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# Violence in Gambling Environments: A Cause for Concern?

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The co-relationship between violence, addiction and crime has been much reported. However, the relationship between violence, crime and gambling is only just emerging. The National Gambling Impact Study Commission (1999) reported that the advent of casinos would bring increased violent crimes especially more domestic violence and child abuse. In the US, this appears to have happened. For instance, Mullen, DenOtter, Wadman, Tran and Anderson (2002) found that intimate partner violence was predicted by pathological gambling in the perpetrator. Furthermore, the US National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling (2003) reported that with the opening of casinos in South Dakota, child abuse and domestic assaults rose by 42 *per cent* and 80 *per cent* respectively. Cano and Vivian (2001) identified a strong link between life stressors (particularly financial stress) and husband to wife violence. The underlying cause of the frustration, embarrassment, guilt and aggression experienced by the gambler (or spouse) is the financial stress caused by losing.

Traditionally, socially disadvantaged groups, when frustrated are prone to resorting to aggressive behaviour for several reasons. Berkowitz (1993) states that when underprivileged individuals do not meet societal expectations they will continually assess their self-worth. Acting aggressively may be an important outlet of expression and frustration (if not the only one available). Aggressive behaviour in gambling environments is probably reinforced through gaining status in social groups through such displays of power and dominance. In gambling environments, any number of different contexts may trigger a violent incident (eg, violence generated by frustration over losing a large amount of money on a machine). This article particularly concentrates on potential trigger factors in the gambling environment itself.

In research looking at the causes of pub violence (eg, Farnsworth *et al*, 1990; Leather & Lawrence, 1995; Beale, Cox, Clarke, Lawrence & Leather, 1998), a number of factors have been isolated as contributing to violent episodes. Many of these appear directly applicable to the gambling environment:

- the type of punter (eg, blue collar/manual customer groups are more violent than white collar; “regular” customers are less violent than passing trade);
- the nature of the environment (eg, allowing the decor to deteriorate sends out the wrong message to players);
- the nature of the overall organization (eg, the potential conflict between control over sales and pressure to return high profits);

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- other factors (eg, players under the influence of alcohol);
- behaviour of the staff such as (i) staff themselves may facilitate violent incidents if they themselves are incapable of handling disputes, (ii) poor customer care, and (iii) unsympathetic response to customer problems (such as faulty payout on slot machines).

Of all the surveys considering crimes against business in the UK, none have specifically considered abuse and violence in gambling environments. Two major national surveys have considered crimes against businesses. These are the British Retail Consortium (BRC) surveys (see for example the Retail Crime Survey, 1999) and the Commercial Victimization Survey (Mirrlees-Black & Ross, 1994). To date the BRC have conducted seven national surveys of crimes against businesses. These surveys measure crime through head offices of business and have a coverage of around 44,000 outlets per year. However, the BRC survey only considers crime against retailers. This sector is broken down into business types (such as off-licences, DIY shops etc.) with gambling establishments being covered in the “other” business types section. Therefore this survey hides the true extent of crime involving gambling in this “other” business category.

The Commercial Victimization Survey is another major national survey to consider crimes against businesses. This was published by the UK Home Office in 1995 and it covered around 3,000 retail and manufacturing premises. Some gambling businesses were covered by the survey but the extent of crimes against them was hidden as they were covered under the general category of “retailers” thus making it impossible to establish the extent of crime against them. There have also been some smaller “localized” surveys of crimes against businesses. The largest two surveys were the Small Business and Crime Initiative surveys conducted in the Belgrave and West End areas of Leicester in September 1995 and 1997 (Tilley & Hopkins, 1997). The total sample of businesses interviewed was 894 in 1995 and 965 in 1997. Eleven of these were gambling establishments – all of which were bookmakers (four in 1995 and seven in 1997). Though this sample is small, it does give us some indication as to the rate of victimization in gambling environments. In sweep one of the survey three out of four gambling environments experienced abuse (75 *per cent*) and one violence (25 *per cent*). These prevalence rates are fairly high when compared to other business types (such as pubs, hotels and eating places). On average, a victim experienced two incidents per year which is lower than business types such as pubs and hotels though comparable to businesses such as restaurants.

It has already been acknowledged that the sample of gambling establishments in each survey is small. However, if these are merged there is an overall sample of 11

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gambling environments. Of these premises, seven (64 *per cent*) were victims of abuse over a period of 12 months, and two (18 *per cent*) were victims of violence. There was an average of 22 incidents of abuse per 100 gambling environments and 3.6 incidents of violence per 100 gambling environments. A victim of abuse would be expected to experience around 3.5 incidents of abuse and two incidents of violence per year. These statistics perhaps give an estimation as to the risks of abuse and violence for gambling establishments in general. Hopkins and Griffiths (2001) made a return visit to a victim of abuse and violence. From these limited data they were able to establish a number of clear reasons why gambling environments generated abuse and violence. It is apparent that gambling environments have many of the common “lifestyle” attributes that generate abuse and violence against staff. For example:

- They appear to have a ready supply of potential offenders. These are obviously people visiting the business to gamble. Many gambling environments (eg, betting shops, casinos, amusement arcades) are male dominated environment and males are more likely to be violent and aggressive than females.
- Female staff may be viewed as “easy targets” by the predominantly male customers. Staff may also lack interpersonal skills and/or training to reduce the risk of violence being triggered within the premises.
- There is a lack of formal guardianship on the premises (such as security guards or CCTV). It has often been suggested that increasing guardianship will discourage potential offenders from engaging in violent crimes.
- They constantly handle cash. Research has generally shown that businesses where money is constantly handled have high risks of experiencing incidents of abuse and violence (see Hopkins, 1997). Tensions can arise when wrong amounts of change given (often accidentally).
- Customers are likely to become frustrated over losing money on the machines. This may lead to aggressive and violent behaviour.

Though the data are limited, it appears that gambling establishments may have higher risks of experiencing abuse and violence than many other business types. It is apparent that more data are required here on both the national and local level. Both the BRC and CVS do not measure abuse and violence specifically against gambling establishments, and data at the local level are limited.

### Implications for Management of Gambling Environments

On a logical level, there are many different ways in which the problem of violence and abuse at work can be tackled. This could be anything from the changing of organizational policies and procedures, redesign and marketing of the organization and/or better selection and training for managers and staff. The following points of action could be important in the prevention of violence and particularly useful in promoting peace within gambling environments

(after Farnsworth *et al*, 1990).

### Good Housekeeping

Good housekeeping sets the standards by which others, in part, decide their own behaviour. Furthermore, it creates a socially attractive environment that helps to limit frustration and keep flashpoints to a minimum. Simple (common sense) measures include:

- Removing “silent” irritants and keeping a “clean” environment.
- Avoiding letting the environment becoming unpleasantly stuffy or smelly.
- Avoiding an undue build-up of cigarette smoke.
- Avoiding unpleasantly high or low room temperatures.
- Keeping floors and other surfaces clean.
- Keeping the environment tidy and not allowing a build up of debris.

### Good Hospitality Management

Staff working in gambling environments should try and build up a good knowledge of their punters and develop a good relationship and rapport. Greeting people, acknowledging them and conversing with them creates an atmosphere that reduces the likelihood of violence. Such contact facilitates early (diplomatic) intervention in potentially difficult situations. Simple (common sense) measures include:

- Welcoming people as they come up to the counter to get change.
- Being visible (eg, making yourself known to the punters and them to you).
- Being diplomatic wherever possible and appropriate.
- Remaining vigilant at all times.
- Knowing the nature and early signs of violence (eg, raised voices, body language, rowdy behaviour, etc).
- Treating the customers with respect so that they respect you.
- Acknowledging those that are waiting that you will be with them as soon as possible.
- Not giving preferential treatment (ie, not having one rule for some and another for others).

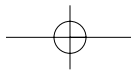
It is also worth noting that violent behaviour can in part stem from both drinking alcohol and drug taking (both which have similar effects). Drugs and alcohol distort individual perceptions and intellectual processes in ways that make explanations less likely to be accepted, and disputes and violent interactions more likely. It is also worth pointing out that (i) it is not uncommon for pubs and gambling environments to be closely situated from one another and (b) gamblers are more likely to (ab)use both alcohol and drugs (Griffiths, 1994; Griffiths & Sutherland, 1998).

Though the data are limited, the research evidence suggests that gambling environments experience high rates of abuse and violence when compared to a number of other business types. Therefore, these specific establishments appear to have a number of “lifestyle” characteristics that generate abuse and violence. Here we have identified a

number of these characteristics. For example, the gambling environment will often attract a ready supply of offenders to the premises and it is able to trigger incidents as customers become frustrated over losing money on bets and sometimes become involved in disputes with staff over stake money or odds given on bets. In addition to this, there are a number of other environmental factors noted that may help to generate incidents (such as the general appearance of the shop, untidiness and so on) and it is apparent that the behaviour of staff can in some circumstances help to escalate incidents.

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