



Gambling's lure is real concern, experts say

. By [John Harris](#)

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Melynda Litchfield refers to slot machines as the “crack cocaine of gambling.” She estimates she lost \$100,000 as a habitual gambler, “maybe more.”

Litchfield said she played slots five times a week at casinos in Joliet, Ill. Gambling consumed her life to the point she lost her job as a registered nurse.

As Litchfield's financial losses mounted, she said she contemplated suicide. She eventually cut gambling cold turkey. The last day she gambled, she said, was April 28, 2012.

“I always thought I was too smart and could outplay the slot machines, but that's not how it is,” said Litchfield, now an activist for the antigambling organization Stop Predatory Gambling. “It's as if I was putting (drugs) in my veins. It's almost a badge of honor if you have a drug addiction but not with gambling.”

With experts estimating nationwide sports gambling could become reality within five to 10 years, many antigambling advocates worry that could boost an already alarming number of those living with gambling disorders.

And that sports betting could lead to an addiction of other games of chance.

“I think in five years we'll see lots of folks pushing the margins of what is sports gambling,” said Northern Kentucky law dean Jeffrey Standen, who has taught and published scholarly articles and books related to sports and gaming law. “Some folks will get on the wrong side of that very blurry line.”

According to the National Center for Problem Gambling, 3.5 million Americans have a “pathological” gaming disorder. Another 6.2 million Americans participate in “problem” gambling, considered a less severe form of addiction.

The American Psychiatric Association defines a pathological gambler as someone with “persistent and recurring failure to resist gambling behavior that is harmful to the individual.” It is the most severe form of the disorder.

Problem gamblers account for 35 to 50 percent of all casino revenue, according to studies by the Institute for American Values, a New York City think-tank focusing on family and social issues.

“(Gambling) is being driven by very powerful financial interests who stand to make an enormous amount of money at the expense of the average American,” Stop Predatory Gambling national director Les Bernal said. “Predatory gambling — whether it’s lotteries, casinos and now potentially sports gambling — is an exhibition about how the system is rigged against everyday people.”

Bernal said sports gambling is a no-win proposition for participants.

“The bookies always win,” he said. “To win \$100, you’ve got to bet \$110. Sports gambling is not going to improve the lives of people in the United States.”

The consequences of gambling can be fatal. The National Council on Problem Gambling estimates 1 in 5 problem gamblers attempt to kill themselves — about twice the rate of other addictions.

“There’s so much collateral damage,” Litchfield said. “Gambling ruins lives. It decimates families.”