

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF CASINO GAMBLING ON CRIME IN MISSISSIPPI

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The devil, perhaps, was the first player (gamester), and contrived it for the express purpose of affording temporary amusement to his beloved subjects, who have transmitted it to their fellows to this present day. (Persius, 1823)

ABSTRACT

The introduction of legalized gambling into a community has generated a great deal of hubris regarding concomitant criminality. While Las Vegas has long been synonymous with organized crime, the recent focus has been on the connection between traditional crime and legalized gambling. The conventional wisdom among opponents of this new source of revenue is that casinos attract many undesirables to the community, thereby increasing crime and social disorganization. Routine activities theory would suggest that with increased numbers of tourists, more opportunities for crime will exist. To test this proposition, the frequency of crime before and after the introduction of legalized gambling in Biloxi, Mississippi was examined. Larceny-theft and motor vehicle theft were the only categories of crime to show statistically significant change. Robbery and aggravated assault increased, while murder and rape declined, although the change was not statistically significant for any category of violent crime.

INTRODUCTION

Gambling has long been associated with moral lassitude, crime, and civic disorder (Kennedy, 1967). Nevertheless, gambling thrived in eighteenth

and nineteenth century America, particularly in frontier towns and on Mississippi riverboats. In the 1830s, an estimated 1500 riverboat gamblers were plying their trade, often working in pairs to better cheat the other players (Commission on the Review of the National Policy Toward Gambling, 1976:22). These gamblers generally lived and prospered only to the degree that they were adroit at cheating. Drinking, gambling, and prostitution flourished in the wide-open frontier towns and riverboat ports where gamblers worked in a rowdy and disreputable environment.

Gambling was also present in eastern cities, although it was generally frowned upon by "upstanding" citizens. In 1850, New York City had a population of 500,000 and an estimated 6,000 gambling houses in operation (Commission on The Review of The National Policy Toward Gambling, 1976:25). Anti-gambling laws were passed in the 1850s in many eastern cities, but widespread police and political corruption allowed gambling to continue with little abatement through the early 1900s. In the eastern cities, too, gambling's reputation was one of disrepute and criminality (Murtagh, 1967).

In the 1930s, gambling underwent a transformation as organized crime, searching for new sources of revenue after Prohibition, hit upon gambling. New technology allowed for national racing-wire service and minimization of risk through lay-off betting (Bell, 1960). Bookies, illegal casinos, and large scale numbers operations flourished. By the 1960s, it was generally agreed by law enforcement officials that illegal gambling activities resulted in the greatest source of revenue for organized crime (King, 1969:192).

With the development of the Las Vegas strip in the 1950s, gambling entered yet another era. Organized crime was attracted to the vast sums of money to be made through legalized gambling and played a role in the development of Las Vegas as the gambling capitol (Skolnick, 1983:807; Abt, Smith, & Christiansen, 1986:79). The association of show business celebrities, showgirls, and organized crime figures with Las Vegas added an aura of excitement for many visitors and contributed to the "Vegas image" as "Sin City." Only in the last few years has Las Vegas made an effort to improve its image. This transformation has been aided by the ownership of casinos by public corporations rather than private individuals and by the conscious attempt to present Las Vegas not simply as a city for "high rollers" but one offering family entertainment as well.

With the increasing respectability of gambling, many jurisdictions have sought to increase tax revenues through legalization of casino gambling. Consequently, the growth in legalized gambling has been explosive. Nevada

was the first state to authorize casino gambling in 1931 and was not followed by a second state until New Jersey permitted casino gambling in Atlantic City in 1978. New Hampshire authorized the first state lottery in 1964. Currently, 23 states have legalized casino gambling and 37 states have lotteries (Popkin & Hetter, 1994:42).

Lotteries bring in more state revenue than do casinos, partially because the lotteries are administered by quasi-state agencies and the monies not funneled through private corporations. In Massachusetts, for example, the average adult purchased \$404 worth of lottery tickets in 1992 and the state was able to keep approximately one-third of the \$1.89 billion dollars wagered in the Massachusetts lottery (Kleinfield, 1993).

Lotteries, however, are rarely implicated in criminal activity, perhaps because of their lack of an ecological impact. Yet, many municipalities and states continue to reject legalized casino gambling as an unwholesome activity that attracts disreputable people and leads to increased crime. In this vein it has been documented by some (Potter, 1989; Jenkins & Potter, 1987; Pennsylvania Crime Commission, 1980) that there is often a link between gambling and other vice activities. They suggest that individuals who have an affinity for one kind of vice may have an affinity for other types as well. Similarly, Potter (1989:246) suggests that for businesses that violate vice laws (i.e., selling child pornography), the step into other illegal vice activities is merely a way of expanding the scope of their business enterprise. Potter (1989:246) also points out that in countries such as Holland and Denmark a connection exists between gambling and other vice activities in spite of the fact that decriminalization or "a significantly enhanced degree of law enforcement tolerance" exists. These studies, however, were addressing a possible connection that existed in jurisdictions where gambling was illegal.

There have not been any findings suggesting such a relationship in jurisdictions in the United States where gambling has been legalized. However, with widespread legalization of gaming throughout the country, questions arise over whether gambling's association with crime is one of the historical past or whether casino gambling does, in fact, lead to increased rates of crime in jurisdictions where it has been legalized.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Dunlap and Laxalt (1981) warn that crimes ranging from family violence to robbery may increase in jurisdictions that legalize casino gambling. They state that several conditions associated with casino gambling are also associated with increased rates of crime. Casinos have many low

paid and seasonal employees and this results in an instability both in the work force and within the community. The easy access and heightened consumption of liquor lowers inhibitions and can lead to crimes of impulse. The large sums of cash carried by tourists who gamble make them and their hotel rooms inviting targets of robbery and burglary (Dunlap & Laxalt, 1981).

Most of the studies of legalized casino gambling's effect on crime have been conducted in Atlantic City. Unlike Las Vegas, Atlantic City was a mature metropolitan area long before the introduction of casino gambling and much was known about its population and crime rate. Therefore, the introduction of casino gambling in Atlantic City in 1978 presented an almost classic experiment to determine the effect of casino gambling on crime.

Two economists, Hakim and Buck (1989), studied changes in crime between 1972 and 1984 in 64 communities in the Atlantic City area. They found that "levels of all crimes appear to have been higher in the postcasino years, 1978 to 1984, than in the earlier period of 1972 to 1977, with other factors controlled" (Hakim & Buck, 1989:414). Violent crimes and auto theft increased most in the legalized gambling period and burglaries increased the least. In a later study analyzing real estate values in these same 64 communities for the years 1972 to 1977 (pre-casino) and 1978 to 1986 (post-casino), Buck, Hakim, and Spiegel (1991) found the increase in crime brought about by the legalized gaming affected property values inversely as a function of distance from the central city casinos. Hakim and Friedman concluded that crime was a social cost associated with casinos (Hakim & Friedman, 1987). They warned, however, that no hasty judgments should be made as to the overall effect of legalized gaming on a community since casinos brought, in addition to crime, increased employment and other economic benefits to a community.

Albanese (1985) reviewed reports on the effects of legalized gambling in Atlantic City by New York's Attorney General (1981) and by the Twentieth Century Fund (1983). Both reports concluded that crime had greatly increased in Atlantic City as a result of the legalization of casino gambling. However, Albanese noted methodological flaws in those studies that also apply to the work of the economists mentioned previously. The most serious problem is that these studies presented misleading crime figures since they did not calculate the crime rates based on "population at risk" (Albanese, 1985).

Albanese conducted a more sophisticated analysis by taking into account such variables as number of tourists (by including tourists in the population at risk), increase in the number of hotel and motel rooms, and changes in police manpower. Albanese then compared the trend in the index

crime rates in Atlantic City from 1978 to 1982 with the trends in the rest of the state. Albanese stated that although a simple analysis would conclude that the crime rate was greater in Atlantic City after gambling was legalized, if the tourists were included in the population at risk, the actual crime rate was less after legalization of gambling than before.

The most comprehensive analysis of the relationship of casino gambling to crime was conducted by Curran and Scarpitti (1991). They noted that although Atlantic City's index crime rate in 1978 was 133.6 and increased to 311.2 in 1980, these numbers taken out of context are misleading.

Consequently, Curran and Scarpitti analyzed the long term crime trends in Atlantic City as a percentage of total state index offenses over time. They found that Atlantic City's total index crime rate and the trends for murder, rape, aggravated assault, and motor vehicle theft were declining as a percent of the state total and these trends were undisturbed by the introduction of casino gambling. However, burglary, robbery, and larceny for Atlantic City, which were steadily declining as a percentage of the state totals from 1968 to 1977, increased in the post-casino years of 1978 to 1989.

By analyzing crimes committed in and around casinos, Curran and Scarpitti were better able to define the risk of crime to Atlantic City residents. Their analysis of crime reports taken by the Casino/Hotel Investigations Unit of the Atlantic City Police Department revealed that most crime in and around the casinos victimized noncommunity residents. They calculated that casino based crime accounted for 63.7 percent of all index offenses reported by Atlantic City in the five year period following legalization and that over 90 percent of the casino crimes were larceny thefts. Curran and Scarpitti concluded that when casino based crime is extracted from the total number of crimes for the population at risk or when tourists visiting Atlantic City are added to the population at risk, Atlantic City's crime rate is comparable to other cities (Curran & Scarpitti, 1991:448).

Curran and Scarpitti's analysis suggests that casino gambling in Atlantic City did not lead to increased risk of victimization of Atlantic City residents. However, questions remain concerning the impact of casino gambling on crime in differing locales. The present study will attempt to analyze the impact of casino gambling in a small southern city to determine if comparable effects are noted as in Atlantic City. Based on these findings, conclusions and policy implications will be discussed relative to the impact casino gambling may have on the functioning of the criminal justice system.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

None of the studies reviewed had an explicitly stated theoretical basis. Though there seems to be some unstated assumptions about the ecological distribution of crime, the connection is never made explicit. However, the social change and disruption brought about by the advent of casino gambling in an area where gambling has been illegal suggests that routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) is the most appropriate perspective to apply.

This theory posits that for predatory events to occur there must be motivated offenders, suitable targets and an absence of capable guardians. The most notable change brought about by the introduction of casino gambling into a community is the number of clientele that are attracted. Here the number of suitable targets or population at risk may grow sizably as a result of the opportunity to gamble. Similarly, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the increased opportunities for crime in the form of increased number of potential victims and the large sums of money they carry would result in a substantial number of potential new offenders in the community as well. At the same time, unless law enforcement and security resources are increased, the ratio of capable guardians to both motivated offenders and suitable targets should diminish, perhaps significantly. Casinos provide their own security forces but these resources are fairly well confined to the interior of the casino and its outer perimeter. Likewise casino environs and their 24-hour life style with free flowing liquor could easily become "hot spots" (Sherman, Gartin & Buerger, 1987; Roncek & Maier, 1991).

Given this scenario, certainly an increased volume of crime would be predicted and depending on the ratio of guardians to offenders and targets, a possible per capita increase in victimizations as well. The per capita increase would, of course, have to take into account increased population at risk.

METHODOLOGY

In 1990, the Mississippi State Legislature voted to allow counties along the Gulf coast and counties containing some interior waterways to determine if casino gambling would be permitted within their respective jurisdictions. On March 10, 1992, voters in Harrison County approved dockside gambling by a 57.4 percent plurality. In August of 1992, three

permanently moored "riverboat casinos" opened for business in the city of Biloxi in Harrison County (Sun Herald, 1993).

Harrison County has a population of 165,365. The county is 77.2 percent white, 19.5 percent black and 3.3 percent "other." Harrison County is relatively poor with 20.9 percent of families having annual incomes below \$10,000. The two major urban areas in Harrison County are Gulfport (population: 41,420) and Biloxi (population: 46,319) (Bureau of the Census, 1992).

Data analyzed for the present study were obtained from the monthly crime reports of the Biloxi, Mississippi, Police Department. These data represent offenses reported to the police for the twelve month time period prior to the introduction of casino gambling in the city (August 1991 through July 1992) and the twelve month time period after the introduction of casino gambling (August 1992 through July 1993). The numbers used in the analysis were the frequencies of reported offenses and were not transformed into rates.

Data were analyzed for the index offenses of the Uniform Crime Reports and twenty other categories listed on the monthly offense reports of the Biloxi Police Department. These offenses, most of which are "public order" offenses or economic crimes, were assumed to be those that would be most affected by the legalization of gambling.

Admittedly, the use of official crime data, as employed in the present study, is fraught with possible sources of error. [See for example Kitsuse & Cicourel (1963), Skogan (1974), and Savitz (1978)]. It should be noted however, that in the present study many of the problems associated with official data are avoided, such as comparisons between jurisdictions or across long periods of time where record keeping procedures might have changed or administrative changes might have occurred that could effect reporting and recording. The fact that comparisons are not made over a long period of time or between jurisdictions reduces the amount of potential error in interpretation. At the same time no claim is made that the data used to make the present assessment of the impact of casino gambling on crime are valid indicators of all of the crime in this community. The data are, however, the best data available and interpretations and conclusions are made with these limitations in mind.

RESULTS

The data comparing index offenses reported to the police before and after legalization of casino gambling appear in Table 1. Tests to determine

Table 1
MEAN NUMBER OF REPORTED OFFENSES BEFORE
AND AFTER INTRODUCTION OF CASINO GAMBLING

Offense	T, Mean	T, Mean	% Change	Sig.Level
Homicide	2.58	0.08	-96.8%	.327
Rape	2.00	1.83	- 8.5%	.745
Robbery	11.00	13.67	+24.3%	.225
Agg. Assault	4.50	4.58	+1.8%	.925
Total Violent Crime	20.08	20.17	+0.4%	.981
Burglary	79.67	93.75	+17.7%	.064
Larceny-Theft	226.83	263.25	+16.1%	.019
Motor Vehicle Theft	20.33	27.66	+36.0%	.006
Arson	1.17	0.75	-0.359	.318
Total Property Crime	328.00	385.42	+17.5%	.009
Total UCR Crime	348.08	405.58	+16.5%	.014

* T-Test, 2-Tail Probability

if any differences exist between the two time periods indicate that there is no significant difference between the two time periods for total violent crime, nor for any specific type of violent crime, nor are any trends apparent. Two of the violent offenses (robbery and aggravated assault) increased in frequency after legalization of casino gambling while two decreased (homicide and rape).

Total UCR property crime did, however, increase significantly after gambling was legalized. Two property offenses, larceny-theft ($p = .02$) and motor vehicle theft ($p = .01$), increased significantly. The mean number of larceny-thefts per

Table 2
ECONOMIC AND PUBLIC ORDER OFFENSES BEFORE
AND AFTER INTRODUCTION OF CASINO GAMBLING

Offense	T₁ Mean	T₂ Mean	% Change	Sig. Level*
Burglary - Motel	3.67	3.58	-2.4%	.945
Credit Card Abuse	1.25	3.08	+146.4%	.984
Criminal Trespass	19.92	24.00	+20.5%	.070
Disorderly Conduct	15.33	19.17	+25.0%	.059
Disturbing the Peace	4.00	5.08	+27.0%	.299
Domestic Argument/Assault	34.00	38.67	+13.7%	.128
Drug Offenses	22.50	23.58	+4.8%	.812
Drunk in Public	72.33	83.33	+15.2%	.106
DUI	15.25	16.00	+4.9%	.720
Embezzlement	13.00	14.67	+12.8%	.446
Fraud	5.50	5.92	+7.6%	.790
Fraud-Inkeeper	2.17	2.08	-4.1%	.896
Gambling	1.83	0.08	-95.6%	.081
Liquor Law Violations	2.00	1.08	-46.0%	.138
Mischief-Property	104.83	80.25	-23.4%	.020
Prostitution	0.50	2.00	+300.0	.134
Simple Assault	39.92	41.33	+3.5%	.733
Suspicious Persons	17.08	19.83	+16.1%	.402
Threaten Bodily Harm	30.25	29.25	-3.3%	.723
Uttering Forgery	8.50	7.42	-12.7%	.804

* T-Test, 2-Tail Probability

month increased from 226.8 before casino gambling was introduced, while motor vehicle thefts rose from 20.3 to 27.7 per month after casinos opened. Burglary also

increased substantially with the mean number of offenses rising from 79.7 before legalized gambling to 93.7 after legalization, but these figures failed to achieve statistical significance.

When UCR property crime rates are combined with UCR violent crime rates, a significant increase ($p = .01$) is found for total UCR crime. This result is due primarily to the large number of larceny-thefts that tend to overwhelm the data for the other crimes when the data are aggregated.

Analysis of public order and other types of economic crime reveal few statistically significant differences (see Table 2). Of the 20 crime categories, 13 increased while 7 decreased after casino gambling was legalized. Of the seven categories that declined in frequency, only "mischief-property" declined significantly ($p = .02$). Two other crimes, gambling and liquor law violations declined, although the differences across the two time periods were not statistically significant. These declines should not be surprising with the advent of casino gambling and the increase in liquor consumption due to casino operations.

Of the 13 categories that increased in number after legalization of casino gambling, none attained statistical significance. However, it should be noted that several crimes did increase substantially (credit card abuse and prostitution) and, given a longer time frame and more gambling activity, these figures may signify a trend toward increased prevalence, particularly of the public order offenses.

DISCUSSION

Examination of the data seems to indicate that inauguration of casino gambling in Biloxi has had an effect on the crime pattern in the city. However, only one of the 28 crime categories declined significantly as mischief-property had a mean of 104.8 offenses before casinos and 80.2 after casinos ($p = .02$). Illegal gambling ($p = .08$) and liquor law violations ($p = .14$) also decreased substantially, but failed to attain statistical significance at the .05 level of probability. A follow-up of longer than 12 months may reveal a statistically significant reduction in yet other offenses.

The impact of legalized gambling appears greatest on economic crimes as larceny-theft increased from 226.8 to 263.2 ($p = .02$) and motor vehicle theft increased from 20.3 to 27.7 ($p = .01$) according to monthly crime reports after casino gambling was introduced. Other economic crimes, such as burglary ($p = .06$) and credit card fraud ($p = .08$), increased substantially but did not reach statistical significance.

Several public order crimes similarly experienced a substantial increase in frequency without attaining statistical significance. Disorderly conduct ($p = .06$), public drunkenness ($p = .06$), criminal trespass ($p = .07$), and prostitution ($p = .06$) all fit this description and may signify a trend towards an increase in public order offenses that warrants additional analysis in the future. Whether these increases are

due to police trying to "clean up" the areas around the casinos or whether they are due to actual increases in crimes committed cannot be definitively ascertained.

As Curran and Scarpitti found the increase of reported crime can be misleading since the raw numbers do not take into account increases in the resident population nor population at risk. Although a yearly census count of population is not available, estimates are that population growth in Biloxi has not been dramatic and would account for only a small portion of the increase if calculated on a per capita basis.

However, the "population at risk" (Albanese, 1985) has expanded greatly due to large number of tourists visiting the casinos. The Harrison County Tourism Bureau estimates that 25,000 tourists visit Harrison County daily. This transient population includes a large pool of potential victims as well as victimizers. However, the Biloxi Chief of Police said that traffic is their biggest problem resulting from the legalization of casinos as vehicle traffic on the main highway to the region has increased 230 percent over the pre-casino volume (Personal communication, 1994). Since many of these tourists spend from a few hours to a few days in Biloxi, the population base of the city should be modified to reflect these larger numbers as suggested by Albanese (1985) and Curran and Scarpitti (1991).

Curran and Scarpitti (1991), for example, took tourism into account and analyzed casino-based crime as opposed to community-based crime in Atlantic City. They found that a significant portion of Atlantic City's crime was casino-based crime affecting the large number of tourists visiting the casinos. One indication of this is that, as in Biloxi, larceny-theft increased dramatically in Atlantic City after casino gambling was legalized. Curran and Scarpitti concluded, however, that between 70-80 percent of the larceny-thefts reported in Atlantic City after the legalization of gambling were casino-based crimes. When the casino based crimes were removed from the Atlantic City crime total, the adjusted community rate is actually only one-third of the official UCR rate (Curran & Scarpitti, 1991:446).

Given the relatively modest increase in crime that Biloxi is experiencing, it is believed that factoring in the population at risk data, when they become available, will produce results similar to that found by Albanese (1985) and Curran and Scarpitti (1991) for Atlantic City. However, Biloxi is not Atlantic City and Biloxi is clearly experiencing a change in both the volume and nature of its crime. For example, Harrison County has four new "escort services" which may account for the apparent increase in prostitution in Biloxi. Also, the police are experiencing an upsurge in credit card fraud, an offense that was rarely seen in Biloxi prior to the introduction of casino gambling.

Some might suggest that increases in reported crime may be due to an increase in police staffing and thus an increase in police reporting due to a more visible police presence. According to the Biloxi Police Department, prior to the opening of the casinos Biloxi had approximately 30 officers, which represented a

significant understaffing. By October of 1993 the force totaled 46 officers. Since a number of these officers began during the twelve month period after the introduction of casino gambling it would seem that this increase in personnel would have resulted in a greater increase in overall crime reported. If anything, one might have expected, on the basis of routine activities theory, an even more substantial increase in reported crime given the likely rise in numbers of motivated offenders and increase in suitable targets. This, however, was not the case. Again it must be acknowledged that we are limited in our ability to draw firm conclusions due to the use of "official crime data."

Along with these changes in crime and the criminal justice system, casinos have brought many other changes to a sleepy gulf-side city. The roads and highways are crowded. Land prices have sky-rocketed. Houses and apartments are in short supply, with prices increasing. Yet wage scales have increased as unemployment has fallen from over 9 percent pre-casino to 4.1 percent today. And twenty more casinos are in the planning stage (Sun Herald, 1993; Harrison County Tourism Commission, 1993).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Given these developments, crime is clearly a factor that needs to be carefully studied, but it is only one of numerous important social changes that should be carefully weighed to determine the desirability of legalization of casino gambling. However, the impact of casinos on the functioning of the criminal justice system should not be minimized. States that legalize casino gambling will almost certainly experience some increases in crime, particularly property crime in and around the casinos. In addition the 24 hour a day casino operations will change the nature of the area where casinos are located and the time as well as volume of crime in the area. The changes will necessitate not only more law enforcement personnel, but also more court and correctional capacity. The police, in particular, will need to adjust to the changes casinos bring to a community. More intensive 24 hour a day law enforcement coverage will be required. More traffic control, property crime, and vice operations will be needed. The police may be well advised to institute a casino-hotel investigative unit as was done by the Atlantic City Police Department.

The police may also need to alter their style to one of "community policing" where the community is composed primarily of tourists. This may necessitate a more benign policy toward drinking in public and disorderly behavior as well as a more fundamental shift toward a service orientation in the entertainment district.

The impact of casinos on the criminal justice system will depend to some degree on the size and nature of the existing community. However, the change for some communities and its criminal justice operations will be dramatic. Peak (1993) has noted that policing "boomtowns" presents unique problems. The dramatic

changes casinos bring to a community and its enforcement arm will almost certainly require a transition and adjustment period before an acceptable balance is struck.

Obviously as more communities allow casino gambling enterprises there can be further and more in depth studies of the total impacts that this industry can have on a community. Hopefully, more thorough and better quality baseline data will be available to evaluate the sum total of all change effects which may ultimately contribute criminogenic influences to the communities involved. It may be that only through examining the results of these real life experiments across a variety of communities that meaningful, generalizable conclusions be reached. Additionally, were before and after crime measures in the form of victimization or self-report data available the problems of the use of official data could be overcome.

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