Prevalence Studies of Problem Gambling in the United States

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The rapid expansion of legalized gambling in the United States has produced tremendous demands for information about the number and characteristics of problem gamblers in the general population. This paper examines the results of prevalence studies of problem and pathological gambling that have been carried out in the United States. The discussion is largely chronological, with a focus on comparative findings from the 15 United States jurisdictions where prevalence studies have been completed since 1980. The results of these studies verify findings from clinical and experimental studies as well as suggesting important avenues for future research. The paper concludes with a consideration of the role played by survey research in advancing the field of gambling research.

In the 1970s and 1980s, in response to cutbacks in federal spending and declining tax revenues, state legislatures throughout the United States began to legalize many types of gambling. Initially, states legalized lotteries with weekly and then daily drawings. As these games
matured, instant games and then video games such as keno and poker were introduced. By 1993, 37 states and the District of Columbia operated lotteries; eight states had lottery keno games while video poker machines were legal in four states.

Casino gambling, once confined to Nevada and Atlantic City, has spread rapidly across the United States in recent years. This expansion has occurred in response to economic recession, rising state and local revenue needs and the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act of 1988. By 1993, there were 153 high-stakes bingo halls and/or casinos operated by Native American tribes located in 27 states (Connor, 1993). Other forms of casino-style gambling such as riverboats and low-stakes casino gambling, have also proliferated. By 1993, riverboat gambling was legal in six states while land-based casinos had been legalized in historic mining towns in Colorado and South Dakota as well as in New Orleans. While the money wagered legally in 1974 was estimated to be $17 billion, the money wagered legally in 1992 had reached $330 billion (Christiansen, 1993; Kallick, Suits, Dielman & Hybels, 1979).

In spite of debates about the essential nature of problem and pathological gambling and the most appropriate ways for governments to respond to this issue, the rapid expansion of legalized gambling in the United States has produced tremendous demands for information about the number and characteristics of problem and pathological gamblers in the general population. This paper examines the results of prevalence studies of problem and pathological gambling that have been carried out in the United States since 1980.

METHODS TO ASSESS PROBLEM GAMBLING IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

Until the 1980s, there were few studies of gambling and problem gambling in the general population. The only national prevalence survey of gambling and gambling-related problems in the United States was carried out in 1974 by the Institute for Social Research (Kallick et al., 1979). While the authors concluded that there were 1.1 million “probable compulsive gamblers” in the United States at that time, the methods they developed to identify problematic gamblers have been criticized (Nadler, 1985).