



2-15-2005

Cynthia Kerber on Gambling

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Recommended Citation

Schlenker, Charlie, "Cynthia Kerber on Gambling" (2005). *Interviews for WGLT*. 113.
https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/wgl_t_interviews/113

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Riverboat Casinos market to Senior Citizens. But, a new study shows that may not be the best thing for older Americans. WGLT's Charlie Schlenker has more with a nurse and scholar....

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Charlie Schlenker: Cindy Kerber is a Professor of Nursing at Illinois Wesleyan University. She has studied gambling among college athletes and is now doing research on senior citizens and gambling

Cynthia Kerber: Many older adults are gambling for recreation. One in twenty of these individuals who gamble as a hobby though has the possibility of developing a problem related to gambling. There's two types of gamblers: action seeking gamblers, those that gamble because they love the thrill, and then those that gamble to escape boredom, for grief reasons, for depression. Older adults in general tend to be more escape gamblers.

Charlie Schlenker: That one in twenty who's a potential problem gambler—are seniors more likely to develop problems with gambling than other groups?

Cynthia Kerber: Seniors are being targeted recently with media attention because of the increased prevalence of gambling in some of—some early reports. A study looking at the number of older adults who gambled say prior to the lottery in 1975 was 50% lower than the same survey conducted in 1998 and when there's more people that participate in a recreational activity that can become addictive like gambling, the prevalence of problems related to that activity increases as well.

Charlie Schlenker: But are seniors more susceptible to problems than other age groups?

Cynthia Kerber: Older adults are at particular risk because with the onset of retirement and perhaps a loss of a spouse or a close friend, those are two of the most difficult life-changing situations for older adults, and other stresses that often occur with aging such as

coping with a chronic illness or loss of ability or socioeconomic change may lead older adult recreational gamblers to develop the compulsive gambling habits.

Charlie Schlenker: That runs counter to what my assumption would have been. I would have assumed that if you've made it to senior status without an addictive behavior, you'd be more wary of it from having from having seen consequences to others through life, but that's not so apparently.

Cynthia Kerber: No, in fact, there's stories of older adults who have developed compulsive gambling behaviors, then sought treatment, and then share their story with others who say, "I've been a very responsible individual all my life. I've managed the finances for my home, my family, my business." But the changes of aging were difficult to deal with and for whatever reason they ended up developing problem behaviors. In fact, older adults can develop problem gambling behaviors in a shorter time period, one to three years, compared to younger adults who start gambling and then perhaps have problems.

Charlie Schlenker: If the senior potential problem gambler rate is one in twenty, what is it for other demographic groups?

Cynthia Kerber: For the college athlete population, the prevalence tends to be 15-20%. A population of male athletes would be higher than female athletes. For adults in general, anywhere from 2-3% is the national average.

Charlie Schlenker: If seniors do get into trouble with addictive gambling, are the consequences more severe for them than for other age groups?

Cynthia Kerber: Well, an older adult who is on a fixed income or who uses their entire life savings to gamble with has less an opportunity to recoup that loss that's nearly impossible to replace and in that respect it would make it perhaps more disastrous for the older adult.

Charlie Schlenker: Do you notice a coincidence of other problems with gambling addiction among seniors?

Cynthia Kerber: Certainly alcoholism, also co-morbidity with affective disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders. A newly-released study looking at VA patients indicated also post-dramatic stress disorder as being a co-morbid problem.

Charlie Schlenker: In addition to the general aging factor that seems to promote it they—

Cynthia Kerber: Yes.

Charlie Schlenker: As Shakespeare would say the second childishness that comes upon us all. Does your work suggest any policy actions to deal with this issue?

Cynthia Kerber: What I do think is important is that more people in the healthcare profession assess for problem gambling in older adults.

Charlie Schlenker: How do they do that?

Cynthia Kerber: Well there's a two-question questionnaire, it's called the Lie/Bet Questionnaire, that's very helpful. We ask the patient if they have ever had to lie to family members or friends about their gambling habits or if they've had to increase their bets to get the same desired effect.

Charlie Schlenker: And if it's yes to both, then that's a problem, but if it's yes to one?

Cynthia Kerber: Then it's a problem as well and it deserves further assessment. Because of the devastating effects of problem gambling behaviors both for the older adult and also for their family or friends, it really necessitates further investigation. Pathological gambling in general is known as the secret addiction, so it's difficult for anybody who develops this problem to share it with someone. Older adults in particular are less likely to talk about behavioral health problems to healthcare professionals, so it's important that we ask them.

Charlie Schlenker: Cindy Kerber is a Professor of Nursing at Illinois Wesleyan University. She says seniors who believe they have problems with gambling make call 800-866-LAST BET for help. I'm Charlie Schlenker, WGLT News.