

Kids Gambling - And Losing

NEW YORK, July 14, 2003

Jeffrey Dervensky, of the International Center for Youth Gambling Problems, says studies indicate that compulsive gambling problems afflict up to 8 percent of young gamblers, compared with up to 3 percent of adult gamblers.

(AP) Whether with their friends at parties, at school or in solitude on the Internet, millions of American teens are taking up an ever-more-accessible national pastime - gambling.

Much of the action is small-time - underage purchases of lottery tickets, playing cards or dice games for spare change. But experts say the long-term stakes are high because gamblers who start young are the most likely to develop addiction problems.

"This is the first generation of kids growing up when gambling is legal and available virtually nationwide," said George Meldrum of the Delaware Council on Gambling Problems. "Casinos, racetracks - they take it for granted."

Nationwide statistics on youth gambling are scarce, but regional surveys suggest more than 30 percent of all high school students gamble periodically.

Middle-schoolers are following suit, as evidenced by the uncovering of a sports-betting ring at a Glenview, Ill., middle school last year. In Delaware, Meldrum's agency recently conducted one of the largest-ever surveys of student gambling; nearly one-third of 6,753 participating eighth-graders said they had gambled in 2002.

Those who gambled were much more likely than other students to smoke, drink alcohol, use illegal drugs and commit petty crimes, the survey found.

Such trends are the focus of research at the **International Center for Youth Gambling Problems, based at McGill University in Montreal**. The center's co-director, Jeffrey Dervensky, said studies indicate that compulsive gambling problems afflict up to 8 percent of young gamblers, compared with up to 3 percent of adult gamblers.

Adult gambling addicts may seek help when they realize their job or marriage is imperiled, but young people are less likely to do so, Dervensky said.

"These kids still live at home, and nobody's dragging them in, saying, 'If you don't go for help, I'm leaving you,'" Dervensky said. "These kids steal money, usually from their family. If you get caught, your parents are not going to turn you in."

Keith Whyte, executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling, said more than 80 percent of American adults now gamble at least occasionally - a possible reason for what he sees as a worrisome tolerance of youth gambling.

"We've had a number of parents say, 'Thank God, it's just gambling,'" Whyte said.

Sometimes, a parent's passion for gambling is passed on to an adolescent. That

happened in the case of Sarah, now a 31-year-old executive in New York City who accompanied her parents to Atlantic City casinos as a teenager, became hooked, and now attends regular sessions of Gamblers Anonymous to shake an addiction that plunged her into a six-figure debt.

"From the first time I actually sat down at a blackjack table and played, when I was 18 or 19, it was pretty obvious I wasn't normal," said Sarah, who asked that her last name be withheld. "I wouldn't want to get up even to go to the bathroom. I was a little crazy. It was all I wanted to do."

Sarah predicted that gambling will spread among young people because of the omnipresence of betting options and the availability of credit cards.

While most casinos try to keep underage gamblers off their premises, enforcement is a challenge. Ed Looney of the New Jersey Council on Problem Gambling said Atlantic City's casinos evict about 34,000 young people annually.

Looney and his colleagues visit dozens of New Jersey schools each year, discussing compulsive gambling and learning about the latest trends. A current fad at inner-city schools is see-low, a dice game played for money even by preteens, Looney said.

Looney said betting on sports is epidemic at colleges, and he estimated that 40 percent of New Jersey adolescents play the lottery, which is meant to be off-limits to anyone under 18.

Others complain that enforcement in many states is lax, and not enough public money is spent to help young gambling addicts.

"You see lottery ticket vending machines which say, 'Don't use if you're not 18' but who's patrolling them?" said Whyte of the National Council on Problem Gambling.

The recent survey in Delaware found that 9 percent of eighth-graders had gambled on Internet sites offering electronic forms of slot machines and card games. Many experts believe this type of gambling will become increasingly tempting to young people.

"The Internet provides the holy trinity of risk factors - immediate access, anonymity and, with use of a credit card, the ability to gamble with money you don't really have," Whyte said.

McGill's Dervensky is worried by Internet gambling sites that incorporate video-game technology.

"They give you an illusion of control, a sense that the more you play, the better you get," he said. "It's training a whole new generation of kids. Once they get their credit cards, they're off and running."

