The Relationship of Ecological and Geographic Factors to Gambling Behavior and Pathology

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The current study examined the effect of neighborhood disadvantage and gambling availability on gambling participation and pathology. A national telephone survey included 2631 US adults. Census data was used to characterize the respondent’s neighborhood, and the distance from the respondent’s home to gambling facilities was calculated. Logistic and linear regressions were performed to predict gambling participation and pathology. Results showed that the neighborhood disadvantage was positively related to frequency of gambling and problem/pathological gambling. The presence of a casino within 10 miles of the respondent’s home was positively related to problem/pathological gambling. The permissiveness of gambling laws was positively related to any gambling in the past year, as well as frequent gambling. These results were interpreted to mean that the ecology of disadvantaged neighborhoods promotes gambling pathology, and that availability of gambling opportunities promotes gambling participation and pathology.

KEY WORDS: gambling; casino; availability; laws; neighborhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Social researchers have long recognized the importance of neighborhood ecological influences on problem behaviors such as criminal offending and substance abuse. For example, the classic work of Shaw and McKay (1969) positively related crime rates to what they termed “neighborhood disorganization” (Shoemaker, 2000). Shaw and McKay believed that in certain densely populated, economically depressed neighborhoods, the young people were influenced by cultural transmission of antisocial values and examples of economic success through crime. Recent research has connected neighborhood deterioration (residential mobility, single-parent households, vacant units, etc.) and disadvantage (families in poverty, unemployment, etc.) to adolescent violence, crime and substance abuse. (Boardman Finch, Ellison, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Elliott, 1994; Paschall & Hubbard, 1998; Stiffman, Hodley-Ives, Elze, Johnson, & Dore, 1999). Boardman and his colleagues used tract-level census data to show a positive relationship between “neighborhood disadvantage” and individual drug use after controlling for individual socioeconomic status. Neighborhood disadvantage was based on percent of persons below the federally-defined poverty level, percent of households headed by a female, the unemployment rate, and the percentage of families on welfare. This result, and many similar results, shows a true ecological effect of neighborhood milieu on individual behavior.

Another perspective for understanding addictive behaviors is the public health model. In the alcohol field, for example, there has been a long-standing controversy between advocates of the public health model, who emphasize restricting the availability of alcohol for the entire society, and advocates of the disease model, who emphasize treatment and other measures for the especially vulnerable “alcoholic” part of the society. (Beauchamp, 1980; Cahalan, 1987).

Neighborhood Characteristics and Gambling

There are reasons to believe that neighborhood characteristics might be related to pathological gambling. The finding that pathological gamblers are disproportionately poor and disproportionately members of a minority group provides reason for suspecting neighborhood effects, because poor people and minority members are