

NEW YORK

Inside New York's Illegal Gambling Dens

'Numbers' schemes and poker rooms are the most common types of illegal gaming in the city

By Tyler Blint-Welsh and Ben Chapman

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An alleged illegal gambling den located just three blocks from a New York Police Department precinct in Brooklyn's Crown Heights went unnoticed by officers until four men were shot and killed there just before dawn on Oct. 12.

But across the city, court records show, the police have raided scores of suspected underground gambling operations, and have gone to court to shut down at least 15 in Brooklyn so far this year.

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From high-stakes Texas Hold 'em matches in an unassuming building in Midtown Manhattan to a juice bar selling illegal lottery numbers to a variety store with slot machines, underground gambling operations can be found in all five boroughs, court records show.

Police officials said at the Triple A Aces Private & Social Event Space, the alleged gambling den in

Crown Heights, more than a dozen patrons were wagering bets on dice and card games when gunfire erupted, leaving three wounded in addition to those killed. Detectives believe a gambling dispute or robbery may have motivated the deadly shooting in the Crown Heights neighborhood down the road from the 77th Precinct, officials said. An investigation of the matter is ongoing, and no arrests have yet been made.

The shooting demonstrates how illegal gambling can lead to violent crime, police officials say.

"It's a very dramatic example, but you don't want to have a quadruple homicide," said Robert F. Messner, Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Civil Enforcement for the NYPD. "You don't want to have illegal operations going on in a community, because it makes the community feel unsafe."

The most common type of illegal gaming in New York City are lottery operations known as "numbers" activities, followed by poker rooms, Mr. Messner said. "Occasionally we'll see a casino-type case but those are pretty rare," he said.

The NYPD is generally alerted to illegal gambling by the complaints from neighbors, Mr. Messner said. An investigation follows, with undercover officers often placing wagers to build cases that lead to the dens' closure, he said. Sometimes, police conduct several stings before raiding the alleged den.

The NYPD sometimes files nuisance abatement lawsuits against the businesses where they say the illegal gambling took place. The court actions can lead to property owners and store proprietors facing fines, temporary closure of their business or ongoing inspections from police.

The NYPD filed 167 nuisance abatement suits against businesses and properties that have housed alleged illegal gambling or drug operations from July 2017 through December 2018, city data show. Brooklyn had the most with 51 such actions.

Police raided an alleged numbers racket run out of a room with a secret door at the El Duende Deli and Grocery in Brooklyn last year after several sting operations in which undercover detectives placed small bets, according to court records. This April, police filed a nuisance abatement lawsuit in State Supreme Court in Brooklyn, seeking to close down the deli. The deli was fined \$2,000 and was subjected to up to a year of unannounced inspections from the police, according to a settlement in the case.

A lawyer for the grocery store declined to comment.

At a space in a commercial building on West 45th Street in Midtown Manhattan, undercover detectives said they saw people playing poker with casino-style chips on four separate occasions between May and November in 2018, according to court records. Officers said they bought between \$500 and \$1,000 in chips during the visits before eventually arresting three people.

A spokesperson for the Manhattan District Attorney said the case has since been sealed and declined to comment further.

Police filed a lawsuit against the property owner of the alleged poker den in February, court records show, but the case was discontinued because the tenant had moved out.

Julio Laracuenta, a former Brooklyn resident who ran a so-called numbers scheme for more than a decade, said the low stakes of those operations rarely led to violence, but gambling dens like the one in Crown Heights can be dangerous.

"A lot of people come to try and steal your money. And there's a lot of places like those," the 62-year-old said in an interview.

Mr. Laracuenta, who now lives in New Jersey, said he no longer sells numbers after being fined for his involvement in an alleged operation at a variety store in Brooklyn. Four police raids between March 2017 and January 2018 resulted in 16 arrests and the seizure of slot machines, an

MP3 player with bags of heroin hidden inside and thousands of dollars in cash, according to a nuisance abatement lawsuit.

He was fined \$3,000 and was forced to consent to unannounced police inspections for up to a year, according to a settlement in the case.

Mr. Laracuate said that no matter how many resources police pour into cracking down on gambling, they will only ever find a fraction of all the schemes in the city.

“If they checked all the grocery stores in New York City, forget it,” he said. “Out of every 10, nine sell numbers.”

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