

December 16, 1997

Suicide Rate Higher in 3 Gambling Cities, Study Says

By SANDRA BLAKESLEE

The dramatic increase in legalized gambling in the United States may be leading to a significant increase in suicide rates among both residents of and visitors to communities where casinos are thriving, according to a new study on suicide and gambling.

In the study, Dr. David Phillips, a professor of sociology at the University of California in San Diego, examined death certificates in major gaming cities in the United States -- Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Nev., and Reno -- and found that suicide rates were up to four times higher than in comparably sized cities where gambling is not legal.

Because there is a long lag in the compilation of death certificates nationwide, it was not possible to determine whether the 24 states that have legalized casino-type gambling within the last 10 years have experienced a similar increase in suicide rates, said Dr. Phillips, an expert on suicide.

The study by Dr. Phillips is reported in the December issue of the journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. It is the first large-scale statistical investigation of gambling and suicide.

Earlier studies have shown that compulsive and pathological gamblers have many problems, including alcoholism and drug addiction, that contribute to suicidal behavior.

Still, several smaller studies have found gambling to be associated with increased suicide rates, white-collar crime, substance abuse and child abuse, Dr. Phillips said. For example, one study found that 3 of the 6 Atlantic City suicides for which the researchers had information probably occurred because of gambling problems.

Americans love to gamble, Dr. Phillips said, and spend nearly as much on gambling (6 percent of the G.N.P., according to a Standard & Poor's Corporation 1996 survey) as they do on family groceries (8 percent).

Dr. Lanny Berman, executive director of the American Association of Suicidology in Washington, praised the study as "quality sociological research," and said the next step would be to design smaller studies that compared gamblers and non-gamblers -- matched for age, occupation and other factors -- over time, to see whether gambling itself was the direct cause of higher suicide rates.

But Frank Fahrenkopf, president of the American Gaming Association, an organization in Washington that represents major hotel and casino companies, said legalized gambling might have very little to do with suicide.

Mr. Fahrenkopf cited studies that say that people moving to the American West, where suicide rates are highest, find themselves isolated and without personal support systems and that these factors, not gambling, explain why they kill themselves.

Dr. Phillips said he got the idea for his study after talking to people who run Gamblers Anonymous telephone lines in Texas. He said callers would say, "I've embezzled all the company's funds, my kids can't go to college, there's no money left for groceries and I don't see any way out."

To look for an association between suicide and gambling, Dr. Phillips examined death certificates that tell how people died. Las Vegas has the highest suicide rate in the nation, he said.

Based on suicide patterns, one would expect a city the size of Las Vegas to have had 310 suicides in 1990, for example, but he found that the actual number in Las Vegas was 497.

Visitors to Las Vegas also kill themselves at a higher rate, Dr. Phillips said. For most cities nationwide, 1 in 100 "visitor deaths" on average is recorded as a suicide. A visitor death means that someone from another state dies while visiting the city in question. In Las Vegas, 1 in 25 visitor deaths on average is a suicide, four times the national average.

"In the case of Atlantic City, we can trace what happened before and after gambling was legalized," Dr. Phillips said. (A similar analysis cannot be done for Las Vegas and Reno because gambling there was legalized in 1931 and mortality statistics do not go back far enough to allow such comparisons.)

Atlantic City legalized gambling in May 1978. Before casinos opened, the residential suicide rate for the city was indistinguishable from adjacent communities in New Jersey. In 1975, the expected number of suicides for Atlantic City was 45 and the actual number was 52, a statistically insignificant difference. **In 1990, after gambling had been in place for more than a decade, the expected number of suicides remained the same, but the actual number of suicides was 64 -- a statistically significant increase. In Atlantic City, 1 in 53 visitor deaths is a suicide, roughly double the national average.**

The study cannot say for certain which people are killing themselves at a higher rate, Dr. Phillips said. It could be the local gamblers or visiting gamblers, spouses or children of gamblers, non-gambling relatives of gamblers or non-gambling residents who work in the industry. Nevertheless, he said, gambling or some factor associated with gambling is linked with the suicide levels.

Gambling also creates economic benefits in many communities, providing jobs where unemployment used to be high. Some groups may benefit while others lose, Dr. Phillips said, a

trend that should also show up in mortality data. "I am starting to study that question now," he said.