

Rolling the Dice on our Children

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, July 23, 2003

Children are following adults into a gambling abyss.

The rise in teen-age gambling is one of the more damaging social costs of this seemingly innocuous American pastime. Millions of American teens are illegally buying lottery tickets, playing cards for cash, or betting online. What starts small can mushroom into an addiction. In fact, experts say children are at greater risk than adults of developing a lifelong gambling problem.

The number of U.S. and Canadian teens aged 12 to 17 with a gambling dependency has shot up 50% in a decade, according to the National Council on Problem Gambling. The majority of American 12-year olds have taken a first step down that path. It may seem like no big deal when Grandma and Grandpa take a bus with their friends to a casino resort and play the slot machines or blackjack table. But adults are role models, and the kids are watching.

Even America's self-appointed czar of virtue, William Bennett, was exposed in May as a compulsive gambler. The former director of drug policy under the first Bush administration lost a staggering eight million dollars in Vegas casinos. In his 1993 *The Book of Virtues*, Bennett writes of the "personal distress in the world because of failures to control...passions, and impulse. 'Oh, if only I had stopped myself is [a] familiar refrain.'" Bennett should know.

Eleven million Americans in 48 states (Utah and Hawaii are the only holdouts) are tossing their hard-earned cash into the whopping \$26 billion casino ring. State governments pocket another \$20 billion per year. In a moral twist, what was once a prohibited and illegal activity is now touted as a fund-raising panacea for bankrupt cities and towns. State lotteries are promoted as easy sources of money-in lieu of taxes-to clean up the environment, expand elder services, or improve education.

Does gambling really reap the financial rewards its proponents promise? Granted, there's initial construction and employment at casino resorts; but local crime rates rise, and nearby property values plummet. It gets worse. Regional economies spend more than a dollar for every dollar they take in,

according to research referenced in the Boston Business Journal. Budget deficits in Connecticut and New Jersey, which both have casinos, forced the states to lay off thousands of employees. Louisiana had to cut gambling taxes in half after casinos threatened to leave because profits were too low.

As a sign of gambling's false promise, states such as Maryland and Illinois are resisting industry demands to expand-for now. But casinos, slot machines, and lotteries are sitting in the shadow of a looming monster: Internet gambling. In 1995, there was only one online gambling Web site; today, there are about 1800 sites. As concern grows over online betting, lobbyists are protesting legislated restrictions. They're calling for "Internet Freedom," as if online gambling is an inalienable right.

Internet gamblers are the most at risk for addiction, according to a study by the University of Connecticut Health Center. Some 74% of those with gambling problems bet online; they were more likely to be younger and single, seeking an anonymous thrill.

It's no surprise that high-risk behavior comes with the territory. Children lie, cheat, and steal to feed their addiction and pay off major losses. In one criminal case, a student told police he'd lost \$20,000 to a 17-year-old student bookie. Dave D'Alessandro, CEO of John Hancock Financial Services, describes watching his father being frisked by sleazy loan sharks angry over late payments. "We lost our grocery store, our apartment, our friends, and our dignity."

Gambling takes from the poor, and gives to a select few. The odds of winning are low, but the temptation is high. Underneath the addiction: loneliness, depression, and low self-esteem. For some it's an escape, a buzz, while for others, it's a way to cope with a parent's divorce, or the death of a loved one.

Today's children are the first to be raised at a time when gambling is considered socially acceptable. If we don't teach them about the dangers, we risk bringing up a generation of gambling addicts.

Do I sound like a prude? Maybe prudent. Most parents are wary of drinking and drug abuse. But young gamblers often end up abusing alcohol and drugs and falling in with a criminal crowd.

It's time to stop treating our kids' futures like dice in a crap shoot. We need hard-hitting educational programs, federal controls on Internet betting, and limits on legal gaming. We've got a lot riding on the outcome.