

Jackpot mirage

Lottery sales are up, and desperate people are losing

BY CHRISTINA QUICK

If there is a silver lining to the economic recession, it could be that some forms of gambling are in decline. Many casinos and racetracks have reported decreased revenue as Americans scale back on travel.

But in some states, lottery sales have increased as down-on-their-luck consumers purchase tickets in hopes of scoring a windfall.

“Some people who wouldn’t normally take a risk are now trying to get back what they’ve lost,” says Jerry Prosapio, co-founder of Gambling Exposed in Crestwood, Ill., a Christian organization that opposes all forms of gambling. “They’ve lost jobs. They’ve lost everything. And so they buy these scratch-off tickets in hopes of getting quick cash.”

Prosapio has experienced the devastating effects of gambling. He started wagering on poker games as a third-grader, enjoying the rush that came from winning. In high school, he spent his free time hanging around racetracks, observing the events like an apprentice studying a trade.

At 21, he took his first trip to a casino, where he lost all his money but saw a stranger win

big. That was all it took.

“The Bible says in Proverbs 14:12, ‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death,’” Prosapio says. “Winning became my goal in life.”

That goal nearly destroyed Prosapio. Though he married and became a father, the gambling addiction grew. In the first two years of his marriage, he maxed out 17 credit cards and borrowed additional cash from family and friends. After exhausting his other sources of money, he accepted a loan from an organized crime syndicate.

When Prosapio fell behind on the street loan, a member of the mob showed up at his door, threatening his wife and infant son.

“That was hitting bottom for me,” Prosapio says. “I knew I was not only risking my own life over this, but now my family as well.”

Prosapio joined a chapter of Gamblers Anonymous. Eventually, he accepted Christ as his Savior and broke free from his addictions. That was 26 years ago.

“Everything I thought I could get by gambling — happiness, peace of mind, fulfillment — I’ve

gotten by not gambling,” Prosapio says.

Today, Prosapio shares his story in churches, where he says he encounters many Christians secretly in the throes of gambling. In one Assemblies of God church, he says he met a husband and wife who were both compulsive gamblers to the point that they couldn’t put food on the table.

For Christians, playing the lottery may be more of a temptation than other forms of gambling because some believe purchasing tickets is somehow more acceptable than visiting casinos.

In a Gambling Exposed survey of teens in church youth groups and Christian schools, 47 percent said someone in their extended family whom they considered Christian purchased lottery tickets. One in three teens said a Christian in their immediate family played the lottery.

Assemblies of God Chaplain Glen Ryswyk, a nationally certified gambling counselor and clinical director of the Christian Family Counseling Center in Lawton, Okla., says any form of gambling — including the lottery — can lead to addiction.



Gambling Exposed co-founder Jerry Prosapio says lottery ticket displays, like this one in Crestwood, Ill., prey on the vulnerable.

“I see the lottery as a gateway to more significant and destructive forms of gambling, much like marijuana is the gateway to harder drugs,” Ryswyk says.

There is also a risk that playing the lottery can become the primary addiction, he notes.

“I have heard of people spending their whole paycheck on lottery tickets,” he says. “As with other forms of gambling, a win becomes a curse. They have to go back and get a bigger win. Money is no longer the motivation. Money is only a means to play. They’re chasing the high of the win. That’s why it’s so addictive.”

More than half of all states with lotteries reported increased sales in the second half of 2008, particularly in daily games and instant scratch-offs. Some states have proposed measures for ex-

panding these games to make up for budget shortfalls in difficult economic times.

Scratch-off ticket sales represent big money for state-run lotteries. During the last week in April, instant tickets accounted for 71.8 percent of lottery tickets sold in Texas, bringing in more than \$51 million, according to the Texas Lottery Commission.

Charles Mattix, pastor of First Assembly of God in Barstow, Calif., has seen firsthand what gambling does to a community.

Located two hours from Las Vegas, the economically depressed city of 24,700 is rife with tragic stories of gambling addiction.

“The wife of one of our church members told me her husband has been so addicted to gambling that their family has been nearly torn apart,” Mattix says.

The availability of lottery tickets at virtually every corner service station only adds to the problem, Mattix says.

“Unemployment, predominately minimum wage earnings and government-assisted income is the breeding ground for the lotto smorgasbord,” Mattix says. “Purchasing gas at the local convenience store, I see insolvent seekers standing in line to buy their tickets. Their aim is to become rich with minimal investment, with dreams of quitting their jobs and living in mansions.”

The likelihood of a big lottery win is slim, to say the least. Mike Orkin, author of *Can You Win? The Real Odds for Casino Gambling, Sports Betting and Lotteries*,

calculated that one person purchasing 50 lottery tickets a day would strike it rich once every 5,000 years.

James Walsh, author of *True Odds*, put it another way by saying a lottery player is much more likely to die of a flesh-eating bacteria than to win the jackpot.

The biggest losers are often those who can least afford to play. Lottery tickets often sell best in the most impoverished counties, which could explain why the lottery industry targets the poor with strategic marketing.

Prosapio says a billboard displayed a few years ago in a Chicago ghetto featured a lottery ticket and the slogan: “This could be your ticket out.”

“The wheels behind gambling are covetousness and greed,” Prosapio says. “In order for you to win, somebody else has to lose.”

The Assemblies of God opposes all forms of gambling. According to the Fellowship’s official position paper, gambling is wrong because it disregards responsible stewardship, involves a game of chance at the expense and suffering of others, is inconsistent with the work ethic taught in Scripture, and tends to be habit forming.

“Gambling is a pseudo form of grace,” Ryswyk says. “People are searching for life, for the answer to their hopes and dreams, in something other than God. Yet it’s quite phenomenal the number of people I see in gambling counseling who are people of faith. There are a lot of hurting people in our midst who need the true grace that comes from a relationship with Christ.” [tpe](http://tpe.org)

CHRISTINA QUICK is a freelance writer and former *TPE* staff writer. She lives in Springfield, Mo., and attends Central Assembly of God.

E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.