

A new addiction is sweeping Indian Country

Notes from Indian Country

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Tim Giago (Nanwica Kciji) 8/1/2005

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According to a recent article in Newsweek Magazine there are 247 Indian owned casinos, 84 riverboat or dockside casinos and there is some form of legalized gambling in 48 states. And this doesn't count the Internet.

Nine years ago (1996) the U. S. gambling industry took in more than \$47 billion. Seven years later (2003) that figure jumped to \$72 billion. All of that money is coming from somebody's pocket and that pocket has to belong to the losers. In other words, gamblers lost \$72 billion in 2003.

During a 2001 study at the Harvard Medical School doctors monitored the brain waves of gaming subjects and determined that the same brain areas lighted up as those who used drugs and alcohol for pleasure. "This put gambling on the map with other neurobiologic addictions," said Dr. Barry Kosofsky, a pediatric neurologist at Weill Cornell Center in New York City.

In South Dakota we have seen the arrests of several respectable, middle-aged, white women for embezzling money from the firms where they worked in order to support their gaming addiction. This is also happening on Indian reservations across America. Of course, in South Dakota gambling is legal in small casinos in nearly every community in the state.

This addiction to gambling has not caused the big splash in Indian country yet, but that splash is coming. If you doubt me just visit any Indian casino on any Indian reservation in this country and you will see many tribal members ensconced at the gaming tables and slot machines in their own casinos.

This gambling addiction is already contributing to many new social problems in Indian country. Adults are spending their per capita payments, and their welfare and paychecks at the gaming tables. They are losing the money they should have used to buy school clothes for their children, to pay their rent or mortgage or to buy food to put on their tables. They are abandoning their children to babysitters or worse, leaving them at home alone, while they feed their gambling addiction at their reservation casinos.

Although the casinos have turned out to be the goose that laid the golden egg to many heretofore poverty stricken tribes, their very success has created a new generation of gambling addicts. It is a shame to see the casinos grow at the expense of tribal members.

Those dedicated groups and organizations on the Indian reservations that have so successfully fought alcoholism and drug addiction now have a new battle on their hands.

Do you have a gambling problem? Newsweek had this simple question and answer problem to determine if you do or do not. If you can answer yes to any of these questions, it may be time to seek help.

Has gambling made your home life unhappy?

Has gambling got in the way of your work or school?

Have you lost sleep thinking about gambling?

Have you gambled with income or savings while bills went unpaid?

Have you made unsuccessful attempts to quit gambling?

Have you borrowed to finance your gambling?

Have you considered breaking the law to pay for your gambling?

Have you felt depressed or suicidal because of your gambling?

Have you gambled to get money to meet your financial obligations?

Have you lied about your gambling?

When you're angry or disappointed do you turn to gambling to feel better?

A study just released shows that compulsive gamblers, drinkers and drug users have high underlying levels of negative emotionality, a syndrome that includes nervousness, anger and a tendency to worry and feel victimized. On many Indian reservations many of these symptoms were already problematic. They seem to go with the territory.

There is a division of wealth spread about to many tribal members through per capita payments made to them by the profits from their casinos. While some use these stipends wisely, many others put them right back into the casinos.

On some Indian reservations programs that have served the previously impoverished tribal members for years, programs such as the Commodity Food Program, have been closed because few tribal members were using the service anymore.

On other reservations more and more tribal members are showing up at the free medical clinics, paid for by the tribal casinos, with anxiety related illnesses. Charitable organizations and churches located on very poor Indian reservations are having a hard

time raising money because the general public falsely believes that all Indian tribes are simply rolling in money from their casinos and no longer need their assistance.

If I paint a bleak picture of this new wealth in Indian country I am only reporting on what I see out there. Easy money can also bring a myriad of easy problems and the addictions to gambling are becoming as pronounced as those once held by alcoholism and drugs.

Let me suffice to say that the only entity making money in the gaming industry is the casinos. And as any hardcore gambler will tell you, “The only way to be sure you come out ahead is to buy the casino.”

(Tim Giago is the founder and former editor and publisher of the Lakota Times, Indian Country Today, and the Lakota, Dakota and Pueblo Journals. He can be reached at najournalists@rushmore.com or by writing him at Native American Journalists Foundation, Inc., 2050 West Main St., Suite 5, Rapid City, SD 57702)

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