

An Investigative Report by Amy Zietlow

Seniors in Casino Land

Tough Luck for Older Americans



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A Casino Land Report

IAV and its partners are conducting a series of investigations called “Casino Land: America in an Age of Inequality.” The goal is to understand the meaning and role of casinos in American life—how they work and what they do, the values they embody and transmit, their impact on civil society, their connection to government, and their relationship to the rise of American inequality. This report is a part of that series.

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Seniors in Casino Land

Tough Luck for Older Americans

Introduction

As with many adventures, I didn't know I was on one until I was deep in the belly of a south Louisiana casino where thirty-five-cent bets flowed faster than the free Diet Coke. My elbow rested on the walker of a silver-haired gentleman as I craned my neck to hear him over the sounds of the Lucky 7s slot machine. He worried I was going to waste all my money, and I thanked him for his grandfatherly concern. As our attention returned to the screens before us, we sank into silence, enveloped in waves of pulsating sound and light.

As a parish pastor and a hospice chaplain, connecting to the lives of older Americans had led me to kitchen tables, hospital bedsides, and even prisons. I am no stranger to those literally facing death or to those thinking about how deadly their lives have become. In every place, my role is not to give answers but to listen and help those around me find sources of hope in the midst of despair. My work often serves the most vulnerable populations, especially seniors, and has resulted in my fervent belief that everyone deserves to age with dignity and grace on their own terms, connected to places that give their lives meaning: homes, neighborhoods, favorite restaurants, places of worship, local parks, even shopping centers.

Should casinos be added to this list? I had never thought much about casinos, in part because frequenting one never appealed to me personally. As a pastor, I had heard passing mention of bus trips to the casino, but when I started doing some research into the topic, I was shocked to learn that seniors often name gambling as their *favorite* form of entertainment.¹ According to the American Gaming Association's *State of the States* annual report, casino gambling has become one of the country's fastest growing industries: commercial casinos in the twenty-three states that license them earned more than \$37 billion in gross gaming revenue in 2012 alone.² One-third of the U.S.

population visited a commercial casino in 2012 and more than half of those people were aged fifty and older.³ Little research was done on trends in geriatric gambling until the late 1990s, when the National Gambling Impact Study Commission reported that the number of older adults who had ever gambled in their lifetime had more than *doubled* from 35 percent in 1975 to 80 percent in 1998.⁴ A flurry of studies soon followed, focused mostly on compulsive and problem gambling.

When I did a search engine query for “seniors and casinos” on the Internet, I found that almost every casino website offers special marketing incentives and identifiers for the over-fifty-five crowd.⁵ Some promote breakfast and lunch deals for the “golden grays,”⁶ and dub the niche market of senior women “the blue hairs.”⁷ The “third of the month club” is a come-on for older adults who head straight to casinos after receiving their social security checks.⁸ Well-stocked with wheelchairs and scooters, casinos often provide more handicapped spots than are required by law. Casino bathrooms are supplied with disposal boxes for diabetic needles and attendants keep a stash of adult diapers on hand.⁹ One casino in Nevada even introduced an in-house pharmacy where 8,000 slot club points cover the \$25 co-pay.¹⁰ Writing about casinos, Gary Rivlin coined the phrase “day care for the elderly,”¹¹ a description that quickly caught on with other journalists.

Could this be true? Is fifty-five considered elderly? If so, are casinos becoming day care for the fifty-five and older set? Both the casino industry’s definition of elderly and the concept of casino-as-day-care offended me. Still, I had to admit, I had never been to a casino, let alone in the middle of a weekday when most seniors visit.¹² My IAV colleagues encouraged me to find out—to visit casinos, eat at the buffets, play the slot machines, and talk to as many seniors as I could—so I checked out local casinos in four different communities: on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, in the farm country of northwest Iowa, and two big city venues in Yonkers and Queens, New York. I met gracious seniors at every turn, most well past their fifty-fifth birthday, many with mobility and health challenges, all looking for a meaningful way to pass the time. They told me about their lives and helped me to understand what drew them to the casino.

I discovered an artificially constructed world: Casino Land. However, unlike Disneyland, coined the “happiest place on earth,” I came away from my four visits to Casino Land feeling deeply sad. On first glance, I discovered positive aspects, for instance the level of accommodation made for those with physical disabilities. But on further inspection, questions arose. Why are casinos so friendly? Why take such pains to make those who struggle with basic necessities like an affordable meal, toileting, even walking, feel welcome? The answer always came back to the slot machine. The mesmerizing design of the ubiquitous electronic gambling machine absorbs the time and money of many seniors, while exploiting their loneliness, idleness, and boredom. When seniors wonder, “What else do I have to do?” casinos answer, “Sit here, put your money in until it’s gone, and maybe you’ll be ‘lucky’ (wink, wink).”

Casino advertisements show exuberant couples nestled at slot machines, laughing and cheering one another on. This is not what I found. I met solitary individuals who often came back to life, happy to engage in conversation only after I broke into their slot machine-induced trance. Casino proponents may claim that the “fun” and “conversation” I experienced is normal, but it is not. I had to work to engage people. Nothing in the environment—from the dim lighting to the level of machine noise—encouraged conversation or interaction with other humans. Sitting at a slot machine felt like being stranded in the ocean in a small inner-tube, trying to connect to other isolated swimmers against the persistent undertow.

I spent about three to four hours visiting each of the four casinos on my list, arriving around 11:00 a.m. and leaving around 3:00 p.m. Although I cover more detail about the two casinos in New York, all of my experiences were fairly interchangeable. In retrospect, my excursion felt like one long casino trip that started in Baton Rouge and concluded in Queens. I did not formally recruit participants, but simply sat down next to strangers, asked questions, and listened.

This is my report from the glitzy, senior-filled world of Casino Land. 

"Good Luck to You!"

On a weekday morning I drove down River Road in Baton Rouge to Hollywood Casino, which has 27,000 feet of gambling space and more than 1000 slot machines. Like many states that prohibit land-based commercial casinos, Louisiana calls this venue a "riverboat" casino. To be sure, the "riverboat" perches on water, in this case the Mississippi River, but in size and construction it is clearly not intended to float anywhere. At 11:30 a.m., the parking lot was nearly full. Valets offered casino-logoed scooters to disabled passengers. Nurse's aides, clad in scrubs, pushed wheelchairs from a nursing home van into the brightly lit facility amid shouts of "Good luck to you!" Inside the lobby, an elderly man slept with his walker at his side.



Searching for the buffet, I asked directions from a blazer-clad security officer, who pointed me on my way, adding another jovial "Good luck to you!" I sat down next to Carol and Herb, a married couple in their seventies.¹³ Herb sported an ornate cane with a carved stone handle. I shivered a bit and we commiserated over the cold temperature inside the casino. "You have got to bring a

jacket!" Carol advised. They come to the casino at least twice a week, they told me, but they weren't planning to play that day. They had come for the \$2.99 Senior Buffet.

Like most Americans who favor electronic gambling, video poker is their game.¹⁴ When they learned that I had never played the game, they warned me not to lose all my money. "Get a card," Carol instructed, though she warned that my card would be red, not gold like hers. She has worked her way up to "celebrity" status.

“They take care of us,” she said of the casino staff. If they win any money, a security guard escorts them to their car. They feel safe. Their friend, Norm, passed by and shared good news: his wife had won \$4000 the previous day. After Norm left, Carol said, “I think we should go play a little . . . I can’t believe Janice won that. We’re already here, we might as well play.”

Leaving the buffet, we entered the three floors of gambling. In a fog of red, blue, and gold lights, slot machines—some old-fashioned looking and some with modern, pixilated graphics—clanged and shook, throbbed and pulsed. No one talked. Silver-haired people, mostly alone, sat scattered throughout the floor. Professional caretakers assisted the wheelchair-bound.



I made my way to the penny slots, one of the thousands of interchangeable machines that, like an arcade game, becomes “your machine” for a period of time. Every machine requires a minimum bet, and machines have a range of bet thresholds—dollar, quarter, nickel, penny, etc. There is an intricate system of computerized reels that “spin” electronically with each bet, however, so you are never simply betting the minimum unless you can figure out how to tell the machine to do just that. During my four casino visits I did not figure it out, and no one I asked could teach me how to bet the minimum. And to be clear, most of the people with whom I spent time play these machines for several hours a day, several days a week, and still they could not clearly explain to me how they work.

I sat next to a gentleman at the Lucky 7’s slot machine, his walker at his side. As mentioned in the opening of this report, the ambient noise of the

machines made conversing with him a challenge. I repeated my questions several times and craned my neck to hear his answers over the din.

“I’ve never played this machine before,” I said. “Is it hard?”

“Huh?” He paused, blinked, “Nah. It tells you what to do . . . You want to get 7s. If you get blue, red, or green, you can get extra spins.”

After the machine spit back his five-dollar bill, he explained the casino “receipts,” which he doesn’t entirely trust, but is often forced to play because, like a soda machine that refuses to accept crumpled currency, the slot machines can be picky as well. If taken, our inserted money becomes a receipt that can then be inserted into other machines or converted back to money by the cashier. He explained that these machines, though technically penny slots, require a bet of at least thirty-five cents to play—a number that reflects a penny on each computerized reel that virtually spins. You can better higher, though. I watched for a bit and then gave it a try. I started to push the button marked “50,” but he stopped me: “Don’t do that! Just bet the lowest to get used to it. You don’t want to lose your money so fast.”

I thanked him for the advice, played a few times and cashed out my receipt. I stopped for some free Diet Coke on my way to another floor. There I met a petite lady with a cane sitting at one of the slot machines with computerized graphics. I asked if I could sit at the adjoining machine. She looked up, and said, “Sure, cha.”

“I’ve never played this machine. Any advice?”

“Oh, just hope it wins!”

I went to put my receipt for ten dollars in credits into the machine. “You don’t have a card?” she asked.

“No, do I need a card to play?”

“Well, it’s doesn’t help you win, but you can get free stuff with one. Just show them your driver’s license and they’ll get you started.” I resisted the temptation to mention that the casino player card is a form of consumer data-mining. As John Kindt, an economics professor and gambling critic says “The information gathered by casinos is second only to the Patriot Act, but casinos are financially motivated. Once they know your gambling patterns they market to your likes and dislikes to lure you back.”¹⁵

Since I still didn’t have a card, I went ahead and simply inserted my money and asked my neighbor, “Okay, what next?”

“You’ll want to play all five wheels. You can bet different amounts.” I noticed that she kept playing “50,” so I asked if 50 was her thing.

“No, I just always play the second button, whatever it is.”

“Okay, I will try that, too.”

“Oh no, no! You play the lowest. Don’t waste your money like that.”

I mentally noted that she was now the third senior to worry about my wasting money as we sat wasting money in a slot machine. So I played “25.” As I hit different combinations of reward and loss she explained them to me. When I somehow managed to get my ten dollars back, I cashed out. As my receipt printed, she said, “Good for you! That’s the way to do it. Break even.”

I sat back and asked, “Do you come here often?”

“Well, not as much as I used to. My husband has been real sick, in the hospital.” She sighed. “Almost lost him. We used to get to the big casinos on the coast all the time. We finally got to Marksville a few weeks ago. We come a few times a week.” She paused. “It’s something to do.”

It was time to leave, so I began searching for the cashier located on the top floor of the gambling boat. I passed movie posters and neon lights on my way. I turned in my receiptt, received my ten dollars, and the cashier offered a final, “Good luck to you!” I instinctively replied, “And also with you.” Immediately my face turned red, and I felt desperate to retract my liturgical statement and explain that I don’t actually believe in luck. She looked to the next patron, oblivious to our ritual exchange. Flustered, I left. As I traversed the steeply inclined ramp off the gambling boat, the hollow yet upbeat refrain “Good luck!” trailed my every step.

I thought about the people I had met thus far and realized that few, if any, fit the casino definition of “seniors” as over-fifty-five years of age. Most were easily over seventy, if not eighty, an observation confirmed by future visits. I also quickly and consistently saw that trying to have a conversation proves quite challenging, especially for those with hearing or vision impairment. I repeated myself a lot. The casino environment is carefully designed to get players to melt into the machine. To talk to someone, I had to break their visual trance and overcome the din of bells, bass tones, and competing carnival-type melodies. Nothing about the setup encourages group socializing or one-to-one conversation. I felt like I was trying to square dance inside a strobe light. An awkward and frustrating task, until we purposely changed the focus of our attention from the machine to each other. 

Killing Time at the Slots

My adventure continued at the Argosy Casino in the northwest corner of Iowa in Sioux City. Open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the casino has three floors of gambling and more than seven hundred slot machines. Like the Baton Rouge “riverboat casino,” Argosy sits on the Missouri River, under the shadow of Interstate 29, the pink and turquoise stucco façade facing industrial buildings and traffic. I’ve persuaded my brother, Craig, to join me on this midday visit. A gigantic picture of a smiling old couple on the side of a black casino shuttle van greeted us as we approached the covered walkway to the gambling boat. “They look happy,” my brother commented. Many casinos offer a theater and numerous restaurants in addition to the gambling attractions, but the Argosy doesn’t fit that description. It boasts just one small restaurant near the front entrance, a simple snack bar on the second level, a customer service desk, and ATMs. Its main attraction is lots and lots of slot machines.



After passing through the main atrium, we walked through a narrow gate with a security guard who checked our IDs and our bags, then nodded us through. We entered the boat down a short, steep ramp, but had no sense that we were on the water. There were no windows and the ceilings were low. Fluorescent overhead lights competed with the busy pattern of the carpet. Our eyes were drawn to the rows and rows of machines. It was very cold, like in the Baton Rouge casino, and I was thankful I had remembered to bring my sunny yellow cardigan (thanks, Carol!).

My brother and I split up with ten dollars each. Craig sat down at a machine featuring cute kittens but felt a little goofy playing it. When he said hello to the silver-haired lady at the next machine and asked how she was doing, she looked a little surprised and soon left. He moved a row over to a more generic slot machine and asked the gray-haired gentleman next to him how it was going.

“Oh, same old, same old.”

They continued to play, when suddenly the man’s machine hit a jackpot. Exploding electronic sounds—jangling virtual coins, a fanfare of whistles and bells—announced the win as the credits racked up.

Smiling, Craig said to the man, “Hey! You won! That’s great!”

“I guess,” the man shrugged. “My wife will be happy.”

As the machine’s hyperactive fanfare continued the man sat as still as before and simply waited for the exuberant celebration to end.

Meanwhile, I was speaking to Simon, a balding man in a faded, denim shirt and khaki pants. When I first sat down, I asked if he minded if I watched him to learn how to play this machine.

“Sure, just killing time.”

I explained that I was visiting family nearby and came to check out the casino. He shrugged and smiled kindly. “It’s not much, but it’ll do.” He told me that he drives here from Nebraska almost every other day to play. I ask, “What’s the best you’ve ever done?”

“Other day I took about \$80 off this machine, but I don’t really remember . . . It’s just something to do.”

I asked about the restaurants, whether the food was any good. He admitted that he didn't really know. "I tend to just stop by the snack bar. They have pizza and hamburgers, if you like that kind of thing."

We talked about the Plymouth County Fair, part of why I was visiting the area, and Simon described himself as a retired farmer. "Used to grow melons—watermelons, muskmelons . . . We used to come down for the fair every year."

"Do you visit any other casinos?"

"Nothing local, but I've been to the big casinos down in New Orleans. Now, that's a big time. But I like a small boat like this." He explained which machines he likes best. He couldn't remember their names but he knew where they were located: "Well, there's this one. I like to sit here 'cause I can see who comes in and leaves. Then there's one along the back wall. I go there when I want quiet and that one seems to give me lots of free spins. And then there's one upstairs I play after I get a snack. I guess I have a routine."

My brother joined us and noted the time. We'd been there for several hours, but it felt like ten minutes. With no windows and the bright fluorescent lights in the casino, it was like a never-ending afternoon. I'd managed to hold onto about seven dollars.

I was struck by the monotonous similarity between this casino in Middle America and the casino on the Gulf Coast thousands of miles away: both were spaces filled with the same incessant slot machine noise and throbbing lights where I met lovely and gracious seventy- to eighty-year-olds who sat for hours in a trance. MIT anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll describes this as the "machine zone," a conditioned state produced by "a response to a fine-tuned feedback loop." Once I made a human connection, I learned about my fellow players' families and vocations. At the same time, however, I got a sense of the numbing ritual that brings these seniors back to the casino day after day, where they come to "kill time." My brother and I left the gambling boat, blinking into the late afternoon sun. 

The Innards of Luck

I arrived at Empire City Casino by taxi, having traversed the construction and traffic north of New York City to get to Yonkers. The modern glass structure soars several stories and features a modern glass canopy that stretches to cover the three lanes of valets. Attached to Yonkers Raceway, a harness racing track, the complex dominates the surrounding landscape of tan concrete. I entered via a door near the outdoor smoking area and was relieved to see that, unlike Hollywood Casino in Baton Rouge, smoking might not be allowed indoors. A security officer greeted patrons at the door. The darkness inside temporarily blinded me to the mass of slot machines filling the casino's first floor. An escalator to the second floor welcomed me to a lobby with clearly marked entrances to the restrooms, restaurants, and main attraction, the racetrack. A large, indoor stadium of gambling tables and comfortable seats were currently empty.

This floor featured mainly high stakes slot machines requiring a five-dollar minimum bet. Few people were playing. Cordoned off in one section, several slot machines lay split open, their insides exposing the tangle of wires and synapses. Service engineers, up to their elbows in machinery, their laptops connected, were working like surgeons and running diagnostics. As I watched them work, I inadvertently caught an engineer's eye and had a Wizard of Oz moment: "Pay no mind to the man behind the curtain!" The players seemed oblivious to these maintenance tasks that exposed the lifeless innards of luck.

Women's voices floated above the machine noise, and I saw several enormous video screens featuring images of shapely women in evening gowns presiding over virtual roulette wheels. They purred to entice new bettors to join, called out when the betting had closed, and then bent forward suggestively to spin the wheel. A betting kiosk resembling an ATM machine sat in front of each machine where players can place an electronic wager with a virtual dealer on a video of a spinning roulette wheel. Fake money bets made on a fake game with a fake woman.

Most machines on the main floor required just a penny or nickel to play. “Wheel of Fortune” was prominently featured on one bank of machines; the Michael Jackson “King of Pop” themed machine sported a high-backed chair with silver accents that’s much cooler than the traditional swiveling vinyl chairs on the other rows. Hunting for the food court, I imagined leaving a trail of breadcrumbs to mark my way back, through the maze-like aisles of slot machines, few of them vacant, but the swirling pattern of red, blue, and black in the carpet combined with the dim, almost black lighting let me know it would be useless. Almost everyone I saw can be described as silver-haired, many with canes resting on their machines. The few “young” elders tended to assist someone older, guiding a walker, pushing a wheelchair, or offering arm-in-arm support.



I continued to weave my way through the machines and scooters and noticed the atmosphere begin to lighten. Could that be natural light? I moved forward tentatively and stepped into the sun-filled cafeteria. The back wall of the space showcased a full food court of meal options reminiscent of malls across America: a deli, Chinese noodles, pizza, salad, and desserts. Lines snaked around every which way. Nudged and prodded forward as people made their way around me to their food line, I was the only one without gray hair or a food voucher. Grabbing a salad, water, and a frozen yogurt, I headed to the checkout lines. I stood behind two friends sharing one tray stacked high with candy bars, bags of chips, Saran-wrapped cookies, and gum. I smiled, nodding at their tray. “The line’s too long for you, too?”

“Oh, this?” they chuckled. “No, we always do this. We just get snacks we can eat while we play. If we don’t stock up now we lose track of time and forget to eat . . . Remember when Maggie fainted?” They both laughed and shook their heads.

The cafeteria, which is about the size of two gymnasias with floor-to-ceiling windows on one side looking out onto the racetrack, offers legions of tables for four—with almost every table already full. I found a spot next to Gerald, who was preparing to eat a patty melt and fries, his cane hanging off the back of his bar stool. He nodded approvingly at my healthy lunch. The casino had sent him forty dollars in deals, so he said he felt like he had to come. Gerald visits about once a month. He likes the horse betting, but doesn’t really do it, and has fond memories of how beautiful the track at Roosevelt Raceway was. He came on the bus that day and usually breaks to eat when he starts to lose. He didn’t want to discourage me though: “I hope you’re lucky.”

He remembered winning big once—\$500—but he warned, “That happened on a \$1.50 machine. Do not try that! Your money will be gone like that!” He snapped his fingers. “Don’t spend too much money. Start with the penny machines, but watch your bets! You can end up betting a lot on one spin without knowing it.”

I asked if he had any favorite machines. He favored upstairs, where it was a little quieter, but he suggested I go with my gut. “See what machine looks fun to you; that might be your lucky machine.” He added the caveat, “If you play a couple of times and start losing a few dollars, then that machine has ‘gone cold.’ Find a new machine.”

I commented on his Masonic ring and we talked about his life. He’d been retired for many years and his wife had died in 2009. “Awfully lonely sometimes,” he concluded. “Seeing a race, winning a few bucks, makes the time pass.”

As Gerald prepared to leave, a thin woman with a graying Pixie haircut, wearing a black and white zebra-striped tunic and dramatically draped

purple scarf, plopped her tray down next to me, laughing loudly. The couple sitting across from us looked up and started chuckling as she announced, “WELL! It might as well be NEXT Wednesday for as long as it took me to get through that line! Look! My pizza has fossilized!”

We all giggled. She pointed at my tray with her knife: “I see you got some ice cream.”

“To my credit, it’s frozen yogurt.”

She raised her eye brows. “Well, lah-di-dah!” I learned that her name was Catherine and as she turned back to dissecting her pizza slice, she explained, “I just had to eat. I’m starving. My friends are somewhere out there, but I just couldn’t care less. It took them forever to get here. Mary lost her keys again. This time they were in the freezer. ‘*WHAT* are you *DOING* with your *KEYS* in the *FREEZER*?’ I asked her. She has no idea. We’re lucky to be alive.”

“Where do you live?” I asked.

“Long Island. We’re here every Wednesday for the deals, but you probably don’t know anything about the deals. You’re not old enough. *Have you even made your First Communion?* See now, how much did that salad cost you?”

“\$8.99, I think.”

“*What?* See, that would be free for me,” she winked.

I confessed that it was my first time in this casino and I asked for advice.

“*Your first time?* Oh my. Well, let me think . . .” She peered at me. “I think you’ll have beginner’s luck. I have a sense about that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, siree.”

“What games do you play?”

“Oh, always the penny ones. I’m not a big timer. Here’s what I’ll tell you. Set a budget. Decide how much you’re going to spend and stick to it. I only get in trouble when I start fudging and get a little more to keep playing. That spins out of control real quick.” Of all age demographics, seniors are the most likely to set a budget.¹⁶ But as Catherine pointed out, keeping to it can be a challenge for any age group. She echoed Gerald’s mystical advice. “You have to have a feeling about a machine. Just walk around. See what machine speaks to you, then put your money in and go. Now, after four or five spins and nothing happens, stop. The machine is dead. It’s not for you. You got to look for a hot machine.” I thought of the machines upstairs with wires and circuits exposed, decidedly dead.



We talked about our families; she couldn’t believe I have three children. Her grandson had graduated from college last week and she was incredibly proud. She did worry that he had majored in finance and couldn’t find a job. He was waiting tables for now. “That’ll fix him real quick!” she concluded.

“Do you enjoy coming to the casino?”

She paused, pursed her lips, “What else have I got to do?”

I enjoy riding up with my girlfriends. We'll go out to dinner tonight." The actual act of putting money in a machine has little to do with the social pleasures she enjoys on a casino outing. Like many seniors, she enjoyed the socialization that happens on the way to the casino and on the way home.¹⁷ She looked down at her plate where she had totally massacred her spinach and mushroom slice. "It's not even good pizza!" she laughed.

After Catherine left, I return to the dark casino floor. I sat down at the Prince of Lightning machine next to Judy, who had whitish-bronze hair and large glasses. She perched, tethered to the machine, like most seniors I saw, with a player's card attached to her belt by a retractable cord. I asked her how to play. "You want four of the ladies in a row and the lightning guy is always good," She answered, without taking her gaze from her screen.

I asked if she came to the casino often and Judy replied, still staring at her machine, "Uh, two or three times a week. It gets me away from the TV." I silently noted that she was staring at a TV screen.

"Do you like coming?"

"Oh, I enjoy it, I guess . . . it's something to do," she shrugged, still fixated on the screen.

As I played next to her I sensed that my questions were breaking into her trance, annoyingly, since she soon cashed out. Before she left, though, she advised me that once a machine stops paying out, "Move on, it's gone cold." I nodded. From Gerald to Catherine to Judy, I have learned that these machines have come to life. They can be hot or cold, and we must break up when with them when they stop responding to us.

In the middle of the casino sat a band shell where a pop group was playing. An older woman with a poufy up-do, low-cut blouse, flouncy poodle skirt with lace petticoat, and white bobby socks with white stilettos crooned,

“Will you still love me tomorrow?” She called out to the predominantly senior crowd, “C’mon ladies, you know the words! Sing with me!” Several ladies danced with one another. Every seat was filled and plastic cups of soda and mixed drinks sat sweating on each cocktail table. I stood quietly behind a group of six individuals in wheelchairs, their attendants standing beside each one. They danced in their seats and one attendant playfully spun one person in his chair. He smiled.

Next I headed back to the throng of machines, where I saw a line of old-fashioned-looking slot machines with spinning reels, bars, and Lucky 7s. They reminded me of the machine I had played in Baton Rouge and I sat down. An African American man named Ronald, wearing a dark polo shirt, slacks, and a baseball cap sat down on my other side. He laid out several folded up newspapers on the game top and inserted seventy-five cents into the slot machine.

“Only 75 cents?”

He nodded, “Yep. I’m just passing time ‘til the betting opens.”

“Are there races today?”

“Just the virtual ones.” Was nothing real here?

“How often do you come?”

“Whenever there are races, six out of seven days.”

I raised my eyebrows and he shrugged, “I’m retired—what else do I have to do? I’ve got to bet on something. I used to bowl. I used to bet on myself, but then I hurt my back, and so now I bet on the horses—I gotta bet on something.”

“What did you do for a living?”

“Run cable. CAT-5’s.” When I nodded, he asked, “You know what that is?”

“Sadly, I do,” I explained how I used to work with computers for a hospice organization.

“Good. Then you know how hard that work is. There is cable everywhere. Just look at this place. I can’t even imagine how much cabling runs through here.”

I agreed. With the number of slot machines plus ATMs, there must be an insane amount of cabling here.

He looked over his shoulder to the right and left. “My daughter works here; one of the suits. She’s considering becoming a highway patrolman. She’s twenty-nine. What does she know? She has a degree in hotel management, one of the few here who do. She should stick with this gig.”

We discussed our families and how I was visiting the city for a few days. “Guess how old I am.”

I didn’t have a clue.

“I’m seventy.” Ronald tipped his head, pausing for effect and appreciation. “I have two and half wives, five kids ranging from eighteen to forty-eight, and my girlfriend, who’s thirty-six, left me this morning.”

I was starting to wonder whether he was hitting on me. He handed me his card and suggested I call. He got up to leave, but then changed his mind and switched to salesman mode.

“Amy, I don’t tell many people my secret, but I think I can trust you.”

Whoa, Nelly.

“I sell detox machines. It’s sort of like a spa at the nail salon, but for your whole body. I’m seventy years old but I feel like I’m twenty-one. It will change your life. It will change your husband’s life. You have no idea how many toxins are in your body.”

Ronald then launched into a lecture about the history of medicine, including the dangers of chemotherapy. He knew that when I bought this machine—and he was convinced that I would because I looked like a very smart cookie—I would not only love it, but I would decide to distribute the product from wherever it is I live again . . . Indiana? Illinois? Wherever—people will love it there. I will make a fortune.

I smiled politely, and eventually he left for the races. Although I met some fascinating characters at the Empire Casino, the effect of the slot machines was the same. I began to notice that more and more seniors sported their player’s card on a retractable leash and that their reasons for visiting differed little from those in Iowa or Louisiana: “What else do I have to do?”

Although the social effects of casino gambling, such as poverty, destitution, alcohol abuse, and addiction are important to address, it is equally important to ask what social purpose casinos serve. Do casinos value the generative capabilities of our seventy- to eighty-year-old citizens? Do they create opportunities for recreation and meaningful service? Do casinos represent the best we have to offer the growing population of seniors? As I left Empire City Casino, I had to consider the possibility that as long as casinos proliferate, the answer, sadly, may be yes. 



Why Casinos Matter to Older Americans

Findings from the Social Sciences

Casinos Are Popular among Older Americans

One third of the U.S. population visited a casino in 2012. More than half were fifty years or older.¹⁸ Seniors often name gambling as their favorite form of entertainment.¹⁹

Casinos Are Spreading into States with Large Shares of Older Americans

Florida has the highest share of older Americans.²⁰ Other states with large shares of older people—including Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, Ohio, and West Virginia—have all experienced expanded state-sponsored casino gambling in recent decades.

Casinos Cater to Older Americans

Older people tend to go to the casino during the off-peak weekday mornings and afternoons.²¹ This makes them a highly desirable market. Older people help to keep thousands of slot machines operating during slower daytime hours.

Casinos make their older customers feel welcome and safe. They cater to their special needs by providing wheelchairs, scooters, adult diapers, and other amenities for customers with mobility and health problems.²² This manufactured “kindness” is especially appealing to people who are lonely, isolated, or feel invisible in the larger community.²³

Casinos Target Older Americans with Special Come-Ons and Promotions

Casinos promote free transportation, inexpensive breakfast and lunch deals, and medication discounts. They provide special senior memberships in clubs like the “golden grays”²⁴ or, for women, “the “blue hairs.”²⁵ They offer “free play” and additional player points for customers who return again and again. One casino even introduced an in-house pharmacy where 8000 slot club points, awarded for frequent play, cover the \$25 copay.²⁶

Casinos Are Unhealthy Environments for Many Older Americans

Many casinos are exempt from nonsmoking laws and therefore pose a special health risk to older Americans who may already suffer from lung, heart, and circulation problems.²⁷ Many casinos also offer free or heavily discounted alcoholic beverages. Alcohol can be dangerous for people on medication or for those who suffer from memory problems. Studies consistently show that casino workers suffer higher levels of job-related health problems than non-casino workers, and it is likely that regular exposure to the casino environment has a similarly negative effect on older casino customers with existing health problems.²⁸

Older Americans Favor Slot Machines—a Highly Addictive Form of Gambling

Seventy-five percent of older Americans favor the slot machine over other forms of gambling.²⁹ Slots and similar electronic gambling devices are computerized machines that use light, sound, and repetitive motion to create a hypnotic “zone” where players lose track of time and money.³⁰

This sensation can be intensely desirable for people who seek escape from their troubles.³¹ For older Americans, who may crave relief from boredom or from the pains of aging, the slot machine is their drug of choice. Like other drugs, slot machines can be a fast-track to addiction. According to one study, people who play slots are likely to experience more rapid onset of gambling addiction than people who engage in more traditional forms of gambling.³²

Slot machines may also be harmful to the aging brain.³³ The overload of stimuli, along with the lack of natural light in the casino, can contribute to diminished cognitive function, disorientation, and mental confusion.³⁴ Studies also show older Americans may be at higher risk for gambling addiction than the general population.³⁵

A gambling addiction not only harms the individual but the community as a whole. Studies show that at least five other people are adversely affected by an individual with a gambling problem.³⁶ Most state assistance for problem

or compulsive gambling is seriously underfunded.³⁷ Little to no attention has been paid to the unique risk factors posed by older Americans and gambling.³⁸

Older Women Are Susceptible to Gambling Addiction

Researchers say that women are at particular risk for developing gambling addiction. As one study put it: “[T]he new face of problem gambling in America is a senior woman who has lost a spouse or become alienated from her children, but has embraced slot machines and quite rapidly develops an addiction.”³⁹

The feminization of gambling addiction is connected to technology and demography. On the technological side, the slot machine provides the kind of emotional release that many older women seek. More than men, women tend to gamble to escape from emotional pain and loneliness rather than for the thrill of competition or the quest for big financial gains.⁴⁰ Thus, they are highly susceptible to the mesmerizing trance induced by slot machine play.⁴¹

On the demographic side, older women make up a large share of the elderly population and are often dealing with loss, depression, and fears about their own physical safety. Some turn to casinos as a refuge where they will be safely transported, fed, and occupied during the day. However, for some women, the risk of gambling-related problems may increase with the increased frequency of casino visits and with more time spent playing the slot machines.⁴²

Older Americans on Fixed Incomes Are Vulnerable to Offers of “Free” Stuff and “Free Play”

Casinos offer free food, free drinks and “free play” in order to entice older Americans to spend more time and money on the machines. Some casinos make phone calls to older customers to inform them that they are “saving” their favorite machine for their next visit.⁴³ Some coordinate bus trips from senior centers to take advantage of a “third of the month club:” seniors who head to the casino after they receive their Social Security checks.⁴⁴

Casinos exploit the desire among older people on fixed incomes to find bargains and get things for free. Many have lived through hard times and believe in thrift.⁴⁵ The irony is that thrift-minded older Americans are vulnerable to marketing schemes that will cause them to lose their money.

Casinos Take Advantage of the Social and Emotional Vulnerability of Older Americans

Older Americans are often targeted by scammers and con artists who befriend them, win their trust, and take their money.⁴⁶ The elders most vulnerable to such scams suffer from dementia, loneliness, and social isolation. But even those who are more physically and emotionally able are susceptible to strangers who make them feel valuable and wanted. Casinos are particularly adept at exploiting this basic human need for warmth and friendship. As one research study notes, “[O]nce inside a casino . . . age seems to make little difference to one’s inclusion and participation.”⁴⁷

Casino Gambling Is on the Leading Edge of a “Silver Tsunami”⁴⁸

The social demography of gambling is likely to change with the aging of the baby boom generation, increasing longevity, and growth of the population of those over eighty-five—the so-called “old-old.”⁴⁹ The number of available caregivers for each person over eighty-five is projected to drop from seven to three,⁵⁰ a factor that may create a need for more institutional group care for older Americans.

Some predict that casinos will become a leading institution for eldercare, or in the words of journalist Gary Rivlin, “day care for the elderly.”⁵¹ Indeed, the state-sponsored commercial casinos have developed a large body of market research on the wants and needs of older Americans. But casinos are not public service institutions. They exist to make profits for their owners and shareholders and to produce revenue for the state. An important, still neglected policy question is this: Should the state license and promote casinos in order to extract revenues for the state from the growing population of older Americans?



Tethered to the Machine

The next day I set off in the opposite direction, to Queens to visit the World Resorts Casino. Having successfully navigated the mass transit system the day prior, I grabbed my trusty Metro card and a Diet Coke and headed out for the long A train ride to Aqueduct Racetrack, which is near JFK Airport. The “racino”—racetrack plus casino—offers two stops: one leading to a glassed-in walkway stretching high above the parking lot; another on the parking lot’s far edge, where the masses and I exited and then walked across the black top several football fields in length, many folks with brown bag lunches in hand.



We entered the portion of the building that features the racetrack betting. A friendly security guard met us at that entrance, spot-checked bags, and funneled us forward to one escalator leading up to the actual betting floor. A gigantic screen loomed overhead displaying races and statistics in a rapid blur. Rows of seniors faced the screen with electronic machines at every station and more scattered throughout the space. Most patrons were silver-haired or gray; some ate homemade sandwiches or drank coffee

from Styrofoam cups. Passing by a small snack shop, I saw an older man dozing at a table. People bustled by to the hotdog condiment station, blind to the sleeping gentleman as they juggled bottles of water or soda with their napkins and trays.

Natural light filled the space, bouncing off the worn gray-and-white flecked linoleum. Taupe metal chairs and stark round tables were scattered throughout the open area. I could have been in an airport or bus terminal, especially with the banks of screens, though these announced past finishes and upcoming races rather than departures and arrivals. Everyone seemed a bit old-fashioned, like *Seinfeld's* Uncle Leo. I almost started to look for Chico Marx to walk by, barking, "Getta your tootsy-frootsy ice cream!" as he did in *A Day at the Races*.



From the dingy racino dominated by televised horse races I crossed over onto the casino's plusher carpeted floor. The textured wallpaper, warm lighting, and elaborate chandeliers provided a soothing visual backdrop to the cacophonous soundtrack of slot machines, with their clangs, bells, low-pulsing bass, and crescendo of synthesized tones.

Much like Empire City Casino in Yonkers, the slot machines here were arranged in a maze-like configuration. Randomly placed hubs of slots broke up the rows upon rows of machines, creating obstacles to the flow of player movement through the crowded casino floor and intensifying my feelings of disorientation. I had entered the "Times Square Casino Level," which boasts more than 2000 slot machines.

Before eating, I visited the second-level “5th Avenue Floor,” which has more than 3,000 slots as well as the largest HDTV in Queens (16’ x 28’ according to the casino website). Because it had an almost identical setup as the floor below, I started to recognize machines such as “Gold Rush,” which features a cartoon prospector riding a rail car into the mine shaft of your choosing: “Maybe you’ll pick the lucky shaft and strike a gold mine!” I saw animal-, ocean-, and space-themed slots, although most feature romance novel-type characters—shirtless men, and buxom, half-dressed women.



I made my way along the perimeter of machines, and stopped to watch Mr. Richard, whose name I knew only because the small computer screen at the top of the slot machine he was playing read, “Welcome, Mr. Richard C.!” He had 168 credits on his card, which translates to \$1.68, if the card credits mean the same thing as machine credits. Mr. Richard’s card, like most others I have seen, was con-

nected to his belt by a retractable cord literally plugged in to the machine via his player’s card. I sat down beside him and asked about his patriotic-themed game with flags and eagles.

“Nothin’ special. I think it gives a lot of free spins, but who knows? Good luck.” At this point his wife came over and reminded him that they needed to eat, and they left together. I was reminded that I should eat as well, so I headed back down the escalator.

A line of individuals in wheelchairs and their attendants waited at the buffet entrance. I stopped, said hello, and asked if they recommended the buffet.

They had just arrived, were waiting for the rest of their group, and seemed a bit preoccupied, so I decided to visit the food court instead.

Thankfully, unlike Empire City Casino, where I was herded into one jumbled line of people trying to fight their way to a food counter, here each offering had its own roped-off line with clearly marked entrances: hamburgers, Subway, pizza, Popeyes chicken, coffee, and ice cream. I purchased an iced coffee and with half my bagel left from breakfast, sat at a table, and fit right in with my brown paper bag. The couple next to me, Bill and Marge, ate bagged lunches as well. Bill's hair was thinning; he wore a blue plaid, collared shirt, a metal quad cane by his side. Marge's large bag rested on the table as she took out various things for their lunch: bottled water, apples, white-bread sandwiches with what looked like bologna. I smiled and lifted up my bag, "Looks like we had the same idea!"

"Oh yes. You can't pay these prices. And it's so fattening. Bill would have heartburn for days."

I nodded. "I would definitely pay the price for trying to eat Popeyes!"

At this point, another couple came off the casino floor. Breathlessly, the woman reported, "I won sixty dollars! He still can't believe it."

Her husband walked on to the hamburger line and she called out, "Don't forget to use your card!" She turned back to Bill and Marge. "Those credits really add up. He said I could play all the credits I want and what did I do? I won \$60 bucks!"

I smiled, introduced myself, and explained that I'm visiting. "Do you all come often?"

"O, Lord, all the time. When are we not here? It's the only thing we can all agree on." They laughed.

Marge added, "It's something to do."

“Any advice?” I asked.

“Oh, just be lucky!”

My bagel now eaten, I returned to the dark main floor of slot machines. The floor felt even darker than at the Empire and the slot machines seemed to tower over me, especially those at the hubs, which seemed to reach with neon arms to the ceiling. Dwarfed by the machines, I looked for games that looked familiar and I found one that featured candy. An elderly African American woman with a portable oxygen tank played next to me. We made eye contact and I confessed, “I feel a bit overwhelmed by all these machines. I get a bit confused. I hope I can understand candy!”

“Oh, I got the sugars, so I figure I can’t eat the candy, I’ll play it.”

This game featured thirty-six boxes that could be connected in exponential ways. From time to time, the last row of candy spun additional times on its own, giving more opportunities to amass credits. The strawberries and the chocolate bars seemed to give more credits, but I wasn’t entirely sure. The woman next to me puffed intermittently on her oxygen machine.

“How have you been doing today?” I asked.

“I lose track, the days all run together.”

“Do you come often?”

“Most days,” she paused to breathe. “I don’t stay long . . . Something to do.”

She began to tell me about her daughter, who lives close by, and at this point I had swiveled in my chair to face her, listening to her story, while randomly hitting the “repeat bet” button on the machine. I could vaguely hear the rhythms of the machine but I wasn’t paying full attention. In the middle of her story, she stopped and said, “Honey . . . Honey . . .”

“Yes?” I said, thinking she had something important to tell me. She replied, “Look. You’ve won.”

I turned my chair and saw that my candy machine was going “cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs,” with connecting lines streaking across the screen with bursts of candy explosions. The credits kept rolling up until I hit over 5000 credits—translation: \$50.

“Wow!” I said, “I wasn’t even looking!”

“I know.” She sounded perturbed. “You better watch it . . . I guess that machine is lucky today. I picked the wrong one.”

“I’m sorry.”

I felt bad. She was faithful to these candy machines and I was just playing to talk to people. I was a little angry at the machine, too. It wasn’t fair. To the machine’s credit, though, if it could speak, it would have rolled its neon eyes at me and shook its graphically generated head and explained, “Amy, I am a computer that runs a random-number generating software. I don’t care about your feelings or Shirley’s. Just put your money in and hit the button.”

But I would have wanted to argue: “Look at Shirley with her player’s card on a retractable cord! She is highly connected to you. You’re her friend.” With Shirley a bit put-out with me, I moved on and left her with the machine.

I stopped by one of the clearly marked restrooms along the edge of the gambling floor. Like every casino restroom I’d visited, it was spacious and very clean. There were plenty of stalls to the back and an attendant assisted with any needs. This bathroom featured a state-of-the-art hand-drying system in the middle of the sink area. Four white machines that looked like miniature tanning beds turned on their sides. With wet hands I looked for towels or a dryer, while eyeing these machines as I imagine the first people who saw a microwave did. I looked to the attendant and she explained that you dipped

your hands into the machine and within a second or two your hands would be completely dry. I was skeptical, but what other choice did I have? A woman with a walker stood a few feet away and I looked to her for confirmation. She shook her head in disbelief but confirmed the attendant's description, "It's space-age!"

"Kills germs," the attendant added.

Now I was thinking of all the people touching the slot machines, all the vulnerable immune systems, and the germs I was carrying. I stuck my hands into the machine, and a burst of heat, light, and wind dried my hands instantly.

I was just about to head back to the city when I saw two almost identical older gentlemen at the slots near the exit to the train stop. I sat and had the pleasure of joining two brothers named Tony at a modern-looking slot machine featuring "Lucky 7s" and an intricate system of "free spin" jackpots. As I got situated at my machine, the older brother, Tony V., turned to show me his redemption ticket, which read \$0.22. "I started with \$200," he grimaced.

The brothers hailed from Long Island and they visited the casino several times a week. Two brothers named Tony.

"You wanna know how we have the same name, dontcha?" Tony L. asked.

I swiveled and settled in for a story. There once had been a midwife who either misunderstood their mother or was just lazy or just really liked the name "Anthony." For whatever reason, they both ended up Anthony, and go by Tony. I considered suggesting that one of them go by Anthony, but did two eighty-year-old men need a lady in a casino telling them how they could have avoided a lifetime of being confused? I thought not. They walked me through their life as "two brothers named Tony," disagreeing on some of the details, such as which one of them had received the draft summons. They didn't remember, but Tony V. went. One thing was clear: they had always

been “Tonys.” The casino even confused them, so eventually they added their middle names to their player’s cards.

Tony L. drove them from Long Island because Tony V. has Parkinson’s disease and his wife didn’t like him driving. “I’m eighty-one, what are you gonna do?” At times, Tony V.’s right hand shook considerably and he steadied it on his cane with his opposing hand. He shared that he had almost died several months earlier.

“EMS came. Thought I was a goner. They put in four stents and a pacemaker, and with the twenty-nine pills I take each day . . . I’m making it.” He looked around, “I can’t get around like I used to, but I can sit here. This is a little recreation, an escape.”

I thought of the women interviewed by Natasha Dow Schüll who described their experience as “machine escape.” They came to the casino to disconnect from everything that overwhelmed them: their responsibilities, their families, even their own bodies.⁵² A body debilitated by twenty-nine pills, Parkinson’s, and a pacemaker might be a body one would want to escape.

Several months earlier the two Tonys and their families had gone to Atlantic City together. “At least there you can go out and walk on the boardwalk when the machines have taken too much of your money,” Tony V. commented. “It’s all a scam, you know.”

We had a fun time, laughing at how the machines trick you into thinking you’ve won big with loud bells and whistles, when you have really only won four pennies. I asked them about the space-age hand-drying machines, and they were just as amazed as I was. They also noted that it will dry your clothes, a tip I chose not to pursue. Like most of the seniors I encountered, the two Tonys seemed to know that the cards were stacked against us, always favoring the house. As I got up to leave, however, they both protested: “Oh stay! You brought us luck!”

Why Seniors Matter

As I made my way to the A train, which took me back into Manhattan, a reel of casino visits played in my mind, all about the same, filled with gracious patrons tethered to mesmerizing machines, drawn to the slots by cheap food and the controlled environment. I can see why seniors default to casinos and why casinos love them for it. I left feeling empty, even though it may seem like I was having fun with the people I met. During the time in which we interacted, we laughed and enjoyed a moment of fellowship, but these interactions lasted, on average, ten minutes. Compared to the hours these seniors spent at the slot machines, ten minutes is inconsequential. They did not come to the casino that day to talk to me or to anyone else. They came to play the slots because they were bored and had nothing better to do.

In fact, when I thought back to my years serving the needs of the dying, I felt infinitely sadder at the casino than I ever did in hospice. Both hospice and casinos provide hospitality to the vulnerable, but they have very different aims. Hospice may seem to be about death, when in fact hospice is about life—maximizing every moment that an individual has left in order to live with meaning and purpose, even in the face of a rapidly progressing terminal illness. It takes a great deal of work to remind a dying person that he or she is not defined by illness or death, but by his or her unique character, contributions, and connections.

In contrast, the casino purports to be a place to “live it up,” when in truth it’s quite deadening. Like a terminal illness, the slot machine consumes the mind and body of anyone who plays. Slots dehumanize the person. Players become automatons, controlled by a software program that entices them to keep playing with small wins, but is craftily engineered to ensure that they eventually lose. Seniors come to casinos carrying any number of physical, mental, and emotional challenges, and from what I saw, they leave flattened, numbed, less motivated to live and conditioned to come back and sit at the machines again.

In order to better understand my observations, I explored the small body of independent study on seniors and gambling and found that almost all of the research focuses on the risks of gambling addiction. Addiction is a valid concern. The percentage of seniors identified as at-risk gamblers, defined as betting more than \$100 on a single bet or more than they could afford to lose, is significantly higher, at 10 percent, than the general population, at 2 to 3 percent.⁵³ The risk may be especially high, because 75 percent of those over sixty-five favor the slot machine,⁵⁴ the most addictive form of gambling due to the rapid playing speed, flickering lights, and “winning” sounds that capture attention.⁵⁵ The slot machine player loses track of time and space, entering a zone that compromises the ability to think clearly or tap into higher order cognitive functioning like willpower, mental flexibility, and long-term planning, which is especially dangerous for the aging brain.⁵⁶ This danger is compounded by isolation. Table games played in groups at least offer the safeguard that social situations provide. Slots are played alone. For many seniors, this short-lived escape can incur devastating losses, especially for those with no discretionary funds for gambling.”⁵⁷

Gambling addiction experts and researchers note that the very situations seniors encounter as they age, such as loneliness, the death of a spouse, loss of mobility, and loss of employment, make escaping into the “machine zone” of the slots an attractive form of relief. Like any type of addictive behavior, it can be “a way for many people to anesthetize their pain.”⁵⁸ Scholars surmise that “the new face of problem gambling in America is a senior woman who has lost a spouse or become alienated from her children, but has embraced slot machines and quite rapidly develops an addiction.”⁵⁹

However, the risk of addiction is not what made me sad. I did not leave the casinos worrying that Herb and Carol, the two Tonys, or Catherine were becoming addicts, even though they very well could. My sadness stemmed from the apathetic motivation each and every one had for coming to the casino in the first place. The casino pulled them in with cheap food, free play, and the illusion of luck in order to profit from them, and ultimately to do nothing to stave off the listlessness. Even worse, it sends them home

feeling less valuable. The slot machine prescribes a false, one-note solution to the multifaceted physical, financial, emotional, recreational, and communal needs of the elderly demographic.

Even video games would be better! Slot machines involve no skill, no levels to beat, and no high score to attain. Remember, I won when I wasn't even looking at my machine. At least with a video game, longer play tends to lead to greater mastery and understanding of the game's *telos*, but these players who gamble for hours, day after day, had no greater mastery or understanding of them than I, a complete novice, did. And that's because a person cannot master them. They are programmed to beat you, and the longer you play, the more you lose. In a trance, one's money and sense of self disappear. Even Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., former head of the American Gaming Association, sees how pointless and mind-numbing the slot machine is: "I don't know if it's the education system, or maybe it's that we as a society have gotten intellectually lazy, but people would rather just sit there and push a button."⁶⁰ And they do so again and again, until their money is gone.

As casino gambling continues to spread, we could face a future of more addicted, broke, lifeless seniors. Due to the size of the baby boomer generation, advances in healthcare, and increases in longevity, the number of Americans over sixty-five will double from 40.3 million in 2010 to 88.5 million in 2030.⁶¹ The number of seniors considered "old-old"—over eighty-five—will grow from 8.7 million in 2030 to more than 19 million by 2050.⁶² By then, society could be overwhelmed by the needs our elders. The number of available caregivers for each person over eighty-five is projected to drop from seven to three.⁶³

In response to this coming "silver tsunami" of the baby boomer generation, the World Health Organization adopted the term "active aging" back in the 1990s. Based on the concept of "individuals actively and systematically influencing the conditions of their aging through self-responsibility and self-care,"⁶⁴ active aging seeks to embody the United Nations 1982 slogan: "To add life to the years that have been added to life." Unlike the false hope and

repetitive, deadening nature of casino slot machines, the United Nations defines life as the ability to develop one's potential, having access to the educational, cultural, spiritual, and recreational resources of society, and being able to live in dignity and security, free of exploitation.⁶⁵ Explicitly stating these goals and allocating assets to them is important because *aging gracefully is difficult*.

Engaging in generative activities is challenging when one is simultaneously managing chronic conditions that can impair mobility and disrupt activities of daily living. As our bodies and minds decline, we need our communities more than ever to help us maximize our coping abilities. Our seniors deserve safe places to have fun, grow, and meet others, but many recreational environments can make seniors feel like an inconvenience, disposable, and a burden.⁶⁶ Sadly, as I saw first-hand, casinos may be the most hospitable place for them to spend their extra time and money, although the glint of wheelchairs and the lure of cheap buffets may cause us to forget that casinos exist for one reason only: to extract as much money as possible from their patrons.

My work as a pastor and a hospice chaplain has taught me how important it is to involve older people in the mainstream of society. At every age, but especially in our later years, people need to be honored and respected for what we can contribute to our common life.

This is contrary to what casinos do. Under the guise of friendly hospitality, they treat seniors as a lucrative market. They lure seniors in with freebies, hand them player cards, and exploit them as easy marks. Surely, valuing seniors means more than valuing the hours and dollars they spend before a slot machine. Surely, parking seniors at a casino in order to give them “something to do” or as a way to “kill time” is not a way to honor our older citizens. Surely, we can do better.

And the good news is that sometimes we do. As an antidote, I also visited government-sponsored senior centers in each of the four cities where I visited a casino. At every facility, staff and senior participants agreed that luck

inevitably runs out and that we need people like those who serve at PACE (Program for the All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly) Senior Centers, who say, “Casinos are a diversion. This is an answer”—an answer that requires a diverse team of skilled professionals striving to help older Americans lead full lives. By setting goals, tracking progress, and celebrating when goals are met, seniors regain power and purpose in their lives. More important, when setbacks happen, which they always do, a senior center team of professionals as well as concerned peers surround that person with support. In times of distress or malaise, our seniors don’t need luck; they need help to become resilient. Senior centers can provide a safe, affordable choice for a day’s recreation, whose foundation, instead of being built on the shifting sand of luck, rests solidly on intentional care and meaningful connection.

I could write pages on those I met in these life-giving places, but I fear that in doing so we might be grasping at a quick fix to our dilemma. Senior centers scattered across the country have begun to pave the way, but being critically understaffed and working on limited budgets, they are David to the casino’s Goliath. Now is the time to expand upon these efforts to create environments that foster fellowship, service, physical activity, healthy eating, and quality connections between seniors and the surrounding local community. The vulnerable aging in society deserve meaningful opportunities for recreation and relaxation that reconnects them to their deepest sense of self; activities that allow them to be honest about disability and loss without being defined and crushed by that awareness, that foster growth in their physical, emotional, and spiritual capabilities.⁶⁷ We need places that do not profit off people but define profit as individual and communal thriving. The basic terms of our social contract are compromised when we permit corporations to feign shallow gestures of dignity and hospitality to our most vulnerable population in the name of maximizing their own monetary gain.

In my brief trip through Casino Land, I met kind and thoughtful people. Most were not big risk-takers, nor did they come to gamble recklessly. They came because they were treated to safe and affordable entertainment where their needs are noticed and met. Moments of true dignity and community arose

when I broke into a stranger's escape by making eye contact and offering a genuine smile, by politely requesting help or advice, and by asking questions about that person's life outside of the casino. This led to laughter, a sharing of burdens, human connection. While we sat silently with our free sodas mindlessly hitting a slot machine button, we were inching toward oblivion, guided by machines designed to create zombie addicts, something to which any of us—but especially the most vulnerable—can fall prey. As I thought of the seniors I met during my travels, I felt the onus on me and my generation. If we don't create and support environments that foster dignity and connection for all ages, shame on us.

As years are added to life, we should work to add life to our years. Casinos drain life. They bank on our buying into an illusion of luck—an illusion that makes a sham of human dignity, creates a false sense of community, and fashions an empty construct of “fun” that lures us into a place of mindless escape rather than of mindful connection. Ultimately, the transaction always profits the house. It is deeply troubling that our state governments are the sponsor and promoter of commercial casino gambling. None of us—including those of us who never visit casinos—can turn a blind eye to the growing presence of this new and corrosive institution in American life. ■

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