

# More casinos does not mean more gamblers

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A new study from the University of Iowa suggests that casino growth does not lead to an increase in gamblers. The finding could impact how states view gaming expansion. Credit: Tim Schoon, University of Iowa

A new study out of the University of Iowa examined how casino growth in the state has influenced gambling by residents. The survey suggests that fewer Iowans gambled overall and also that fewer people have become addicted to gambling despite a recent spurt in gaming facilities. Casino gambling was introduced in Iowa in 1991. There are currently 21 casinos in Iowa, all but three licensed by the state. (The others are owned and operated by Native American tribes.)

The findings could affect expansion plans by casino operators and may influence how [policymakers](#) in Iowa, who must approve new casinos, view adding more gaming facilities, says Donald Black, a psychiatry professor at the UI who has been studying gamblers and gambling habits

since the late 1990s.

"It seems society reaches a [saturation point](#) beyond which additional gambling opportunities won't capture more people," says Black, whose study was published in the journal *Annals of Clinical Psychiatry*. "And that applies to problem gamblers, too. They all seem to adjust to it."

The survey asked 356 residents in eastern Iowa 18 years of age and older about their gambling activity. The respondents were slotted according to the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS), a known measure that ranks gambling behavior on a five-point scale, from no problems to addiction.

Black and his colleagues compared the results to similar surveys done in 1995 and 1989. The researchers report that the percentage of people who didn't gamble had risen to 83 percent in the most recent survey, versus 72 percent in the 1995 poll. Moreover, the percentage of non-gamblers in the latest survey was nearly as high as the 86 percent of Iowans who reported not gambling in the 1989 poll—before any casinos had been built in the state.

The prevalence of addicted gamblers, those with the highest ranking on the SOGS scale, also dropped in the most recent survey, from nearly 2 percent of [respondents](#) in the 1995 survey to 1.4 percent in the latest poll. This, despite a doubling in the number of casinos—from 10 in 1995 (including three racetracks that added slots that year) to 21 currently.

Still, the number of self-reported gambling addicts was far higher than the 0.1 percent who claimed a gambling addiction in 1989.

That suggests "casinos have had a great impact (on [problem gamblers](#))," Black notes, "but it has stabilized."

Bolstering that notion, the percentage of residents who say they gamble

occasionally (ranked 1 or 2 on the SOGS scale) had dropped to 14 percent in the latest survey from 23 percent in the 1995 survey.

Black adds that the results, although limited to Iowa, should hold true elsewhere. He said the findings substantiate a theory, championed by Howard Shaffer, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, who looked at the impact of gambling in casino-rich Nevada and found that the number of people addicted to gambling was not disproportionately higher than other states.

Black likens the public's fascination with casinos as a child with a new toy. Sure, it's interesting at first, but at some point "it's lost its novelty," he says.

Gambling was legalized in Iowa in 1975 with the introduction of bingo. A state lottery followed in 1985, and dog and horse tracks were added in 1985 and 1989, respectively. Riverboat casinos were legalized in 1989, and the first three casinos, in Bettendorf, Dubuque, and Davenport, opened two years later. The state collected \$116 million from casino gambling last fiscal year, according to the Iowa Racing and Gaming Commission.

The [survey](#) was conducted between 2006 and 2008 during a family study of problem [gambling](#). The UI partnered with the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at the University of Northern Iowa on the poll.

Provided by University of Iowa

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