lethbridge Correctional Centre whose thesis is the revision, implementation, and evaluation of this original curriculum.

3a. Analysis of the social and economic impacts of introducing new forms of gambling into a specific jurisdiction (British Columbia, Alberta, Colorado, Massachusetts), that includes a specific examination of the impacts on crime.

- Four sources of data: a) self-reports of gambling-related crime among problem gamblers in population surveys; b) gambling-related crime in police incident reports; c) before/after changes in uniform crime statistics; d) offenses recorded by the provincial/state gaming enforcement branch.
- Gambling-related crime constitutes a very small percentage of all crime.
- Crime that is gambling related is more likely to be non-violent property crime, but does also include domestic violence, and alcohol-related violence.
- Increased legal gambling availability has significantly decreased rates of illegal gambling.
- In general, there has been a small overall net increase of legalized gambling on crime rates in these jurisdictions, and in the case of casinos this is partly due to the increased number of visitors to the area.
- Williams, R.J., Belanger, Y.D., & Arthur, J.N. (2011). *Gambling in Alberta: History, Current Status, and Socioeconomic Impacts*. Final Report for the Alberta Gaming Research Institute. April 2, 2011. <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/48495>

- Arthur, J.N., Williams, R.J., & Belanger, Y.D. (2014). The relationship between legal gambling and crime in Alberta. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 56 (1), 49-83.
- SEIGMA Research Team (2018). *Social and Economic Impacts of Expanded Gambling in Massachusetts:2018*. Amherst, MA: School of Public Health and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst. September 18, 2018. (Note: R.J. Williams was the lead author).
- Summit Economics & Williams, R.J. (2020). *Socioeconomic Impacts of Casino Introduction to Colorado*. Final Report for the Colorado Department of Local Affairs. April 2020.
- Blue Thorn Research, Population Health Promotion Associates, PFIA Corporation, & Williams, R.J. (2007). *Socioeconomic Impacts of New Gaming Venues in Four British Columbia Lower Mainland Communities: Final Report*. Report for the Gaming Policy and Enforcement Branch, Ministry of Public Safety & Solicitor General, Government of British Columbia. July 31, 2007. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/sports-recreation-arts-and-culture/gambling/gambling-in-bc/reports/rpt-rg-impact-study-final.pdf>

3b. Comprehensive analysis of all 492 socioeconomic impact analyses of legal gambling introduction that had been conducted up to 2011, including a specific analysis of the impacts on crime.

- The introduction of legal gambling should influence crime rates in one of several ways:
 - By decreasing the rate of illegal gambling, which tends to be a fairly reliable effect.
 - By increasing the number of problem gamblers, a small minority of which engage in crimes (primarily property crime) to support their gambling and some of whom develop relationship conflicts and domestic violence because of their gambling.
 - By creation of venues (casinos) that provide increased opportunities for illegal activity to occur (e.g., passing counterfeit money, money laundering, loan-sharking, cheating-at-play) and that attract a clientele with criminal tendencies.
 - By creation of additional alcohol-serving venues that contribute to alcohol-related offences (DUIs, assaults).
 - By increasing the overall number of visitors to the area.
- This impact is mediated by
 - How much prior exposure the population has had to gambling.
 - The magnitude of the increase in legal gambling availability.
 - The existence and strength of jurisdictional policies that protect against the negative impacts of gambling.
- The results are mixed, with most studies finding a small increase in crime, but other studies finding no increase.
- When there has been an increase, it is generally associated with casinos, property-related crimes, alcohol-related crimes (DUIs, fatal crashes, assaults), and money laundering.
- Williams, R.J., Rehm, J., & Stevens, R. (2011). *The Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling*. Final Report for the Canadian Consortium for Gambling Research. March 11, 2011. <https://opus.uleth.ca/handle/10133/1286>