CASINOS A GLITZY TRAP FOR MANY IMMIGRANTS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

Saint Paul Pioneer Press (Minnesota)

October 30, 1995 Monday METRO FINAL EDITION

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Section: MAIN; Pg. 1A

Length: 1969 words

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Series: Gambling on the Future

Body

To the ***immigrant***, ***casinos*** represent all that is America: The lights are ever bright, the action always fast, and the rooms perpetually sing with the sound of easy money on metal. For ***many*** of the Twin Cities' ***Southeast*** Asians, gambling provides a way to avoid depression and cultural isolation. It is a way to belong - if only to an illusory America.

But going to a ***casino*** to escape depression is like jumping from the jaw of the crocodile into the jaw of the tiger, warns Chom Chanh Soldaly, a case manager at the Hennepin County Medical Center's addiction medicine center.

"Quite a few family take the paycheck, go straight to the ***casino***, and come home with nothing," Soldaly says. Earlier this year, Soldaly and a researcher from the University of Minnesota conducted door-to-door interviews to gauge the extent of problem gambling in the Hmong community. Time and again, people reported that gambling had destroyed their families.

"They look to get out from some depression symptom or PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). Then they end up gambling because they have nothing to do. Lots of family are dependent on public assistance, and there are quite a bit of the people who work - husband and wife - and end up gambling, too. They lose their job, they lose their house."

Addiction specialists are growing increasingly concerned about the effects of gambling on ***Southeast*** Asian families. The downward spiral is all too familiar: the gambler loses an entire paycheck at a ***casino***, then "chases" the debt by borrowing more money. Soon there is nothing for rent or food. No money for gas to get to work. Children are neglected while parents gamble, and endangered by poverty and hunger if mother or father lose.

"We have bicultural workers who keep running into symptoms that, when you start to explore, relate back to a gambling problem. 'My parents are fighting,' or 'We don't have enough food in the house.' When they start to trace that back, you find often that there's no money and it's got a gambling root," says Bob Popken, executive director of United Cambodian Association of Minnesota, whose organization is developing an intervention program.

"They have little or no disposable income, so anything they lose is magnified greatly over people who have more disposable income," Popken says.

In Laos and other ***Southeast*** Asian countries, people might gamble once a year on a holiday such as the New Year. Games are informal and might include animal fighting contests. The odds of winning are about equal.

Observers say newcomers to this country don't fully understand that unlike gaming activities in their homelands, American games favor the ***casino*** - or, in the case of the lottery, the state. Newcomers need to understand how chasing a gambling loss can lead to an inexorable cycle of debt, desperation and compulsive behavior, experts say.

However, efforts to help ***Southeast*** Asian compulsive gamblers are stymied by language barriers, distrust and lack of a culturally appropriate treatment model. The confessional, 12-step "Minnesota model" is ineffective with these populations. To admit a gambling problem and to admit financial failure is more shameful than acknowledging a drug or alcohol addiction.

Still, the issue has begun to surface. During family gatherings held at United Cambodian Association of Minnesota, Cambodian ***immigrants*** have named gambling as one of the four biggest problems plaguing their community.

"The problem is increasing," says Vuthy Pril, a counselor trained in chemical dependency and compulsive gambling. "The majority of gamblers live in public housing area and they don't have a whole lot of money. They probably cut short on their budget, which they should spend on food.

"They have their children nearby when they gamble, and they play too late at night. Children maybe 2, 3 years old or younger. They're out playing until midnight and their children should be in bed," he says.

Although people rarely broach the subject in community meetings, Pril takes it upon himself to raise the issue. Though most people are casual or social gamblers, he says he advises people to curb their activity or stop altogether. Rarely will someone admit he or she has a problem.

"It's not something that's easy to bring up. It's even harder than drinking problems or other drug problems. It's shameful," Pril says.

Cambodian tradition includes holiday betting, and perhaps some gambling to fill empty time after the rice harvest. Gambling is not seen as immoral behavior, but being out of control is not acceptable. Gambling is not new, Popken says - what's new is that the societal controls that were in place in Cambodia have not survived the move to the United States.

When Cambodians come to this country, they find that the gambling experience is much different than it was in their homeland, Pril says.

"Now we have new things like lottery. And ***casino*** is a major one that people tend to lose a lot of money in this country," Pril says. "A lot of Cambodian people do not understand the probability of gambling, how much chance that you win from slot machines. So therefore they just keep gamble in the hopes that they will win.

"They know that they're going to win sometimes, but they don't know that the probability of losing is more. They lack education. If they have some education, a good understanding of how much chance they have over the dealers, then they probably make a better decision whether to gamble or not."

William Yang, director of the Hmong-American Partnership, became concerned about compulsive gambling among ***Southeast*** Asians in 1992 while working in St. Paul Mayor Jim Scheibel's office. Yang was dismayed to learn that ***casinos*** were sending buses to Hmong neighborhoods and giving people cash or coupons to use for gambling. People would board the bus, leave children at home and gamble the night - and their paychecks - away.

Although the ***casinos*** have stopped sending buses to public housing areas and ***Southeast*** Asian neighborhoods, Yang remains deeply concerned about compulsive gambling in the Hmong community.

Although he knows of some Hmong who play the lottery and Powerball, Yang is most concerned about ***casino*** gambling because it is so attractive and so easy. Even people with no English skills are able to play blackjack.

"We'd like to have something set up, let's say an outreach program, which would be able to educate (about) the dangers of becoming a compulsive gambler. But so far nothing has been done," Yang says. There is little money

available to fund outreach programs aimed at ***Southeast*** Asians, but Yang argues that it would be cheaper to pay for education now than pay for treatment later.

Worse than opium

The University of Minnesota's substance abuse treatment program focuses on special populations, including the Hmong. Of the average 130 patients the program sees each day, more than a third are ***Southeast*** Asian, according to psychiatrist Dr. Sheila Specker.

"One of the things that we found in treating them is we can deal with their opium addiction, but they continue to gamble. They use all of their family resources, whatever income they get from welfare, on gambling," Specker says. "It becomes just as much, if not more, of a problem than opium. In fact, the families would rather have them using opium, because they know where they are. They're home in their room vs. out gambling."

The University of Minnesota program is one of the only treatment programs capable of treating ***Southeast*** Asian opium addicts because it employs bilingual workers. The staff is conducting a study of patients to determine the pervasiveness of gambling.

"One of the problems is that even though we know they're gambling, because we see them do it right out the door, they'll deny it. They won't acknowledge it to us when we directly ask the questions," Specker says. "It's more shameful to acknowledge a gambling problem than it is their opium use."

The university would like to develop a program to treat gambling addiction, but the program would need funding to support a staff position for a bilingual worker, she adds.

"One of the problems is that they don't have any skills to function in this society. So as long as that continues, the chances of rehabilitation aren't great. So part of the program is being able to teach people some basic skills about how to get along in our culture."

Ken Winters is a University of Minnesota researcher who has done a variety of studies on compulsive gambling for the state's Human Services Department. Winters earlier this year developed a strategy for measuring the extent of problem gambling among ***Southeast*** Asians.

A team of a social worker and Hmong counselor Chom Chanh Soldaly sought out families where gambling was thought to be a problem. Intensive, home-based interviews seemed to work well, Winters says.

"We did find that we could get people talking about it and they would open their doors up," Winters says, adding that Soldaly already knew through informal networks where gambling was a problem.

"It's going to take an outreach worker from the community to help us find people and to establish the trust, but it looks like you also need someone well-trained in addictions, probably from our culture, to serve as sort of the key professional in executing some kind of intervention and treatment."

Winters hopes that the "home-based model" builds trust to a point where eventually people with gambling troubles will enter a standard treatment program. Winters notes that once word got out in the Hmong community that Soldaly was a contact person, Soldaly began to get unsolicited calls from people seeking help.

Education is key

Education about the risks of gambling must start young, according to Roger Svendsen of the Minnesota Compulsive Gambling Hotline. Svendsen, who also serves on the governor's advisory council on gambling, is working with the ***Southeast*** Asian Community Coalition on Youth and Families to develop a gambling-education program.

In addition, Svendsen has met with a variety of mutual aid organizations, which assist ***immigrants*** with cultural assimilation issues, and he believes these organizations will play key roles in educating ***Southeast*** Asians about

American-style gaming. There is much to learn about the dangers of overdoing this form of entertainment, Svendsen says.

"Some of it has to do with boredom. What is there to do, for the older people, if you can't understand TV, if there aren't plays or movies in your native language, if the radio isn't meaningful and you don't really understand the sports? A fairly culturally neutral place with excitement and glitz would be some of the gambling environments," Svendsen says.

"We know that some of those people are vulnerable. We know that a lot of people who get into trouble with gambling are in trouble because of separation events, a death, a change in job, a way to deal with loneliness, a way to deal with lack of vitality in life."

Soldaly agrees. He says it is important for Hmong people, particularly the elderly, to find ways to fill their time besides sitting around feeling homesick and depressed. He suggests classes on lifestyle issues that include tips on "healthy" gambling, courses on English as a second language, or no-stakes card games with other elderly or unemployed people.

"They are at home without nothing to do - just four walls. Like being in jail, is what people said. They need help desperately," Soldaly says. Gambling, he adds, "is a disease - contagious."

"The Lao folk say that if your house burn down, you lose everything but you still have land to build new house. But if you game, you can sell everything and you lose everything," Soldaly says. "Gambling is more worse than having a fire burn."

Notes

One in an occasional series

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: FAMILY (90%); WAGES & SALARIES (88%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (88%); PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS (77%); MENTAL ILLNESS (77%); MAMMALS (75%); INTERVIEWS (73%); POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (72%); HUNGER IN SOCIETY (72%); MANAGERS & SUPERVISORS (71%); EXECUTIVES (70%); CHILD ABUSE (62%); DISPOSABLE INCOME (60%); POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS (50%)

Company: TWIN CITIES PEPSI (58%)

Organization: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA (56%); UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA (56%)

Industry: GAMBLING (90%); ***CASINOS*** (90%); ACADEMIC MEDICAL CENTERS (75%)

Geographic: MINNESOTA, USA (92%); SOUTH-EASTERN ***ASIA*** (88%); ***ASIA*** (88%); CAMBODIA (79%); LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (76%)

Load-Date: October 21, 2002

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