



As Powerball jackpot grows in Michigan, some claim state-sponsored gambling preys on poor



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SAGINAW, MI — While some see the Michigan Lottery as harmless fun and a boon to state revenues aimed at education, others say it unfairly preys on the poor.

Wednesday's drawing for the state lottery's Powerball game could be the largest in Powerball history. [The jackpot has now reached \\$500,000 million.](#)

But some see state lotteries as preying on those who can least afford to spend money on something that likely won't result in a payout.

"Governments' predatory gambling policy has led to higher taxes, more personal debt, worsened state budget deficits and it has turned millions of citizens into gambling addicts," said Les Bernal, executive director of the Stop Predatory Gambling organization.

The nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., has set its sights on eliminating government lottery programs and casinos, arguing they do more harm than good.

Gretchen Villarreal, public relations assistant for the Michigan Lottery, disagrees. Villarreal said the state lottery has contributed \$17 billion to Michigan's School Aid Fund since it began operating in 1972.

"That is a lot of money that wouldn't be there if there wasn't a niche wanting this," she said. "Good things are coming out of it, like our slogan, 'Good Things Happen.'"

Bernal said since governments began setting up government-sanctioned gambling in search of new revenue, they fundamentally altered Americans' perception of "The American Dream." It has shifted from the image of Rosie the Riveter once used by the government to sell savings bonds to the images of crossed fingers or trees laden with gold coins, both images used in advertising for state lotteries.

"We go from a flexed bicep, you know, that we-can-do-it attitude, to where it's all about luck," Bernal said.

He cited a seven-year-old [study by Opinion Research Corp.](#), in which 21 percent of Americans surveyed said playing the lottery was the most practical strategy for accumulating several hundred thousand dollars for retirement. That was even higher for the poorest people surveyed — 38 percent of those who earn less than \$25,000 pointed to the lottery as a solution to accumulating enough wealth to retire.

Gerald Peterson, a professor of psychology at Saginaw Valley State University, said his studies on the psychology of gambling have shown that sporadic reinforcement — that is, winning a small amount on rare occasions — can encourage people to spend more and more on gambling.

"From their point of view, they see it as something that might pay off," Peterson said. "Often, they think of themselves as the exception. They think they have a special system or special way of analyzing the situation and fail to take into account that the odds are set against them."

The professor said publicity of the lottery works a lot like the sights and sounds engineered at casinos, and said the excitement it triggers makes it more likely for "sporadic reinforcement" to be successful.

"All the bells and whistles are intended to arouse and excite," Peterson said. "And that can enhance risk taking."

The Rev. Elias Mumbiro, pastor at State Street United Methodist Church in Saginaw, agrees that gambling and the lottery in particular is a "destructive" force in the community.

"Our church's position on the lottery is that it is incompatible with our Christian teaching," Mumbiro said. "It impoverishes people."

The pastor said addiction to gambling on the lottery can cause people to dig deeper holes for themselves financially while hoping to win big.

"That's building castles in the air," Mumbiro said. "People who are addicted to playing lottery become so addicted that they use almost everything they have in the hope that they may win someday."

Villarreal said the Michigan Lottery cooperates with the state's Department of Human Services to provide those with a gambling problem a way to get help.

On the back of all instant tickets and other printed material, she said, is the number to the 24-hour Michigan Problem Gambling Help-Line at 1-800-270-7117. Printed next to it, Villarreal said, is the statement, "If you bet more than you can afford to lose, you've got a problem."

She said that, each year, the Michigan Lottery also contributes \$1 million of its proceeds to education and treatment programs for problem gambling.