

Suicide at Detroit casino—the human cost of legalized gambling

Larry Roberts
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Last Wednesday afternoon, January 26, a gambler committed suicide after losing thousands of dollars in the high-roller VIP section of the newly opened MotorCity Casino in Detroit.

Solomon Bell, 38, an off-duty police officer from suburban Detroit, lost between \$15,000 and \$20,000 in wagers that day, first at the MGM Grand Detroit Casino, and later at MotorCity Casino. After losing \$3,500 at the blackjack table, at \$500 a hand, Bell pulled out his service revolver and shot himself in the head.

Bell's suicide came as a shock to many Detroiters, who have been told that the establishment of casinos would be a boom for the city, creating jobs and an economic revitalization. The MGM Grand Detroit Casino opened in April 1999 and the MotorCity Casino opened this past December. Billions of dollars have been poured into the casinos, including millions from the city to acquire land and infrastructure to house the gambling businesses, even as hospitals for the poor are closed because the city does not have a few million dollars.

However, for those who have followed the casino industry and its tremendous growth, last Wednesday's events did not come as a surprise. "We expect people to commit suicide," said Sheilah Clay, agency director for a program that runs a hotline for gambling addicts. "But to do it in the casino, that's shocking."

Clay reported that 5 to 7 percent of casino patrons become addicted, and those addicts have a high rate of suicide. Within the nine months casinos have existed in Detroit her office has received calls from 12 people threatening to kill themselves. "In those cases," reported Clay, "we've kept them on the line until we could get someone physically to the place they are."

Clay's experiences are echoed in national reports

investigating the gambling industry. A report published by the National Gambling Impact Commission reported that 5 million Americans are pathological or problem gamblers, and another 15 million are at risk. A second report published by the National Research Council, part of the National Academy of Science, reported that "pathological gamblers are far more likely to commit crimes, run up large debts, damage relationships and kill themselves."

In both Atlantic City and Las Vegas, the largest casino resorts in the US, suicides have become commonplace, a byproduct of the industry itself. In Atlantic City, three people committed suicide within an eight-day period in August after suffering massive losses at the betting tables.

News reports stated that following Solomon Bell's suicide the MotorCity Casino continued its operations on three of four floors. Only the floor where the shooting occurred was emptied, provoked primarily by the panic of witnesses to the suicide. However five hours after the suicide, even before the blood on the carpet had dried, high-stakes betting was continued.

In their short period of operation, the Detroit casinos have proved extremely lucrative. MGM Grand Detroit has pulled in more than \$1 million a day in profits, more than its parent Las Vegas resort, according to 1999 fourth-quarter earnings reports.

Solomon Bell was the type of person the casinos seek to attract. As a suburban policeman he made \$75,000 last year in salary and overtime, owned several cars, and was buying a \$134,000 home. The majority of casino patrons are Detroiters with far less means—generally working people, many poor, hoping to hit it big and move out of poverty.

The odds are always stacked against people who enter the gaming halls. Winning margins are set by the

casino operators, with the aid of computers, and are always in favor of the owners. The only winners have been those who invested in the casinos, often with very little money, and have walked away with millions at the expense of people like Solomon Bell.

What has spurred the growth of the gaming industry in the US? The drive by big business to cut costs led to the wide-scale destruction of jobs in the late 1970s and early 80s, unopposed by the unions. Autoworkers, steelworkers, rubber workers and airline workers, to name just a few, were hit with massive job losses, leading to levels of poverty unseen since the 1930s. In Detroit, as the auto industry cut jobs and spun off its auto parts manufacturing, often to nonunion companies, the incomes and communities of workers were devastated.

Significantly, the attempt to bring gambling into Detroit was strongly opposed for close to 20 years. Beginning in 1976, casino proponents tried four times to pass referendums to legalize casinos in Detroit, defeated each time by large margins. At that time the political establishment, including the present Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, a Democrat, and Michigan's Republican Governor John Engler, opposed the construction of casinos.

In 1993 a fourth Detroit referendum on casinos was narrowly defeated. By 1994 the views of the political elite had changed. Casino proponents, with the support of the news media, claimed the new Windsor, Ontario casino, across the river and directly in view of downtown Detroit, was taking in money that Detroiters could be using to rebuild the city.

The 1994 vote was also assisted by a new element seeking to get in on the action: black businessmen and the clergy who were promised they would personally benefit from the establishment of gambling in Detroit. Millions of dollars were spent to sell the casinos to the public as its savior. The 1994 referendum, the fifth attempt in 18 years, finally passed, paving the way for the construction of casinos.

Until the late 1980s gambling existed only in Atlantic City and Las Vegas. Today, a person can make a legal wager in every state except Utah, Hawaii and Tennessee. Thirty-one states, including Michigan, have casino-style gambling, and thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia operate state lotteries. An industry that was once an exotic rarity has become a \$600

billion industry, and is growing.

Detroit was once proudly called the auto capital of the world, but in the year 2000 there are only two remaining auto assembly plants within the city limits. In their place, garish casinos have sprouted up, surrounded by poverty and blight.

Gambling is at best an unhealthy industry that accentuates the inequality in society, acting as a cash nexus, transforming everyone and everything into a commodity. Culturally, the growth of the gambling industry is yet another example of social decay, a parasitic enterprise that appeals to the worst instincts: greed, individualism and indifference.



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