

**The National Coalition Against
the Expansion of Gambling
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By Maura Casey**

A year and a half ago I began a six month leave of absence with a question: What is the impact of the spread of gambling, an expansion in the last fifteen years that has rivaled anything seen in our history? What is the social impact, the financial impact, and why can't we affix a specific and reliable figure that the spread of legal gambling costs society?

Drawing upon my background – three years working full time in the field of addictions and a graduate degree in journalism and public affairs – I was fully confident that with enough reporting I would be able to come up with a figure on how much gambling addiction costs. I was absolutely wrong.

After six months of crisscrossing the country, interviewing 150 people and reading every study I could get my hands on, I realized I could not, and never would, be able to come up with an inarguable figure on how much gambling costs society.

There are a lot of reasons for this. One is that most studies are skewed in favor of the gambling industry, because they've paid for the bulk of the research. Another is that the most obvious impacts of gambling are things that are easy to measure -- economic impacts in the form of jobs, tax revenue and the like. And those are good things. That's why when studies come out on the impact of gambling, you hear glowing phrases such as research that calls casinos "an economic engine" for the state, which is what a study called the Foxwoods Resort Casino in Connecticut.

Yet such studies almost never examine the other impacts of gambling, – the impact on suicide, divorce, neglect, job loss, family instability. And without those measures, most studies remain, at best, an incomplete and often too-rosy picture of the role of gambling. Researchers say such measures are too difficult and too expensive to estimate.

But – it's not impossible. This is, after all, the country that cured polio and sent astronauts to the moon.

The social cost of other forms of addiction have been exhaustively researched.

There are dozens of major research organizations and institutes whose major concentration is producing data on drug and alcohol abuse.

The federal government spends billions of dollars on just such a mission. That's why we understand that one in 10 people are addicted to drugs or alcohol. That's why we know that a child of an alcoholic is 50 percent more likely to develop alcoholism. That's why we can say that a drug or alcohol addicted parent is far more likely to neglect or abuse his or her children. We have data on the rates of violence involved with substance abuse, how many teenagers are using what, how drugs affect women as opposed to men, how much drug addiction costs businesses and how many car crashes, on average, are caused by drunken driving. We know all this, and nobody argues about it, because we've spent billions in taxpayers money to find out.

But there are no well-funded studies that can state with widely-accepted data what are the negative impacts of gambling.

Why?

Because there is no political will to measure the complete impact of gambling.

State and federal governments have no desire to turn over this rock. Period.

We don't have answers because the institutions in our society with deep pockets to pay for research necessary has not the slightest motivation to look at this issue. State governments – the biggest beneficiaries of gambling – surely have no motivation to do so, no matter how forward-thinking or well-meaning they are.

An example of this is my own state of Connecticut.. Connecticut was the second state in the country to pay for gambling addiction treatment, initiating a state-sponsored program in 1981 which is still in existence today. In the 1980s, the state legislature passed a law that mandated a study on the impact of gambling every five years. And that was when we just had lottery and jai lai.

Connecticut is the 3rd-smallest state in the union, the size of a Texas county at 100 miles long by 50 miles wide, and has a population of 3.5 million people. We have – without exaggeration – the two biggest casinos in the world, Foxwoods and Mohegan Sun. In the last 10 years, no fewer than five town treasurers or tax collectors in the area of my newspaper have been prosecuted for embezzlement because of a gambling habit.

Yet the governor of the state, John Rowland, took out of his budget in 2001 money for the legally-mandated study on the impact of. When I asked him why, he shrugged and said, "We know the impact of gambling. Some of it's good and some of it's bad." After a fight in the legislature, the study was postponed for two years. Now, with the state facing a billion-dollar deficit out of \$13.5 billion, I have to say that spending \$500,000 on such a study will not be high on the list of priorities.

The federal government is the most obvious candidate to pay for research on this issue. And yet the federal government has failed utterly to do so. It spends more in one year on the National Household Survey on Drug and Alcohol Abuse – a survey that has been conducted since the late 1970s – than it has in the last 30 years on gambling research, a period that includes two national commissions on gambling. And those who head that survey have consistently refused to add questions on gambling.

The National Commission on the impact of Gambling in 1998 was our best shot to get research that could tell us with some semblance of certainty exactly what the social impact of gambling is on our lives. And yet that commission did not do so. It had estimates and figures that it used with so many caveats and cautions I wondered, when reading the report, what the real story was.

So I called up Dean Gerstein, of the National Opinion Research Center, which had been asked by the commission to do the research on the impact of gambling. The NORC is the oldest not-for-profit survey organization in the country, and Dr. Gerstein had been in charge of the research on gambling for the commission. So I asked him why his group couldn't come up with figures which had more certainty.

He was extremely candid with me. He said, "The entire budget for the commission was for about \$5 million – for everything. We were given \$1.3 million to conduct this research it was a one-shot deal done in difficult circumstances and done very fast, in 7 months, from May 23, 1998 to Feb. 1, 1999. We went as far as the resources permitted, particularly when the base of studies is slim.

This is not a research subject that has a huge community working with them."

The gambling industry, he said, made it difficult to get any research done. "There were three members of the industry on the commission, and one threatened to sue me. There were huge fights over the content of questionnaires. Constant arguing with wording, and claims that questions were intrinsically biased. This went on with every angle," he said. In

the end, he believed that the deeper questions that I wanted answered wouldn't ever be addressed until the U.S. becomes willing to spend tens of millions of dollars a year on the research – the way it does currently with drug and alcohol addiction. “You can't build a research field with no money,” he said. “You have to have more than one journalist to put out a newspaper – it's the same with research.”

Knowing all this, I wondered whether or not it would have made a difference if the commission had a larger budget for research. I called Paul Simon, the former senator from Illinois, who sponsored the bill which created a national commission on the impact of gambling. I asked him why the budget for the commission was so limited -- \$5 million spread out over two years of national research and hearings from coast to coast. He said, “We were lucky to get any money at all, given the opposition of the gambling industry.”

So what we have is a situation not unlike tobacco research 40 years ago. We have an industry pushing a product that is guaranteed – guaranteed – to make a minority of the population addicted. Government gets significant tax revenue from the product. Yet we allow that industry nearly complete control of the research regarding how their marketing practices might increase or decrease that addiction. Our nation allows the gambling industry – or any industry in a similar position such complete control over the bulk of research at our peril.

Remember when tobacco companies denied for years that there was a link between cigarettes and cancer? Well, the gambling industry isn't that stupid. It doesn't deny that its product has some bad side effects, that's why so many in the gambling industry help pay for gambling hotlines and treatment – more generously, I might add, than do most state governments.

Yet gambling industry research, even if it avoids bias, will focus on the biochemical nature of gambling addiction and focus on what's going on in the brain, putting the onus and responsibility on the individual. It will never, for example, do a study on the effect of free alcohol on gambling behavior. It will never research and release to the public the possible link between slot machines' high event frequency – the fact that you can bet 14 times a minute with these machines – and whether or not the ability to bet so often is a critical factor in drastically shortening the amount of time it takes women to become problem gamblers – just 3 to 5 years – as some researchers suspect.

As long as governments keep looking the other way, as long as the federal government, ducks its responsibility to fund significant research, as long as state governments act more like predators towards taxpayers, willing to increase gambling for the tax revenue it brings in no matter what the social cost, we will not have the answers we deserve.

Just to tell you how reluctant institutions are to find those answers, let me tell you the story about last year's study on the impact of slot machines on overseas military bases.

My favorite quote about slot machines is one I lifted from an article in Gaming Today in which one David Davila said, “The average slot machine pays for itself in the first 100 days. For the rest of its useful life, it's all gravy. The longer you sit in front of one, the more you lose. Next to prostitution, it's the world's business. In no other business do people budget money to lose to you.”

The military gets about \$125 million in slot machines on 90 overseas bases. And when Congressman Roscoe Bartlett of Maryland decided to ask that the impact of those slot machines be measured, interested parties in the pentagon became very anxious that the study come out “correctly. “ PricewaterhouseCoopers was contracted to conduct the research. Midway through, it gave members of the military a briefing of what researchers were finding. An uproar ensued. The Pentagon decided that the consulting firm wasn't doing the research right – and no doubt they weren't especially if it wasn't biased. The Pentagon took over the study and proceeded to find that slot machines were wonderful, socially-rewarding things to have on base which had very little

impact, if indeed any at all, on service men and women.

Now, here's the kicker. My brothers and sisters in the news media took the press release issued about this wonderful study and put out one-day stories from coast to coast saying that there were no problems whatsoever with having slot machines on bases overseas. But I had been waiting for this study for some time, and I kept asking one question that apparently never occurred to my colleagues: What department in the pentagon did the study? After I refused to stop asking that question, the Pentagon finally admitted to me what I had suspected all along: The department of Morale, Welfare and Readiness – the very department whose budget swells from slot machine revenues – the very department which had consistently defended slot machines on bases – did the study! So of course they found that all was well.

Now, I am by no means a conspiracy theorist, but mix enough money and politics together – and the gambling industry has unlimited money and a lot of political savvy – and you have a very formidable opponent which few institutions in our country have shown the backbone to work against – or even slow down.

After six months full time on this issue, the most compelling things that need to be addressed are these: - The fact that women are getting addicted to gambling in 3-5 years. The phenomenon, called telescoping, puzzles researchers who don't know why women are getting so addicted so quickly – in one-quarter or one-third the time it takes men. I'm no scientist, but since women prefer slot machines to most other forms of gambling, I wouldn't be surprised if the high event frequency of slot machines and the number of bets they can place in a short period of time is creating pathways in the brain a lot more quickly than a man with a preference to bet on horses.

- The whole question of how slot machines are increasing addiction. You know, slots are really an incredible combination of computer technology, psychology, video games and Madison avenue marketing. The human race has gambled for thousands of years, but these machines are an entirely new which have no resemblance whatsoever to the slow, mechanical, one-armed bandit of 20 years ago. There isn't nearly enough information on their long-term impact. I asked a retired slots expert whether or not companies hire psychologists to help entice people to use these things, and he said no, "They don't need to. They follow the kitchen sink approach." They throw everything they have at the customer, doing anything to keep them from walking away – and more often than not, they are successful.

- The very high rate of problem gambling among teens, and whether or not the widespread use of video game technology, and the use of that same technology in slot machines, will have an impact as they grow older and are free to gamble legally.

- The impact on an increase in casino gambling as a form of leisure on the elderly, a population for whom this is still a relatively new experience.

- The impact of Internet gambling. There are 1400 sites and counting for gambling on the internet, and it's possible to gamble at work, while waiting for a plane if you have the right kind of cell phone or palm pilot, or in the middle of the night in your living room. I can't imagine the impact this will have.

Finally, what will always remain with me from my six-month foray into this subject of gambling are the people I met. I traveled a lot, and whenever I mentioned what I was doing in every chance encounter I had, stories would come out of the woodwork. One woman sitting next to me on a plane talked to me for two hours about how worried she was about her sister, a Ford Motor Company executive, because of how much money she was spending in the Detroit and Windsor, Ont., casinos. She had never gambled until they opened. A librarian who had heard about my project called me from Virginia because she was worried about her sister, who was gambling at casinos in Colorado. Again, her sister never started until the casinos opened. And when I got back home, I got a call from a state legislator who I didn't know well who asked me if I would go

out to lunch with her. I did, although I was puzzled, and at lunch her story came out: She checked on the balance of her son's college account upon his graduation from high school and discovered that, without her knowledge, her husband had withdrawn everything to gamble at the casinos.

These stories are just the smallest indication of the quiet uproar the expansion of gambling is creating in our society. It is my belief that our government and our people ignore these voices – and the unfettered, unquestioning expansion of gambling that is at the root of these troubles -- at our peril.

Thank you very much.