Crime rising with gambling

Bad checks, theft show biggest gain

By GREG GARLAND
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Legalized gambling is adding to Louisiana's crime problems as some people cover gambling losses by writing bad checks, embezzling from employers or stealing from others, the state's district attorneys say.

However, most of the district attorneys say gambling is not a major factor in the crime rates of their communities, at least so far. They characterize the impact of gambling on crime as "minor" or "moderate."

The state's district attorneys offered their views on gambling and crime in response to a survey sent to them by The Advocate. All but four of the state's 41 district attorneys responded.

The district attorneys who responded said their assessment of gambling's impact on crime was based on their own knowledge of cases, and on interaction with other law enforcement authorities.

"I think we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg as far as gambling-related crime in Louisiana is concerned," said Grant Parish District Attorney Edward L. Tarpley Jr.

He said he already has had several criminal cases, including embezzlement cases, in his sparsely-populated, central Louisiana parish in which gambling is an element.

"As more people gamble and incur large gambling debts, we can expect some of them to resort to embezzlement, theft, forgery or issuing worthless checks in order to cover their gambling losses," Tarpley added.

In general, The Advocate's survey found that:

• Gambling is having its most direct impact in a growing number of worthless check cases. Some district attorneys reported dramatic increases in that crime category due to gambling.

• The types of crimes and social problems with gambling links run the gamut, from embezzlement, theft and burglary to insurance fraud, suicide and child abuse or neglect, among others.

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Advocate staff photo by Bradley K. Bigley

Jefferson Davis Parish District Attorney Michael Cassidy leafs through a day's worth of bad checks that area merchants turned over for collection recently. Cassidy said gambling has helped push bad check cases to all-time highs in his rural parish.
District attorneys on gambling

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East Baton Rouge Parish

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— Bernard Boudreaux Jr.
Iberia, St. Martin, St. Mary parishes

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Caddo Parish

Crime

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- Video poker — the form of gambling most widely accessible throughout the state — was cited by a majority of district attorneys as the type of gambling that is generating the most problems for them.
- Most of those who said overall crime rates have risen in their districts over the past three years also said that new forms of legalized gambling introduced during the period were a factor in the increase.
- Of 26 prosecutors who said their crime rates were up, 18 said gambling was a factor. Two said their crime rates were about the same, but likely would have gone down without gambling.
- With few exceptions, the case of a Baton Rouge man who was followed, robbed and killed after he left a Bossier City riverboat casino with $30,000 in winnings, gambling is not contributing to violent crime.

In written comments on The Advocate’s surveys, and in interviews, several district attorneys cautioned that trying to gauge the impact of gambling on crime in their communities is difficult and subjective.

“We are not always sure why a person commits a crime,” noted Cadot Parish District Attorney Paul Carmouche.

“It is difficult to assess the impact of gambling on crime because jobs have to show that a crime occurred and that the accused did it,” Carmouche said. “Motive is not an element of a crime that we need to prove. Therefore, gambling may be a much larger factor in crime than we know.”

Bernard E. Boudreaux Jr., the district attorney for Iberia, St. Martin and St. Mary parishes, also pointed to difficulties in drawing links between gambling and crime.

“Crime connected with gambling can basically only be established by the defendant’s statements,” Boudreaux said.

“The only criminal activity to which I can point as being directly related to gambling is the increase in worthless check cases. There are other areas, but I cannot say with any degree of certainty that they are related to gambling.”

Boudreaux said he believes that gambling is “having an adverse impact on the crime problem” based on his 20 years of experience in the district attorney’s office, but he said it is too early to establish a clear pattern.

In the survey, the DAs were asked whether they were seeing crime related to gambling in their districts and, if so, how they would characterize the impact — major, significant, moderate, minor, insignificant or no impact.

Boudreaux was among 15 district attorneys to characterize the impact of crime on his district as “moderate.” Another 15 said gambling is having a “significant” impact on crime in their districts.

None said gambling was having a major impact on crime, and only one said it was having a significant impact. Five said gambling was having an insignificant impact and one said it was having no impact.

East Baton Rouge Parish District Attorney Doug Moreau said the problem of gambling-related crime may not be severe yet, but that he expects it to increase in coming months and years.

Moreau said common sense tells him that financial pressures on some who lose more than they can afford gambling inevitably will lead them to illegal behavior.

“It’s not a static situation,” Moreau said. “I believe it (gambling) is going to have a major impact. You will not know, statistically, the effect until it’s too late.”

District Attorney James M. “Jim” Bullers, whose northwestern Louisiana district includes Bossier and Webster parishes, said gambling has had a positive economic impact, but added that “social ills” are evident.

“Gambling and alcohol being available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is too much temptation for some people,” Bullers said. “We see an immediate impact in property crimes and family violence increases... Property crimes are up — especially in the bad check/forge/forgery/credit card fraud category.”

Bullers said his office has dealt with four embezzlement cases over the past two years — in amounts ranging from $200,000 to $250,000 — in which gambling is a known or suspected factor.

“We hadn’t seen that kind of embezzlement,” Bullers said. “There’s definitely a downside to it (gambling). We do have some problem gamblers now who are turning into thieves.”

Bullers said he recently added an assistant district attorney to his staff and an investigator, in part due to an increased case load from two riverboat casinos in Bossier City.

Ouachita Parish District Attorney Harp Ray Lumbard said his first gambler, Camille Buras, estimated gambling has increased that office’s workload from 15 to 25 percent. She listed embezzlement, bad checks and theft as the biggest problems.

When asked to identify crimes in their districts that have involved gambling, the most frequent was bad checks followed by forgeries, credit card fraud and embezzlement.

Thirty-one of the 37 district attorneys who responded to the survey identified bad checks as a problem. Most frequently was bad checks, forgeries, credit card fraud, followed by embezzlement.

Jefferson Davis Parish District Attorney Michael Cassidy said worthless checks are also on the rise in that southeast Louisiana parish, which is located near areas with truck stop video poker and casinos in Texas and Indian casinos.

Cassidy said his office normally sees its biggest influx of worthless check cases around Christmas and at the start of school, but said things have changed this year.

“In June, my office received the same number of cases as we normally receive at Christmas and the beginning of school combined,” Cassidy said. “It was the busiest month in the last four years. I hope it’s not a sign.”

Cassidy said 123 worthless checks were turned over to his office on just one Tuesday in June — which he described as “extremely high” for his parish of only about 50,000 people.

Cassidy said the number of cases is involved in a number of worthless check cases because residents who come in a few times a week to cash out a gambler and ask for cash need to be sent to the office, and when they are sent to the office, they are asked for warrants.

Like most district attorneys, Cassidy sends certified letters to people who write bad checks, advising them they have 30 days to pay or a warrant will be issued for their arrest.

The offense is a felony with more than $1500 involved.

While most DAs said gambling is causing crimes problems to one degree or another, some said it has not been enough of a problem to cause reason for concern.

Robert A. Pitre, Jr., executive assistant to Jefferson Parish District Attorney John Joseph Manoukides, wrote that the impact of gambling on crime there was “insignificant, just another forum for the types of crimes that would likely be committed elsewhere.”

Ayorelles Parish District Attorney Eddie Knoll said an Indian casino and video poker have caused some crime problems, but that gambling also has
brought benefits to the community.

"Although gambling has had some impact on crime in our community, the Indian casino, particularly, has had some significant positive effects such as an increase in employment and economic development," Knoll said.

James D. Caldwell, the district attorney for rural Madison, Pemias and East Carroll parishes, said legalized gambling had a positive impact there — not only economically, but on that region's crime rate.

Caldwell said sports book and other illegal gambling forms historically have caused most of his district's crime problems attributable to gambling. Legalized gambling has reduced those problems, he said.

Besides off-track betting and video poker in truck stops and bars in the area Caldwell represents, there are riverboat casinos a few miles away in Vicksburg, Miss.

"We feel legalized gambling has actually prevented a rapidly increasing crime rate because of employment benefits and transferring clientele from illegal gambling 'dives' locally to highly controlled environments... where they have a better atmosphere, free drinks and visible law enforcement, strictly controlled," Caldwell noted.

When asked to list in priority order the types of gambling that are causing the most crime problems, video poker topped the list by a sizable margin. Video poker is widely and easily accessible in Louisiana.

Seventeen of the district attorneys who responded to the survey listed video poker first as the type of gambling causing the most problems, with six listed that form of gambling second in their ranking.

"Video poker seems to have the most impact, with people writing worthless checks to get money to put into them," wrote Calcasieu Parish Assistant District Attorney F. Wayne Frey.

Frey said riverboat casinos there are "a close second" in impact on crime.

Ironically, video poker has provided a source of revenue for pay raises for district attorneys and assistant district attorneys since the pay hikes were granted in 1992. The pay raises cost $5.4 million annually.

Pete Adams, executive director of the Louisiana District Attorneys Association, said state government is obligated to provide money for the raises, regardless of what happens with video poker.

"If video poker ceased tomorrow, the state would have to find it some other way," Adams said, adding that the prosecutors are not dependent on video poker for the money.

While video poker ranked high on most of the district attorneys' lists as a source of crime problems, eight prosecutors with riverboat or Indian casinos in their districts listed those forms of gambling first or second.

Seventeen more district attorneys with riverboats or Indian casinos near their districts reported that those casino facilities are having an impact on crime in their districts.

The lottery, sports book and illegal gambling, charitable bingo and other forms generally were listed lower on the priority lists of types of gambling causing the most problems.

Four of the state's 41 district attorneys did not respond to the Advocate's survey on gambling and crime. They were: Harry Morel Jr. of Hahnville, John F. Rowley of Chalmette, William R. Coenen of Rayville and J. Reed Walter of Jena.