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Video poker slammed as worst of all possible options

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The video poker that the Illinois legislature recently passed and Gov. Patrick Quinn is poised to legalize was slammed Friday as what "may be the most addictive form of gambling known to man."

Stop Predatory Gambling, a national nonpartisan group, hosted a news conference with three experts who said what Illinois hopes will be a partial solution to its money problems will cause more problems than it solves.

Video poker, said Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Natasha Dow Schull, "is a far cry from the one-arm bandits from the 50s and 60s."

Instead, the machines are designed with false "rewards" to keep players at the machine longer, with mechanisms to keep them playing faster and with simultaneous-play options to entice them to spend more money than before, said Schull. In short, she said, the machines are designed to produce what the industry calls "playing to extinction," or playing until all a player's money is gone.

The rapid-fire button format keeps action moving as fast as 900 games per hour, Schull said.

"There's no need to wait for horses to run, or a dealer to shuffle," she noted. In other words, no breaks or queues to give a gambler pause to assess the situation and possibly leave.

Whereas typical gambling games like blackjack and other games derive 30 percent to 50 percent of their revenue from problem gamblers, machines can generate as high as 60 percent of their revenue from those types, said Schull.

Another study found that while 9 percent to 10 percent of casino gamblers met pathological gambling criteria, 20 percent of non-casino video poker players did, said Frank Quinn, a psychologist who studied video poker in South Carolina, where it existed for seven years until several lawsuits were able to end the practice.

And the financial benefits can be overrated, he said. Because the machines use cash, owners can unscrupulously underreport revenue, said Quinn.

While federal trials here in Illinois have demonstrated a link between illegal video poker and the mob, even in South Carolina, where it was legal, there were instances of the machines being used to launder money, Quinn said.

Within six months of video poker being removed, the number of Gamblers Anonymous groups dropped by half, and in another six months, fell by another 25 percent, Quinn said.

The machines are particularly pernicious, said Tim Kelly, former executive director of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission, because they represent "convenience gambling" available in any corner bar rather than a destination like a casino.

Kelly's commission, formed by then-President Bill Clinton, recommended specifically that states stay away from that form of gambling because it "provides fewer benefits and creates potentially greater social costs" than other forms of gambling.

At the very least, the commission recommended doing extensive studies and having a firm regulation plan in place before legalizing such machines. No such study was done in Illinois, and an Illinois Gaming Board member has criticized the plan because the board is not equipped to regulate the machines.

Although video gaming appears to be a done deal in Illinois, Stop Predatory Gambling called on Gov. Pat Quinn to veto the measure once it arrives on his desk.

A spokesman for Quinn could not immediately be reached for comment Friday. He has previously said he would begrudgingly allow it.