

An Open Letter From 220 Religious Leaders to the President and Congress on the Spread of Gambling

Dear Member of Congress:

We, the undersigned, represent a variety of faith perspectives and religious beliefs. We hold differing convictions regarding many of the most prominent issues of our day. Yet we are united in our opposition to legalized gambling. We believe it to be a moral and cultural cancer. Therefore, we respectfully urge Congress to begin to address the devastation that gambling has wrought on our children, families, communities and nation. Consider just the following sampling of gambling's toll on America's citizenry:

- Gambling exploits those with the fewest financial resources, as both a multitude of studies and our own experiences in our individual communities readily confirm. A few months ago we were inundated with glowing press accounts of the Powerball winner from Kentucky who gambled part of his unemployment check to attain the jackpot. How many tens of thousands of others in similar circumstances squandered their meager income chasing this state-sponsored fantasy and wound up without enough money to pay the rent or put food on the table? According to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (NGISC), individuals earning less than \$10,000 per year spend more on lottery tickets every year than any other income group.
- Each of us—and the faith communities we represent—could provide countless stories of families shattered by gambling addiction. We are often the ones forced to pick up the pieces of lives ripped apart by divorce and domestic violence. According to a survey by the NGISC, gambling has been responsible, in whole or in part, for more than 2 million divorces in recent years. Child abuse and neglect are other effluents of gambling's explosive growth. In addition, research indicates that children of gambling addicts do more poorly in school, experience more behavioral problems, and are more susceptible to gambling addiction themselves.
- The gambling boom has made our communities more dangerous places to live. Gambling operations attract crime, and they create new criminals out of otherwise law-abiding citizens. Studies confirm that more than half of gambling addicts will engage in illegal activities—everything from embezzlement to armed robbery—to fund their compulsion to gamble.
- Gambling has subverted the rightful role of government as protectorate of the people. Casinos in particular have bought favor with politicians at all levels, thus enabling them to spread their poison product into even more communities. In the most recent election, gambling interests lavished \$10.9 million on candidates and parties at the federal level alone. That does not include the multi-millions spent on lobbying, nor does it take into account that gambling interests have become the single most powerful force in a number of state governments. All of this influence comes at a terrible price that is paid for by the gambling industry's multitude of victims.
- The rapid increase in legal gambling opportunities has created a concomitant boom in the number of gambling addicts. According to the NGISC, more than 15 million Americans struggle with a significant gambling problem—and the repercussions are often profound. Perhaps no single statistic better reveals the depth of despair associated with gambling addiction than this: One in five of those who become addicted to gambling will attempt to take his or her own life.
- Legal gambling operations entice teenagers to delve into this dangerous activity. Many become trapped. Studies show that the rate of gambling problems among adolescents is dramatically higher than that for adults. Hundreds of thousands of teens regularly access casinos, lotteries, and other legal betting venues despite age regulations to the contrary. Further, aggressive and omnipresent gambling advertising campaigns disparage the ethic of work, diligence and study while bombarding teens with the idea that gambling is the means to get rich quick.

Gambling has become a blight on our nation's cultural landscape. As religious leaders, we see the gambling-induced pain and devastation among many of those who look to us for spiritual guidance. Thus, we stand together not only in our concern, but in our commitment to oppose this predatory and destructive industry. We call on members of Congress to place America's citizens and families ahead of the false promises and hefty political contributions of the gambling industry, and to begin to address this rapidly growing menace to our national welfare.

Sincerely,