

The report notes that there have been numerous studies on links between legalization and compulsive gambling, several of which showed increases and others not. One study found that participation in a state lottery was associated with a greater involvement in general gambling, which is in turn linked with problem gambling.⁴⁷ But another study found that the Minnesota lottery switched adolescents from illegal to legal gambling and did not increase overall gambling in the state.⁴⁸

The report by the Committee on the Social and Economic Impact of Pathological Gambling states, "Legal gambling could increase the number of people who gamble at least a few times; if pathological gambling is some constant proportion of people who experiment with gambling, then the number of pathological gamblers will also increase. Another possibility is that legalization encourages

people to gamble more frequently and to spend more money on gambling. This increased gambling activity could place more people at risk for developing gambling problems by increasing their comfort with games, their familiarity with gambling as entertainment, and their likelihood of socialization with other gamblers."⁴⁹

The North American Association of State and Provincial Lotteries (NASPL) acknowledges that problem gamblers do play the lottery, but it asserts that lotteries by nature do not appeal to problem gamblers. "Problem gamblers are attracted to games for a variety of reasons," the NASPL states. "One is a sense of high excitement, usually involving considerable sensory stimulation. Lottery tickets do not provide this. A second factor is a sense of mastery or skill. Lotteries have no skill element. A third is the immediacy of the result and reward

Winning the Lottery: What Are the Odds?

Almost everyone has heard the adage that your chances are better to be struck by lightning than to win the big prize in a state lottery. But is this statement really true? The answer is less than clear cut. Lottery proponents argue that the average person's chances of winning at least some money are much better than most people believe and are far better than the odds of being struck by lightning. However, a Kentucky coal miner who invests a few dollars in the Powerball game every week in hopes of hitting the jackpot actually might have a better chance of catching a lightning bolt.

In a recent study of the Kentucky lottery, statistical data showed that the odds of guessing the correct six numbers for the Kentucky Powerball game were roughly 1 in 81,000,000, according to a spokesperson for the Kentucky lottery. In contrast, the National Weather Service estimates that a person's chance of being struck by lightning over the course of a lifetime as 1 in 600,000. If these numbers are correct, a player would indeed stand a better chance of being struck by lightning than winning the lottery. However, Edward J. Stanek, director of the Iowa lottery, says Powerball is not an "all or

nothing" game, and the player is not required to get all six numbers right to win some amount. In fact, being less than perfect in picking the correct numbers can still result in winning \$100, \$1,000, or even \$100,000.¹ Kentucky lottery officials note the chance of winning \$1,000 playing Powerball are 1 in 364,041. That means a player is roughly twice as likely to win the \$1,000 prize in a single play as to be struck by lightning over the course of a lifetime, though the odds of winning Powerball are still remote.

In a speech delivered to the North American Association of State and Provincial Lotteries (NASPL), Stanek further addressed the comparison between lottery wins and lightning strikes. He noted that in 1995, lightning in the United States and Canada killed 91 people while in that same year, 1,136 people won \$1 million or more playing lotteries. Also, using data from the National Safety Council, Stanek calculated that the odds of an average American being killed by lightning on any particular day were about 1 in 1,178,989,420. Thus, according to his analysis, a player would be 21.44 times more likely to win a typical Powerball game than to

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and the ability to play repeatedly and quickly. Numbers game drawings typically take place some time after the purchase is made, and players have to wait between a day and a week to play again. Even instant or scratch tickets have much less immediacy than other forms of gambling.⁵⁰

In its report to President Clinton, the NGISC makes a number of recommendations with respect to compulsive gambling. Among these, the NGISC recommends that all governmental gambling regulatory agencies require applicants for gambling licenses to adopt a "clear mission statement" as to

"I figure you have the same chance of winning the lottery whether you play or not."

—FRAN LEBOWITZ

their policy on problem and pathological gambling, and refuse to service any customer who appears to have a gambling disorder. The NGISC also recommends that states fund research, education, and treatment programs on problem gambling. It urges states to mandate

that private and public insurers and managed care providers identify successful treatment programs, educate participants about pathological gambling and treatment options, and cover appropriate programs under their plans.⁵¹

A number of states already have programs designed to raise awareness about the problems of

Odds, continued

be killed by lightning on a day when Powerball numbers were being drawn.²

In contrast to the National Weather Service's 1 in 600,000 figure, however, Stanek's number reflects the odds of being struck and killed by lightning on any particular day while the National Weather Service's odds reflect a person's chance of only being struck by lightning during their entire lifetime. So both lottery proponents and opponents can use the lightning statistic to argue their case.

Aside from Powerball, there are other less complicated games such as scratch-off cards where the odds are much more player friendly. For example, in the Kentucky study, scratch-offs were the most widely played lottery game in the state, garnering 37 percent of player participation (as opposed to Powerball's 30 percent participation rate). When surveyed, 27 percent of players indicated they liked knowing if they win or lose immediately, while another 23 percent said they enjoy the opportunity to win often (the odds of winning at least something in Kentucky's scratch-off games are 1 in 4).³ Therefore, those who do think the odds of being struck by lightning and winning the Powerball jackpot are comparable are probably more inclined to participate in games like scratch-offs where the odds

of winning are much more in their favor.

North American lotteries in 1998 awarded \$52 million in prizes each day. This equates to \$36,000 being given away every minute of every day.⁴ While those who cite the minuscule chances of winning a \$100 million jackpot in a Powerball game are correct, the opportunity to win smaller amounts is much greater. Thus, while the lightning analogy may add a certain electricity to anti-lottery arguments, it may not be entirely accurate. Still, people lose much more often than they win, no matter what game they play.

—Gregory Gunter

FOOTNOTES

¹Edward J. Stanek, "A Critique of Lottery Critics" (from the speech "Take the High Road and Keep the Upper Hand" delivered to the North American Association of State and Provincial Lotteries at its Twenty-Third Annual Meeting in Boston, Mass. on Sept. 29, 1997, p. 10.

²*Ibid.*, p. 10.

³"Kentucky Lottery Corporation Participation and Attitude Study, University of Louisville Center for Urban and Economic Research, 1994. A total of 1599 adults over 18 years of age took part in the survey conducted from February 1994 until April 1994. The information was obtained through telephone conversations with participants throughout the state.

⁴See Stanek, note 1 above, p. 10.

Gregory Gunter is an intern at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research.