

The Legalization of Gambling: A Question of Friend or Foe?

“Gambling: Risking something of value on an outcome of an event when the possibility of winning is less than certain.” (Korn & Shaffer, 1999)

There is evidence that it existed during Ancient times; while under the rule of Caesar, the Romans participated in it; in our day and age, we are surrounded by it. Gambling has become an accepted reality of society (France, 1902). Playing the weekly lottery, betting on horses at the track, and dabbing one’s bingo card at the community hall are just a few of the many forms of gambling. Although it is considered to be a harmless hobby to some people, it is an illness to others. Despite the studies that indicate that gambling can have negative effects on the family, health sector, and the law and enforcement system, it is the attractive revenue that gambling provides to governments, the influx of tourism it can bring to a city, or the notion of the state taking control away from the underworld that help to reveal that the benefits of the legalization of gambling are greater than the costs.

The most prominent argument as to why the legalization of gambling has been so popular is the enormous revenue it generates for governments. With a venture that grosses over fifty billion a year, many governments view gambling as an attractive way of bringing in money to the state (PBS, n.d.). In a Canadian study by Vaillancourt and Roy in the year 2000, the authors stated that the prohibition of gambling would result in a tax increase between ten and fifteen per cent to replace gambling revenues (as cited in Azmier, 2000). Given the fact that eighty-two per cent of Canadian households in 1996 took part in some form of gambling, taking this activity away followed by increasing taxes would not resonate well with the public (Basham & White, 2002). Such a high percentage of people gambling illustrate how the popularity of legalized gambling can attract people to cities, therefore providing a boost to the city’s tourism industry, another sector that welcomes this source of revenue.

Cities where gambling is legal are considered to be great tourist attractions. When a casino opens, an influx of money enters the community’s economy because of the number of tourists. Las Vegas is a testament to how tourists’ dollars are capable of transforming a barren desert into a highly desired destination. The increase in the number of tourists results in an increase in spending in the community, thereby providing opportunity for employment and a boost to the hospitality industry. One of the reasons why many people have become willing to try to gamble is because the majority of people no longer view the act as a sinful and dirty vice provided by the corrupt underworld (Govoni, Frisch, & Getty, 1998).

The legalization of gambling has allowed the state to take the control away from the underworld. This has weakened the power of embezzlers, forgers, confidence men, and armed robbers, all of whom use gambling as an arena for their work (Peterson, 1949). Although placing bets illegally through book keepers continues to exist, it is important to realize that prior to its legalization, those in control of gambling “completely dominated the underworld” (Peterson, 1949). While it appears that the legalization of gambling has provided society with positive results, one must also recognize the negative effects that it has had on the family, health sector, and the area of law and enforcement.

When analyzing the cost-benefit effects of the legalization of gambling, one should also examine the family. One problem is that gambling has provided everyone with an opportunity to take part in an act that can potentially ruin people’s lives and the lives of those closest to them. There is evidence that gambling can have negative effects on one’s spouse, children, friends, life at work, school, and

community, all of which can take a toll on the family (Basham & White, 2002). In 1991, an analysis on the Florida lottery discovered that a greater portion of the revenue generated through the lottery came from low-income families who, “purchased lottery tickets in place of utilities” (Abbott & Cramer, 1993). The growing attraction between children and gambling has resulted in a number of studies. Researchers have revealed that adolescents who get involved in gambling have a higher rate in school failure, family conflict, sexual activity, psychiatric disorders, and delinquency (Korn & Shaffer, 1999). Given the problems in this area, parents and schools should assume a greater responsibility in educating children of the potential dangers of gambling.

It is important to recognize the correlation between gambling and a number of negative behaviors. Studies have proven that alcoholism and depression are related, and in a report by Taber, Russo, and Adkins, the authors discovered that approximately forty-four per cent of pathological gamblers are problem drinkers (Korn & Shaffer, 1999). These studies similarly suggest that spouses of pathological gamblers also have a high rate of depression and psychosomatic disorders (Korn & Shaffer, 1999). In a country such as Canada, where there is universal healthcare, researchers argue that all of these negative effects of gambling place a strain on the health sector.

Just as it has been the government’s decision to legalize gambling, it has become the government’s responsibility to develop and fund treatment programs for illnesses caused by gambling (Azmier, 2000). In 1993, the Canadian Public Health Association recognized gambling as a public health issue (Azmier, 2000). Understanding that pathological gamblers do require help from the health system, it is important to recognize that only a minority of gamblers have problems (Basham & White, 2002). Therefore, the argument of those opposing the legalization of gambling on the rationale that it takes its toll on our health care system does not carry much weight, as the strain on the health sector is minimal.

The law and enforcement system are another area of concern for opponents of the legalization of gambling. This is because many people who have become in debt due to gambling resort to committing crimes in order to help with their finances (PBS, n.d.). This in turn brings police into the equation, followed by the judicial system should there be a trial. Once again, this argument is not a strong one, as the percentage of people who gamble to the point where they are forced to commit crimes is very low (PBS, n.d.).

Legalized gambling has provided governments with a great source of revenue, it has helped to provide a tourist attraction to many cities, and it has provided a safer environment for people who enjoy gambling. One cannot dismiss the potential dangers of gambling; however, one must always accept the responsibility for their actions. Family members, school systems, and any business profiting from the gambling industry should do their part in helping to ensure that gambling is regarded as an exciting social outing, a thrilling activity, or in the case of the purchaser of a weekly one-dollar lottery ticket, a fun hobby.