

BETTING SHOPS AND CRIME: IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP?

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Abstract

Gambling and its link with criminal activity is an area of growing research interest. Studies from various regions worldwide have suggested an association between criminal activity and easily accessible gambling, yet, despite growth in the commercial gambling industry, relatively little is known about the nature, extent or impact of gambling-related crime. Such information is critical in the current UK climate as some gambling establishments (particularly betting shops) are prevented from getting operating licenses on the basis of police objections that they are likely to become 'crime hotspots'. Therefore, this paper briefly overviews to what extent betting shops cause, facilitate, or attract crime. It is concluded that only two types of betting shops can realistically be associated with crime arising from problem gamblers who use their premises and with criminal behaviour occurring within or in the immediate environment of the premises itself.

Although a few studies have shown associations between gambling and crime there is no empirical evidence showing that gambling venues (including betting shops) cause crime. Most of the empirical evidence concerning the relationship between crime and gambling concerns the criminal consequences of problem gambling (including those 'addicted' to gambling). In order to be a cause of crime, betting shops must be both a necessary and sufficient condition for the crimes in question to occur. This paper finds that they are neither.

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Betting shops and crime: Is there a relationship?

Addictive behaviour and its link with criminal activity has long been an area of research interest (e.g., alcohol, and to a lesser extent narcotic drug use). More recently, the same arguments have been used in relation to links between crime and problem gambling addiction. For instance, studies from various regions worldwide suggest an association between criminal activity and easily accessible gambling, yet, despite growth in the commercial gambling industry, relatively little is known about the nature, extent or impact of gambling-related crime. Such information is critical in the current UK climate as some gambling establishments (particularly betting shops) are prevented from getting operating licenses on the basis of police objections to them being potential ‘crime hotspots’¹. Therefore, this paper briefly overviews to what extent betting shops cause crime.

Gambling and crime: A brief overview

Much of the focus on gambling-related crime tends to be upon problem gamblers (known more colloquially as ‘gambling addicts’). Problem gamblers tend to be individuals who are chronically and progressively unable to resist impulses to gamble and that their gambling compromises, disrupts or damages family, personal, and vocational pursuits. The behaviour increases under times of stress and associated features include lying to obtain money, committing crimes (e.g. forgery, embezzlement, fraud etc.), and concealment from others of the extent of the individual's gambling activities (Griffiths, 2006). Criminal behaviour is most commonly associated with problem gamblers because problem gamblers spend more than their disposable income and often have to resort to criminal activity as a way of getting money to carry on gambling and repay associated debt problems.

Law enforcement officials claim that gambling expansion inevitably leads to “an increase in enterprise crime and money laundering activity particularly relating to casinos...and an increase in illegal activities such as loan sharking, extortion and frauds” (Proke, 1994; p 61). Public opinion polls also tend to reflect a general perception that a correlation exists between widely available gambling and crime. For instance, a Canadian study by Azmier (2000) found that 64% of participants agreed that gambling expansion leads to an increase in crime.

Gambling-related crime tends to relate to four distinct types (Smith, Wynne & Hartnagel, 2003). These are:

- *Illegal gambling* – Gambling activity that is counter to jurisdictional regulations statutes, such as operating without a gambling license, cheating at play, etc.;
- *Criminogenic problem gambling* – Activities such as forgery, embezzlement, and fraud, typically committed by problem gamblers to support a gambling addiction;
- *Gambling venue crime* – Crimes that occur in and around gambling locations, such as loan sharking, money laundering, passing counterfeit currency, theft, assault, prostitution and vandalism;
- *Family abuse* – Victimization of family members caused by another family member's gambling involvement, (e.g., domestic violence, child neglect, suicide, and home invasion).

For the purposes of this paper, only the two of categories of most major importance in relation to betting shop crime, namely criminogenic problem gambling and gambling venue crime will be examined.

Problem gambling-related crime

A major social and economic impact of problem gambling is illegal acts committed to obtain money to gamble or pay gambling-related debts (Griffiths, 2006). Most of the information that associates problem gambling with crime tends to be anecdotal and arises from clinical, welfare, and judicial sources (Smith, Wynne & Hartnagel, 2003). However, there is an increasing body of empirical literature.

According to Smith, Wynne and Hartnagel (2003), two different views emerge regarding crime-related problem gambling. Firstly, data from general population surveys show only a modest association between problem gambling severity and engagement in criminal acts. Secondly, data from Gamblers Anonymous (GA) members, problem gamblers in treatment, and incarcerated populations indicate a much greater association between the two behaviours. When crime and gambling questions are asked in national studies, a number of them have consistently shown that a small but significant minority of respondents get into criminal trouble because of their gambling (Wynne Resources, 1998; Smith & Wynne, 2002) ; whereas surveys specifically sampling problem gamblers show very high rates of reported involvement in crime (e.g., Blaszczyński, McConaghy, & Francova, 1989; Ladouceur, Boisvert, Pepin, Loranger, & Sylvain, 1994; Lorenz & Politzer, 1990; Polzin *et al.*, 1998; Meyer & Stadler, 1999). Research amongst those arrested for various crimes have also shown that problem gamblers are approximately three to four times more likely to commit crime than those arrestees who do not gamble (McCorkle, 2002).

Problem gambling-related crimes vary between those in treatment and those in prison (Smith, Wynne and Hartnagel, 2003). Problem gamblers undergoing treatment typically report engaging in “white collar” crimes that tend to involve a breach of trust. Problem gamblers in prison are more likely to include those guilty of committing street crimes such as burglary, robbery, pimping, prostitution, selling drugs, and fencing stolen goods (Rosenthal & Lesieur, 1996). Furthermore, some authors believe that crime is unlikely to cause gambling, whereas out-of-control gambling may well lead to crime (Brown, 1987; Dodes, 2002).

The Australian-based Productivity Commission Report (1999) provides a comprehensive overview of various aspects of the association between problem gambling and crime by examining the following questions: (i) why do some problem gamblers turn to crime? (ii) what proportion of problem gamblers commit offences? (iii) what crimes do problem gamblers commit? (iv) what happens to convicted problem gamblers? (v) what is the connection between problem gambling and loan sharks?

- *Why do some problem gamblers turn to crime?* Generally, because they experience the following sequence of events: asset losses; accumulating debts; exhausting legal means of obtaining funds including drawing on savings and retirement funds; borrowing from family

and friends; cash advances on credit cards; and loans from financial institutions or “loan sharks” - until committing a crime becomes their only option.

- *What proportion of problem gamblers commit offences?* This depends on the sample of problem gamblers. There are different rates for the general population, prison inmates, those in treatment, and GA members – the rates range from a low of 11% for those in population surveys to a high of 66% among GA members.
- *What crimes do problem gamblers commit?* They range from minor to serious crimes but are more likely to be non-violent property or breach of trust crimes such as forgery or embezzlement, versus violent crimes such as assault and armed robbery.
- *What happens to convicted problem gamblers?* It depends on the crime being committed. Sentences tend to be more lenient for white-collar crimes than for armed robbery and drug-related offences even though the money amounts are often much higher in the former.
- *What is the connection between problem gambling and loan sharks?* Although the evidence is anecdotal, loan sharking is widespread in casinos. Problem gamblers who use loan sharks generally exacerbate their troubles because debts are magnified, as is the stress from worrying about not being able to repay the loan.

The American National Gambling Impact Study (1999) examined the possible causal relationship between problem gambling and criminal behaviour and indicates that among those who have not gambled in the past year, only 7% have ever been in prison. In contrast, three times as many individuals who have been problem gamblers at any point during their lifetime (21%) have been incarcerated. Despite all of these findings, almost none relate specifically to problem gamblers who frequent betting shops.

In the UK, there is now a growing literature suggesting a relationship between problem gambling in adolescence and criminal behaviour (Griffiths, 1995; 2002) and that a small proportion of children and adolescents who gamble excessively on slot machines may steal and commit other criminal offences to fund their habit. There is also some retrospective evidence indicating that some of these individuals end up coming to the attention of the police and the law courts (Griffiths & Sparrow, 1998). One measure of commitment to a given activity is the proportion of resources that an individual puts into it. With respect to slot machine gambling, time and money are the two most salient resources. Several of the most recent British national surveys all report that slot machines are the most popular form of commercial gambling among adolescents with 9% of 8,598 adolescent participants having played these machines in the past week (down from 17% in 2006; MORI/International Gaming Research Unit, 2006; Ipsos MORI, 2009). Although frequency in itself does not automatically imply negative consequences, when taken together with the research into expenditure, the consequences do appear to be more negative.

Empirical evidence has shown that even short playing times can lead to relatively large losses - at least for the typical child or adolescent (Griffiths, 1995). Many studies summarized in overviews by Griffiths (1995; 2002; 2003; 2008) have found a strong correlation between the amount spent during a typical visit and the frequency with which children and adolescents gambled. Some research has indicated that nearly 20% of child gamblers spend more than £10 per gambling session. This latter statistic means that some schoolchildren (albeit a small minority) are spending at least £40 a week on gambling. It is very unlikely that these individuals have such a disposable income a week, which leads to the conclusion that they acquire the

money through less acceptable means. Possible sources of money beyond pocket money or part-time job money include borrowing money, using money that was for other purposes (e.g. lunch money, fare money etc.) and stealing money.

Stealing to play slot machines has regularly been reported by a number of authors and is again correlated with frequency of play (Griffiths, 2002). Some may distinguish between stealing from home and stealing from outside the home. Evidence indicates that stealing from home occurs more often than stealing from outside the home (Griffiths, 1995). Strangely, whether this distinction is made or seen as useful appears to be idiosyncratic. For example, an old study by the Home Office (1988) asserted that stealing from the home is not as morally wrong as stealing from elsewhere. However, it could be argued that stealing from home is no less serious than stealing from other sources and it could further be argued that the higher figure for stealing from home is a consequence and function of opportunity and proximity.

Although there is growing evidence that children and adolescents who gamble excessively on slot machines may engage in non-violent theft and other criminal offences, such as fraud and robbery, to fund their habit, there has been little evidence from the legal professions themselves. A study by Yeoman and Griffiths (1996) attempted to establish a relationship between criminal activity (most notably theft) and gaming machine use. The survey was undertaken in Plymouth by police officers dealing with juveniles when they first came to notice. The police filled out *Juvenile Forms* which recorded the details of the juveniles and their families, the circumstances of the case and other additional information affecting the child, the family or other factors giving cause for concern. On the same form information was sought ascertaining the adolescent gambling problem.

A total of 1851 *Juvenile Forms* were collected within a one-year period. Of these, 72 cases (3.9%) were identified as having some association between the offence recorded and slot machine gambling. Of the 72 juveniles, 67 were male (age range 8 to 16 years old) and 5 were female (age range 13 to 16 years old). Of the 72 cases, 62 of them (86%) involved theft or burglary, five of them (7%) involved missing persons, four of them involved criminal damage (5.5%) and there was one case of a domestic dispute. The number of first time offenders (n = 27) accounted for 38% of the cases. To put the findings of this survey into perspective it has to be realised that there are over 20,000 adolescents in Plymouth aged 10 to 17 years of age who could potentially commit a crime. However, it is probably fair to assume that a vast majority (a) do not commit crimes that come to the notice of the police and (b) do not engage in regular gaming machine use. Therefore it can be concluded that the vast majority of adolescents do not need to commit crimes to fund any kind of gaming machine behaviour.

The fact that approximately 4% of juvenile crime was associated with slot machine gambling is evidence that a minority of individuals commit crimes in order to 'feed such an addiction'. It should also be further emphasised that the cases outlined in the Plymouth survey are those that actually reached the stage where police were involved. It is quite possible - and indeed probable - that there are many other instances of crime related to machine use that either does not get reported or that blame is attached elsewhere (e.g., a drug problem). It seems reasonable to speculate that many parents may be able to cope financially with their child's stealing problem, or have such a strong parental response that the problem is not even acknowledged, and that only

those who find the pressure too much, or who do something to attract attention, are those who come to the attention of the police.

In respect to betting shops, there is no evidence that adolescents frequent betting shops especially as almost all commercial gambling activity that they engage in is at amusement arcades, family leisure centres, and single site premises that house one or two slot machines (e.g., cafes, chip shops) where they are legally allowed to play. In fact, the majority of bookmakers adopt an 'Under 21' photographic identity control (i.e., anyone who the bookmakers consider to be under 21 years of age is asked to prove their age through photographic identification).

Gambling venue crime

There are many crime-related behaviours that can occur on, or in the immediate vicinity of, gambling venue premises such as betting shops. Smith, Wynne and Hartnagel (2003) outlined the five most common types of crime that occur at gambling venues (mostly casino-based but instances can – and do- occur in betting shops). These are:

- *Fraud*: Examples of this include counterfeit currency, fake credit or ID cards, and meal by fraud.
- *Theft*: Examples of this include purse snatching, removal of cash from slot machines, employee theft (e.g., cash, chips, materials), car break-ins, and winning players being robbed in the washroom or parking lot.
- *Rowdiness, creating a public disturbance, assault*: Examples include fights between patrons or patrons and staff, intoxicated or drugged individuals who disturb other players and/or interrupt the smooth flow of the games, spousal disputes, vandalism, vagrancy, loitering and pandering.
- *Cheating at play*: Examples include player/dealer conspiracies (use of marked cards, overpayment of a winning hand), and pressing and pinching bets (adding or subtracting chips from a bet based on the dealer's up card).
- *Other Criminal Activities*: Examples include prostitution, drug trafficking, money laundering, loan sharking, bookmaking, and child neglect.

On the whole there is very little empirical data collected for academic research purposes for these types of activity although there are occasional studies giving empirical evidence in some of these areas. For instance, Griffiths and Hopkins (2001) overviewed the evidence of betting-shop related violence. They reported that it is evident that no workplace is immune from the threat of abuse and violence. However, it does appear that some work groups are more "at risk" than others. For instance, various authors (e.g. Poyner & Warne, 1986; Budd, 1998) have listed groups at risk from assault include the police, prison officers, security services, social workers, nurses, care workers, teachers, postmen, retail sales staff, public transport, banking staff, building society staff, post office staff, catering and those that work in public houses. Further to this, Farnsworth, Leather and Cox (1990) assert that the types of job that are now threatened go far beyond society's traditional view of those that might be involved. One such workplace could potentially be that of betting shops.

Like many premises in the alcohol licensing trade, it would appear that betting shops also have the potential to generate incidents of violence. In a betting shop environment, any number of different contexts may trigger a potentially violent incident. These may include in-fighting within a group over disputed bets, drink-related violence, and violence generated by frustration over losing a large amount of money on a bet. Abuse and violence in the workplace can take many different forms from verbal assault, psychological threat, and physical attacks (from minor scuffles through to bodily harm). Further to this, employees who work in occupations where they are continually under the threat of verbal or physical assault will often suffer more psychological stress, i.e., there is a chronic experience of stress associated with being 'at risk' (Farnsworth et al, 1990). There are also other costs as the experience of violence affects both employees' families and other customers. In the longer term, betting shops may experience an increase in staff turnover particularly if the place has a 'reputation' as being abusive and/or violent, which in turn may affect profits.

In research looking at the causes of pub violence (e.g. Farnsworth et al, 1990; Leather & Lawrence, 1995; Beale, Cox, Clarke, Lawrence & Leather, 1998), a number of factors have been isolated as contributing to violent episodes. These may be applicable to the betting shop environment.

- The type of punter (e.g., blue collar/manual customer groups are more violent than white collar; 'regular' customers are less violent than passing trade)
- The nature of the betting shop (e.g., allowing the decor to deteriorate sends out the wrong message to punters)
- The behaviour of the staff (e.g., staff themselves may facilitate violent incidents if they themselves have had a drink or are incapable of handling disputes)
- The nature of the overall organization (e.g., the potential conflict between control over sales and pressure to return high profits)
- Other factors (e.g., punters drinking too much alcohol)

It is also worth noting that positive social pressure (e.g. in the form of regulars and women being present) may act as a moderator for violence. Of all the surveys considering crimes against business in the UK, none have specifically considered abuse and violence in betting shops. Two major national surveys have considered crimes against businesses. These are the British Retail Consortium (BRC) surveys and the Commercial Victimization. These surveys measure crime through head offices of business and have coverage of around 44,000 outlets per year (Griffiths & Hopkins, 2001). However, the BRC survey only considers crime against retailers. This sector is broken down into business types (such as off-licences, DIY shops etc.) with betting shops being covered in the 'other' business types section. Therefore this survey hides the extent of any crime associated with betting shops in this 'other' business category.

The Commercial Victimization Survey is another major national survey to consider crimes against businesses. This covers around 3,000 retail and manufacturing premises. Betting shops are covered by the survey but the extent of crimes against them is also hidden as they are covered under the general category of 'retailers' thus making it impossible to establish the extent of crime associated with them (Griffiths & Hopkins, 2001). Again, it needs to be stressed that associations in this context in no way imply causation.

There have also been some smaller 'localised' surveys of crimes against businesses. The largest two surveys that I am aware of were the Small Business and Crime Initiative surveys conducted in the Belgrave and West End areas of Leicester in September 1995 and 1997 (Griffiths & Hopkins, 2001). The total sample of businesses interviewed was 894 in 1995 and 965 in 1997. Eleven of these were betting shops (four in 1995 and seven in 1997). Though this sample is small, it perhaps gives us some indication as to the rate of victimization of those working in betting shops. In Phase 1 of the survey three out of four betting shops experienced at least one incident of abuse and at least one incident of violence. On average, a victim experienced two incidents per year, which is lower than business types such as pubs and hotels. These statistics give us an approximation as to the risks of abuse and violence for people working in betting shops. However, the data tell us little about how incidents are actually triggered and the number of betting shops (n=11) is too low to reach any conclusion.

It is apparent that more data are required here on both the national and local level. Both the BRC and CVS do not measure abuse and violence against people who work in betting shops, and data at the local level are limited. One other potential data source is from the head offices of betting shops but that data (to the author's knowledge) has never been collected and/or made public.

What can betting shops do to reduce crime within venue?

There are many different ways in which within venue crime (particularly the problem of violence and abuse at work) can be tackled. This could be anything from the changing of organizational policies and procedures, redesign and marketing of the organization and/or better selection and training for managers and staff. The following points of action could be important in the prevention of violence and particularly useful in promoting peace within betting shops (after Farnsworth et al, 1990). These types of 'housekeeping' action points are already embedded within the policies of many leading bookmaker.. Good housekeeping sets the standards by which others, in part, decide their own behaviour. Furthermore, it creates a socially attractive environment that helps to limit frustration and keep flashpoints to a minimum. Simple (common sense) measures include: (i) removing 'silent' irritants and keeping a 'clean' environment, (ii) avoiding the betting shop becoming unpleasantly stuffy or smelly, (iii) avoiding unpleasantly high or low room temperatures, (iv) keeping floors and other surfaces clean, and (v) keeping the betting shop tidy and not allowing a build up of debris (betting slips)

Betting office staff should try and build up a good knowledge of their customers and develop a good relationship and rapport. Greeting people, acknowledging them and conversing with them creates an atmosphere that reduces the likelihood of violence. Such contact facilitates early (diplomatic) intervention in potentially difficult situations. Simple (common sense) measures that betting office staff members should employ include:

- Welcoming people as they come up to the counter to place a bet
- Being visible (e.g., making yourself known to the punters and them to you)
- Being diplomatic wherever possible and appropriate
- Remaining vigilant at all times

- Knowing the nature and early signs of violence (e.g. raised voices, body language, rowdy behaviour etc.)
- Treating the customers with respect so that they respect you
- Acknowledging those that are waiting that you will be with them as soon as possible
- Not giving preferential treatment (i.e., not having one rule for some and another for others)
- Giving people plenty of warning that that last bets on particular events are approaching (especially if the betting shop is noisy or crowded)

It is also worth noting that violent behaviour can in part stem from both drinking alcohol and drug taking (both which have similar effects). Drugs and alcohol distort individual perceptions and intellectual processes in ways that make explanations less likely to be accepted, and disputes and violent interactions more likely. It is also worth pointing out that (i) it is not uncommon for pubs and betting shops to be closely situated from one another and (b) gamblers are more likely to use and abuse both alcohol and drugs (Griffiths, Wardle, Orford, Sproston & Erens, 2010). In such instances, it could further be argued that anti-social behaviour stemming from intoxication is not the fault of the gambling establishment or the people that work in them.

Conclusions

As can be seen by the overview presented, the only two types of crime that betting shops can realistically be associated with are crime arising from problem gamblers who use their premises and criminal behaviour within the premises itself. Licensing Committees in Great Britain should be concerned with crime and disorder insofar as crime within the Act is concerned, not with unrelated acts such as burglary and shop theft. Furthermore, a Licensing Committee should not be concerned with too many gambling premises in a locality although it may be relevant if it points, as a result, to rising problems in crime and disorder. It is also worth highlighting that although a few studies have shown associations between gambling and crime there is no empirical evidence showing that gambling venues (including betting shops) *cause* crime. In order to be a *cause* of crime, betting shops must be both a *necessary* and *sufficient* condition for the crimes in question to occur. This paper found evidence of neither. Most of the empirical evidence concerning the relationship between crime and gambling concerns the criminal consequences of problem gambling (including those 'addicted' to gambling). The social responsibility procedures put in place by all bookmakers over recent years have assisted in helping keep problem gambling to a minimum in the UK, as shown by the last national prevalence study (Wardle, Sproston, Orford, Erens, Griffiths, Constantine. & Pigott, 2007). Such measures also appear to help inhibit potential criminal activity (particularly that which arises from problem gamblers themselves).

Footnotes

1 This claim is made on the basis that the author has been involved as an expert witness in an increasing number of court cases where betting shop applications have been turned down on the basis of police objections relating to betting shops being crime hotspots.

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