

At issue: Gambling

Casinos are no cash cows but rather drains on society



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Our children are hurting. Many are in trouble, many are in great crisis. Teachers know this. So do our police, youth counselors, social workers and Family Court judges. Now we have added gambling halls to the list of stressors that our children have to contend with.

As a social worker, as an addiction professional, as a health care and prevention specialist, I can only say to all their family, friends and communities, "Please don't gamble. Our children can't handle any more dysfunction!"

Gambling frequently leads to lost homes, broken families, lost savings, lost college funds, bankruptcies and to a dramatic increase in crime including embezzlement at business and industry. It is strongly correlated with mental illnesses, including anxiety disorders, depression, nervous disorders and suicide. Gambling is associated with a rise in alcohol and drug abuse, and there is a very strong association with relapse into active alcoholism.

Furthermore, problem or pathological gambling also seriously affects the family and friends of the problem gambler. Some states have reported that divorce tripled after the introduction of casinos. Others reported an explosion in domestic violence.

The number of compulsive gamblers in the United States has increased from 10 million to 20 million over these past few years, with the greatest increase in those states that have legalized casino gambling. Last year gamblers lost more than \$70 billion.

Compulsive gambling reportedly increased 52 percent in one region in New York state after a casino opened.

All states that have legalized gambling have found subsequent dramatic increases in the number of compulsive gamblers, and in crime, family dysfunction, divorce, bankruptcy and mental illness. But by then it is too late to reverse the trend. Once legalized, gam-

bling is there to stay — and to spread.

Because of gambling's ultimate cost in broken families, disintegrated communities and a weaker society, there is no justification to use it to raise revenue. Studies show that gambling can remove valuable resources from the community and can hurt small businesses and the overall economic development strategy critical for community sustainability and growth. Field research throughout the nation indicates that for every dollar the legalized gambling interests indicate is being contributed in taxes, it usually costs taxpayers at least \$3 (and higher numbers have been calculated) because of major cost increases in the welfare, mental health and criminal justice systems.

The United States has had experience with widespread legalized gambling. The most relevant example occurred after the American Civil War and migration to the "Wild West." With this proliferation in gambling, however,

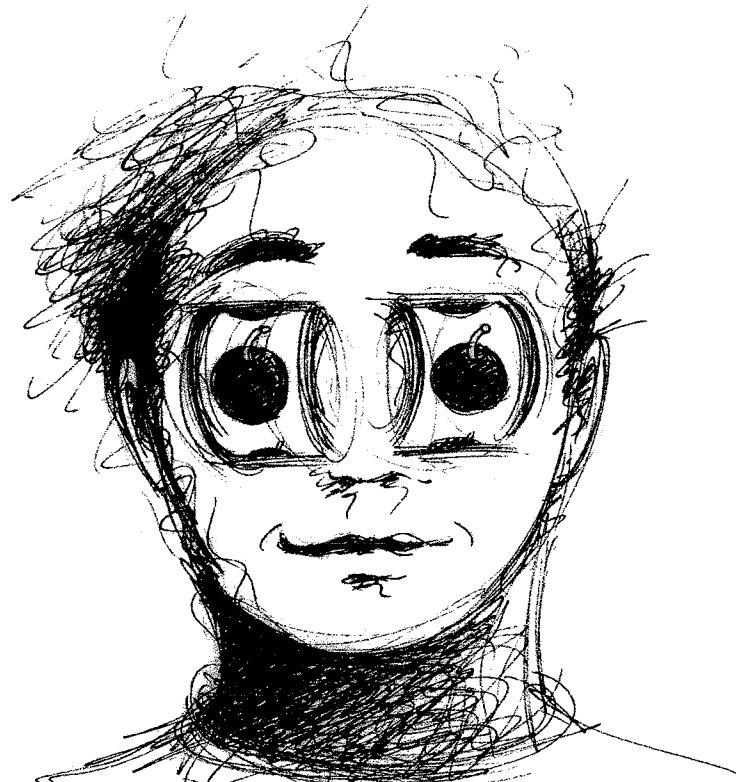
people realized the negative effects and started a trend to prohibit these activities, and by 1910 there was virtually no legal gambling in the United States. Gambling was not just prohibited via state statutes and local ordinances, but, more important, these prohibitions were incorporated into most state constitutions to make it as difficult as possible for future generations to legalize gambling activities.

In 1995, the National Commission on Gambling recommended a moratorium on the expansion of the gambling industry.

Unfortunately, philosopher George Santayana may have been right: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Let's not gamble away our children's futures. □

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