



# Failed revitalization in Atlantic City, and the continued culture of crime

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By Jen A. Miller

On Monday, [two Canadian tourists were stabbed to death in broad daylight in Atlantic City](#). The aunt of the woman accused in the killings now says the assailant had a history of schizophrenia and homelessness.

The alleged attacker's mental state was just revealed today — too late to stop the knee jerk reaction from some media outlets, such as the *Philadelphia Daily News*, to run headlines like TOURIST DEATH TRAP on its cover.

That's more than a bit sensationalized considering Philadelphia has had 134 homicides so far this year. What happened on Monday constituted Atlantic City's seventh and eighth.

Plus, this crime also seems to be more of a tragic fluke than a plotted homicide — a woman with a history of mental instability's interaction with two women in the wrong place at the wrong time. One woman was 80; the other was 47.

However, this has put Atlantic City back in the national spotlight, and not in a good way. Is there violent crime in Atlantic City? Yes, absolutely. [According to the Press of Atlantic City, this is the third fatal attack on tourists in the last two years](#). But in a lot of ways, Atlantic City is the victim of state-sanctioned programs that continue to hold its head under water.

## **Atlantic City cannot be fixed from the outside in**

It's an old joke among Atlantic City casino workers that no one who works in the casinos actually lives in the city. I've been covering the Jersey Shore for five years, and of the dozens of people I've met who work in the gaming industry, only one lived in Atlantic City — and after one year, he moved to Margate.

Atlantic City is like any other poor urban area that struggles to hold on to middle and upper class citizens. There's no grocery store, but there are high crime rates in the city and affordable housing options in neighboring towns. Until there is a stable and safe environment, these casino workers don't have an incentive to live there. Until there are programs in place that help residents

get out of poverty, they won't have the education or experience to apply for those middle- and upper-class-paying casino jobs themselves.

Yet the focus of every past revitalization project in Atlantic City, [including the latest that kicked off in 2012](#), has been on the boardwalk casino and marina districts.

Yes, officials drone on about how this will lead to increased tourism dollars, but that only helps residents to a point.

The Atlantic City Alliance, which is a non-profit funded by the casinos, dropped \$20 million on a new "Do AC" ad campaign this year, and will spend \$30 million on the campaign in the next four years.

What if that money were used for resident job training instead? More police? Improvements to infrastructure? Improving schools? Subsidies for a grocery store so residents had at least one in the city's boundaries? Programs for the mentally ill? The homeless? What if that \$140 million were spent on improving the actual city of Atlantic City instead of begging tourists to come to the casinos?

We see the same problems with Camden, with Chester. Sure, you can drop a casino or an aquarium or a soccer stadium in town, but until the entire city improves, you won't turn those visitors into residents. They'll come in, enjoy whatever that one attraction is, then leave.

### **Casinos bring crime**

A 2004 Department of Justice study found that more than 30 percent of pathological gamblers arrested in Las Vegas and Des Moines had committed a crime in the past year. One third of those admitted they had committed robbery to pay for gambling debts, and 13 percent said they assaulted someone for money. Another study from economists from the University of Illinois and University of Georgia found that the addition of casino to a region lead to an increase in crime in three to four years after. The prostitution industry in Las Vegas doesn't just happen to show up on its own. It's there because of the casino culture.

We saw this happen in Philadelphia after casinos were added to the region. In 2010, a woman was robbed and pistol whipped outside of Philadelphia's SugarHouse Casino. In 2011, two men followed another SugarHouse patron to his N.J. home and beat him while trying to rob him of his gambling winnings.

The first casino opened in Atlantic City in 1978. That's 34 years for this to build. It's a knee jerk reaction to blame the people living in the city, but they are not entirely responsible for the culture of crime. Atlantic City's year round population is 40,000 and swells to 29 million in the summer. Given that gambling is a main draw, of course crime will follow.

When Pennsylvania was considering allowing casinos to open up in its borders, I was vocal about the problems that gambling brings. I've seen what it's done to Atlantic City. Are there nice restaurants and spas and things to do in Atlantic City? Sure. I struggled with this issue for a long

time, but I chose to continue to write about the casino's amenities because the casinos themselves will never go away, because people want to know about them, and I've enjoyed the non-gaming options myself. But evidence of the erosion gambling brings is evident when you drive through the actual city and see block after block — even those near the ocean — decaying. Not only can gambling be incredibly addictive and ruin lives, but crime follows: robbery. Assault. Money laundering. And, yes, homicide.

In the case of Pennsylvania gambling, though, my protests — and those of thousands of others — were drowned out by promises of adding quick and easy money to the tax rolls.

But as continued violence in Atlantic City proves, money is never quick and easy.