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"Gambling: Socioeconomic Impacts and Public Policy"

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America now is a nation of gamblers. Until a decade ago, Las Vegas-style casino gambling was confined to Nevada and New Jersey, though most states had lotteries. In 1988, South Dakota voters authorized the once-notorious town of Deadwood to begin limited-stakes casino gambling. That same year, Congress effectively authorized casino gambling on Native American lands in some 31 states. The next year, Iowa legalized riverboat casinos on navigable waters; in 1990, Illinois followed suit. And so, as one of the contributors to this volume notes, "the dam was broken." In 1993, a survey found that, for the first time, more than half of American adults had gambled in casinos. Today, 48 states have some sort of legalized gambling (the holdouts are Utah and Hawaii); 37 states and the District of Columbia operate lotteries, and 25 states have riverboat casinos, Las Vegas-style casinos, Indian gambling, or video poker.

Scholars have lagged behind these dramatic developments, leaving research on the socio-economic impact of gambling rather thin. But that may be changing. This volume, edited by James H. Frey, a sociologist at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, contains a baker's dozen of essays on various aspects of the subject. In addition, the \$4.5 million National Gambling Impact Study Commission, created by Congress two years ago, is due to make its report by mid-1999.

Americans in 1996 wagered a record \$47.6 billion, including \$19.1 billion at casinos, \$16.2 billion on lotteries, \$5.4 billion at Indian reservations, and \$3.2 billion on horse racing. The gambling industry (or "gaming" or "gaming entertainment" industry, as it prefers to be called) touts the yield to the states from the lotteries (\$13.8 billion in 1996) and other tangible benefits, including the roughly 460,000 jobs provided by the casino and pari-mutuel horse racing and breeding businesses. Not to mention the intangible enjoyment given to millions of customers. But there is a negative side.

Casinos seem to increase the number of compulsive gamblers, who squander sums they and their families can ill afford to lose and sometimes turn to crime to sustain their habit. Among Americans "exposed to commercial games," writes Eugene Martin Christiansen, a private consultant, the proportion who become compulsive gamblers appears to range from 1.7 percent (in Iowa in 1989) to 7.3 percent (in New York in 1995). Though relatively few in number, compulsive gamblers "account for anywhere from 23 to 41 percent of gaming revenues," says Henry R. Lesieur, president of the Institute for Problem Gambling, citing surveys done in four states and three Canadian provinces.

Many analysts have linked legalized gambling, particularly casino gambling, with increased street crime. Ohio University sociologists William J. Miller and Martin D. Schwartz challenge the logic of these studies, pointing out that they often cite per capita crime rates based on the size of the local population, ignoring the fact that the population is swollen by an influx of visitors. Yes, gambling increases "the raw amount of crime, which will mean more work for police, more court sessions, and more filled jail cells." But "casino gambling may not increase crime more than tourism does," they say.

Another contributor, John Warren Kindt, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, worries about the growing clout of the gambling industry in many state legislatures. "In Illinois, for example, one casino company offered \$20 million to two political insiders to help secure a casino license." Kindt also says that industry lobbyists succeeded in getting Congress to limit the power of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission. It can subpoena only documents, not people. "Even so," he expects, the commission "may still reveal some unflattering problems with U.S. legalized gambling, such as increased crime and corruption."