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Embezzlement a growing trend with problem gamblers

The legalizing of slots gambling seven years ago has brought a wave of white-collar crime by public officials and others in power



by [Mike Jones](#)

Staff writer

mjones@observer-reporter.com



by [Scott Beveridge](#)

Staff Writer

sbeveridge@observer-reporter.com

Washington Co.

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Many people feared slots gaming would bring rampant crime into Washington County after The Meadows Casino opened seven years ago.

But while petty crime has been on the decline in and around The Meadows Casino in North Strabane Township, police are noticing a growing trend where [public officials and others in power embezzle money to feed their gambling addictions](#).

“The only other problem area we have seen is the [larger cases of embezzlement](#),” North Strabane police Detective John Wybranowski said. “You’re starting to see a marked increase away from the casino, but it’s related to gaming.

“You see these crimes that are collateral to addiction,” Wybranowski said.

Washington County District Attorney Eugene Vittone said several people in prominent positions, including a local police chief, have been accused of stealing large sums of money to gamble.

That list includes former Cecil Township police Chief John T. Pushak, [who police say siphoned more than \\$10,000 from a federal account](#) to gamble at The Meadows and Rivers casinos over three years. The alleged discrepancies were uncovered in a February 2013 audit of the account created to fund drug sting operations and purchase related equipment. A search warrant affidavit alleges [he made ATM transactions at the casino using the police debit card](#).

Vittone wonders if [the problem is even more widespread](#) with families or nonprofits refusing to report thefts so they don't become public.

"You've got to have a good job if you're going to access that kind of cash," Vittone said. "It's going to be trusted employees handling that cash."

Unlike the surging heroin crisis gripping Western Pennsylvania, illegal gambling has long been a problem in Washington County, with much of it having centered around bookies or clandestine video poker machines in older towns that dot the Mon Valley, Vittone said. A lot of that crime was covered up, he added.

The difference now is the proximity and legality of slots gaming in the state, he said.

"It's a vice like any other," Vittone said. "I think it's always been intertwined in corruption."

[He said the heroin epidemic is the biggest problem he faces as a district attorney](#) in an office where the number of criminal cases it prosecutes increased from 2,300 in 2007 to 3,100 in each of the past two years.

"The problem is with heroin," he said. "I can't refocus off of that right now."

Addicted to gambling

Problem gambling is not unlike a drug addiction, said the leader of the Washington chapter of Gamblers Anonymous.

"You're going to lose control, do illegal things, because compulsive gambling is our drug," said Jim Pryor, of Wheeling, W.Va., who leads [Gamblers Anonymous](#) meetings at the Brownson House community center in Washington. "It takes control of your life."

He said he's been with the organization for 40 years, and started the Washington chapter in 1982 when most problem gamblers went to horse races or back-room poker games. Today, he said, most of the people who attend his meetings are addicted to casino slots machines or the illegal video poker games.

"It doesn't take long to get hooked," he said.

Most people who attend the meetings have committed some form of crime to get money to gamble, Pryor said.

“It’s the ones who hit the bottom who come once and you never see them again,” he said.

And gambling addiction has steadily increased since the casinos opened in Pennsylvania seven years ago, according to [Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board](#) statistics. The board has received 6,550 self-exclusion applications from problem gamblers asking to be banned from statewide casinos since 2007, when just 200 were self-banned. Fifty-eight percent of the people on the 2013 self-exclusion list are men.

Those who ban themselves from the casinos face arrest if they step onto the gaming floor and must forfeit their winnings if caught.

“That (self-exclusion list) has proven to be a very useful tool to help a good number of people who have a gambling compulsion to stay out of the casinos,” Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board spokesman Doug Harbach said.

The Meadows Casino, with state police on site and 1,242 surveillance cameras, is constantly looking for suspicious behavior, customers “who show signs of stress on their faces” and others who break their routines, said Sean Sullivan, the casino’s vice president and general manager.

“We know our customers. We are on our toes daily,” Sullivan said.

A gambler who drops more than \$10,000 in a certain time period also is reported to the Internal Revenue Service, he said. The casino also cooperates with law enforcement regularly to help prosecute criminals.

“I’m proud to be working for an entity that provides a tremendous amount of opportunity for the community,” Sullivan said, noting the casino has 1,400 employees and distributes \$10 million annually, money that is shared with municipalities in the county.

The state Gaming Control Board requires all casinos to include information on problem gambling in each of their advertisements. That information also rotates on the electronic sign at the Racetrack Road entrance to The Meadows Casino.

Petty crime not the problem

While the self-exclusion list has increased every year since 2007, petty crime in and around [The Meadows Casino](#) has steadily declined. According to state police crime statistics, property offenses, such as stolen vouchers or cash on the gaming floor, have dropped from nearly 800 cases in 2009 to a little more than 100 cases in 2013. There were a dozen alcohol-related calls and 11 drug offenses in The Meadows Casino last year, and no sex offenses reported there since 2009.

In fact, Wybranowski said, the biggest problems police investigate in their jurisdiction outside the casino are minor fender-bender crashes involving older drivers in the parking garages.

“From what we anticipated, (crime) didn’t turn out to be happening at the level we thought it would,” Wybranowski said. “So far, they’ve proven to be a fairly good neighbor.”

But the expansion of gambling in Pennsylvania hasn’t stopped with slots and table games in the casinos.

Vittone is now concerned about how [the recent expansion of small games of chance](#), such as 50/50 raffles or pull tabs in bars and social clubs, will exacerbate the problem and potentially create more addicted gamblers.

“It was a pretty broad expansion of what was already going on,” Vittone said of the small games of chance bill passed by state lawmakers in November.

“There’s official schizophrenia on what we’re doing with gambling.”