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Royal Flush or Just a Bluff: Casinos and County Unemployment in the Midwestern United States

Amber Irlmeier*

ABSTRACT. Legislators and community members alike have discussed the pros and cons of opening casinos. A frequently mentioned benefit of opening casinos is that they will bring jobs and thus reduce unemployment. Past studies have looked at the effect casinos have on unemployment over a period of a few years; this is the first study to look at data from over two decades (1990-2012). This study uses an ordinary least squares regression to look at the effect that 56 commercial casinos in the Midwestern United States have had on county unemployment. A significant correlation is found between the presence of a casino in a county and a lower unemployment rate. Other variables that have a statistically significant effect on the county unemployment rate are the state unemployment rate, the percentage of the population that is white, and real county per capita income.

I. Introduction

“Cedar Rapids Casino Would ‘Cannibalize’ Other Casinos, Study Finds.” “Gaming Chair to Cedar Rapids Casino Supporters: Don’t Throw in the Towel.” “Cannibals, Poker Faces, and Silver Linings” (Smith 2014; KCRG 2014; Dorman 2014). These are just three of several headlines recently published about a proposal to open a new casino in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Discussion about the merits and faults of opening casinos is becoming more and more common as new states legalize commercial casinos and as more proposals are filed to open these establishments. Opponents of casinos claim that casinos reduce the business for other entertainment industries, ruin lives for pathological gamblers, and increase crime rates, while supporters of casinos boast of economic growth from tax revenue and job creation. This study uses an ordinary least squares regression to look at the effect casinos have on county unemployment in fifty-six counties in the Midwestern United States.

II. Background

On March 19, 1931, Nevada became the first state to legalize gambling,

*I would like to thank Dr. Ken Brown for his help in completing this study.

and in 1976, New Jersey became the second (History Channel 2014; State of New Jersey Casino Control Commission 2014). Since then, the two largest centers for casino gambling, Las Vegas and Atlantic City, have developed. Only in the past two decades have other states begun legalizing casino gambling. The first casino outside of Nevada and New Jersey to open was the Dubuque Casino Belle in Dubuque, Iowa. Its first day of operation was nearly twenty-three years ago on June 1, 1991 (Rhythm City Casino 2014). As of December 31, 2012 there were twenty-three states with legalized commercial casinos (American Gaming Association 2013, 2).

III. Literature Review

Opponents of casinos consistently cite three main negatives of casinos: cannibalization, pathological gambling, and crime. Cannibalization refers to the idea that when casinos come to an area, they will cannibalize other entertainment industries. For example, instead of going to the movies or a skating rink, a person could choose to go to the casino, consequently hurting the other two businesses. Siegel and Anders (1999, 118) find evidence of cannibalization of other entertainment industries as a result of riverboat casinos in Missouri. Earl L. Grinols and J.D. Omorov (1996, 11) also find cannibalization of other industries after a casino enters an area. “We have found that casinos are associated with a drop in general merchandise and miscellaneous retail and wholesale trade within 10 miles of the casino averaging \$367 per \$1000 increase in casino revenues.” In contrast to these two studies, Wiley and Walker (2009, 112) find commercial casinos in the Detroit area to have a statistically significant positive effect on the value of retail property nearby. They argue that “there is no evidence to support the hypothesis that a substitution effect exists whereby casinos merely absorb spending that might have taken place at other businesses” (Wiley and Walker 2009, 113).

Another negative result of casinos is the effect on pathological gamblers. Henry R. Lesieur (1992, 49) says that surveys find that one to two percent of adults are pathological gamblers. Upon reviewing four other studies about gambling addiction and job loss, Lesieur (1998, 156) concludes that between 21 and 36 percent of pathological gamblers have lost a job as a result of their addiction. Pathological gamblers face higher rates of bankruptcy, unemployment, and stress (Koo, Rosentraub, and Horn 369).

In addition to cannibalization and pathological gambling, a third negative result of casinos is an increase in crime. Hyclak (2011, 33) finds significantly more car thefts and robberies on college campuses within ten miles of a casino. Earl L. Grinols and David B. Mustard (2006, 26) complete an extensive study with data from 1977 to 1996 of every county in the United States. They find that, “casinos increased all crimes except murder.”

Despite cannibalization, pathological gambling, and crime, casinos continue to open at an increasing rate in the United States. Often this is because of the claims that casinos increase tax revenue and create jobs. Tax revenue from all casinos in the United States was \$8.6 billion in 2012 (AGA 6). With respect to jobs, the American Gaming Association (AGA) notes State that “more than 332,000 people were employed by commercial casinos nationwide in 2012.” The AGA also says that “during 2012, commercial casino employees earned \$13.2 billion in wages, benefits, and tips” (AGA 2013, 7). If, as Seigers and Anders (1999) and Grinols and Omorov (1996) find, cannibalization of other entertainment industries is occurring, this means that although casinos created 332,000 jobs, they are also destroying jobs in other entertainment industries. As a result, there may be no net effect on unemployment.

One of the earliest studies to analyze the effect of casinos on unemployment was carried out in 1994 by Earl L. Grinols. Grinols looks at the unemployment rate before and after the opening of eight riverboat casinos in Illinois. The study looks only at short-term effects because all eight had opened within three years of the study: two in 1991, three in 1992, and three in 1993. He finds that employment only increases by 26% of the 7806 jobs that were created by the casinos (Grinols 1994, 10). He says that this “indicates that a substantial number of jobs were lost elsewhere in the affected markets so the net jobs were a small or zero percent of direct employment on riverboats” (Grinols 1994, 11). He then notes that these results may not be taking into account the possibility that there was already an increasing or decreasing trend in unemployment occurring before the casino entered the area. To take this into account, he runs statistical analyses including three years prior to the casino opening. The conclusion of these analyses is that “none of the riverboats [. . .] showed a significant effect [. . .] on reducing unemployment or increasing employment, though one showed a significant negative effect on employment” (Grinols 1994, 11).

For tribal casinos, a strong relationship between casinos and decreased unemployment has been found. William N. Evans and Julie H. Topoleski (2002) complete a study of all tribal casinos in the contiguous United States. They find that four years after casinos opened there was an increase in the employment to population ratio of 12%. Indian reservations historically have had high poverty and unemployment rates: “Compared to the United States as a whole, Native Americans on reservations have 60 percent lower incomes and nearly five times the poverty rate. Much of the lower income can be traced to lower labor force participation rates and higher unemployment rates among this group” (Evans and Topoleski 2002, 13). Because Indian reservations start out with much higher unemployment rates, the same degree of effect on unemployment cannot be expected of commercial casinos.

The effect on the unemployment rate is not only different between tribal and commercial casinos; it is also different between rural and urban counties. Thomas A. Garrett (2004, 14) looks at six counties in the Midwest that have casinos. Four of these counties are rural and two are urban. Using past unemployment trends, he forecasts what the unemployment rate for the county should be in the years after a casino opens, and he then compares this forecast to the actual unemployment rate. Garrett suggests the difference between the two is the net effect of casinos on the unemployment rate. He finds that for three of the four rural counties, the casinos have a negative effect on unemployment. For the urban counties, a discernible effect on unemployment is not found; many more factors affect the unemployment in urban areas than in rural areas (Garrett 2004, 21).

One of the most recent and comprehensive studies of casinos’ effect on unemployment was written by Chad Cotti in 2008. Cotti wanted to complete a comprehensive study because most previous research only looked at a single state (Cotti 2008, 1). The sample in his study is all 161 counties in which commercial casinos had opened in the United States between 1990 and 1996 (Cotti 2008, 23). He finds that, “casinos lead to more employment and in some instances higher earnings, and as such, likely due [sic] lead to some economic growth” (Cotti 2008, 39).

No comprehensive study has been completed to look at the effect casinos have on unemployment over a longer length of time. As noted above, the Grinols study only looked at three years of data, and the Cotti study looked at seven years of data. Also, Cotti’s study was the first to

look comprehensively at commercial casinos. This study will look at fifty-six commercial casinos and twenty-three years of data from 1990-2012.

IV. Model & Data

The AGA identifies five categories of casinos: electronic gaming devices, card rooms, racetrack casinos, tribal casinos, and land-based or riverboat casinos (AGA 2013, 7). This study looks at all casinos classified as land-based or riverboat casinos as of December 31, 2012 in eight states in the Midwest. The states analyzed and the respective number of casinos are as follows: Illinois (11), Indiana (11), Iowa (15), Michigan (3), Minnesota (0), Missouri (13), Ohio (3), and Wisconsin (0).



Figure 1: A map showing the location of the fifty-six casinos included in this study

Economists Oded Izraeli and Kevin J. Murphy (2003) analyze the effect of industrial diversity on a state's unemployment rate. Because the dependent variables in this model and Izraeli and Murphy's model are both unemployment rates, the independent variables should also be similar. Since this study is looking at county unemployment rather than state unemployment, the independent variables must be adjusted to be county-level data rather than state-level data. Table 1 lists Izraeli and Murphy's variables for their industrial diversity study in the left column and this study's corresponding variables in the right column.

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TABLE 1—Description of Variables

Industrial diversity study	Casino study
U - is the state unemployment rate	COUNTY_UNEMP - is the county unemployment rate
USU - is the national unemployment rate	STATE_UNEMP - is the state unemployment rate
RPIC - is state per capita income (in 1982 dollars)	REAL_PCI - is the county per capita income (in 1982 dollars)
NWT - is percent of working-age population that is non-white	WHITE - is percent of the county's working-age population (15-65 years of age) that is white
TEEN - is percent of working-age population that is 16-19 years of age	TEEN - is percent of the county's working age population (15-65 years of age) that is 15-19 years of age
OVER65 - is the percent of the population 65 years and older	OVER65 - is the percent of the county population 65 years and older
DEN - is population density	POP_DENSITY - is the county population density
POP - is the state population	COUNTY_POP - is the county population
POPCH - is the rate of population growth in a state	POP_CHANGE - is the rate of population growth in a county
DIV - is a measure of the degree of industrial diversity	CASINO_DUM - is an indicator of whether or not there is a casino in a county

Source: Data adapted from Izraeli and Murphy 2003, 3.

The resulting model for this study is:

$$\text{COUNTY_UNEMP} = \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \text{STATE_UNEMP} + \beta_2 \text{REAL_PCI} + \beta_3 \text{WHITE} + \beta_4 \text{TEEN} + \beta_5 \text{OVER65} + \beta_6 \text{POP_DENSITY} + \beta_7 \text{COUNTY_POP} + \beta_8 \text{POP_CHANGE} + \beta_9 \text{CASINO_DUM} + \varepsilon$$

where α_0 is a constant, β_1 through β_9 are coefficients of the independent variables, and ε is an error term.

The state unemployment rate (STATE_UNEMP) should have a positive correlation with the county unemployment rate. If the state unemployment rate rises, the unemployment rate on average of the counties within the state would also be expected to rise.

Real per capita income per county (REAL_PCI) is calculated by dividing the county's nominal per capita income by the Consumer Price Index for each year. The Consumer Price Index data used have a base year of 1982. The expectation for the coefficient on REAL_PCI is negative because as real per capita income rises, both the incentive to work and the demand for output rises, and therefore lower the unemployment rate.

The variable WHITE is calculated by dividing the population in the county that is white by the working age population in the county. Working age population for this study are people between the ages of 15 and 65. The expectation is that WHITE will be negatively correlated with the county unemployment rate because non-whites typically have higher unemployment rates than whites (Israeli and Murphy 2003, 4).

The percentage teen (TEEN) is found by dividing the number of teenagers in a county (15-19 years of age) by the working age population in the county. The percentage over sixty-five years of age (OVER65) is determined by dividing the number of people in a county over the age of sixty-five by the total population of the county. The effect of the TEEN and OVER65 variables on county unemployment could be either positive or negative. It could be negative because the more people in these two groups, the smaller the labor force and therefore the lower the unemployment rate. It could, however, be positive because these groups consume less than other members of the population and, as a result, they create less of a demand for goods and services which could increase the unemployment rate (Israeli and Murphy 2003, 4).

County population density (POP_DENSITY) is computed by dividing the county population in thousands by the county land area in square miles. Israeli and Murphy hypothesize that state population density will have a negative correlation with state unemployment because "higher (lower) density means lower (higher) production costs, which helps a state's industries to become more competitive." The production costs are lower because "higher density means shorter distance among economic agents which lowers transportation as well as communication costs" (Israeli and Murphy 2003, 3). The same idea should apply to county

population density; county unemployment should decrease as the county population density rises.

The effect of county population (COUNTY_POP) on county unemployment is ambiguous. It may be negative because as the population of a county rises, businesses will be attracted to the area and, as a result, the unemployment rate may decrease. It may be positive because as the population increases, there is more competition for jobs. More competition could result in a higher unemployment rate.

Yearly population change (POP_CHANGE) is calculated by subtracting the prior year's population minus the current year's population and then dividing this number by the prior year's population. The resulting value was then multiplied by one hundred to obtain a percentage population change figure. Izraeli and Murphy hypothesize that population change is negatively related to the unemployment rate: "an increase in in-migration to a state should alter the composition of the state's labor force toward individuals with a higher likelihood of employment" (Izraeli and Murphy 2003, 4). The same may apply to the county population change.

The final independent variable is the casino dummy variable (CASINO_DUM). It indicates whether there is a casino in a particular county. It will equal zero for years during which no casino is located in the county and will equal one when a casino enters a county and for all successive years. For example the Isle of Capri Casino Waterloo in Black Hawk County, Iowa opened in 2007. For this cross-section, CASINO_DUM equals zero for years 1990-2006, and equals one for years 2007-2012. The only exception to this rule is the Argosy Empress Casino in Will County, Illinois. This riverboat casino opened in 1992, and in 2009 the casino caught fire and was closed. Therefore, for this case, CASINO_DUM equals zero from 1990-1992, one from 1992-2009, and zero from 2010-2012. Appendix A lists the sources for the casino opening dates. The expected sign for the casino dummy variable (CASINO_DUM) is ambiguous. It could have a negative coefficient because of the new jobs that the casino brings. This reduction in unemployment, however, could be offset if cannibalization is occurring. Also, the coefficient could be positive if the casinos are causing a large number of pathological gamblers to lose their jobs.

Table 2 shows the sources, unit of measurement, and descriptive statistics for all variables in the model. For all variables, there are 1288 observations (56 casinos with 23 time periods each).

TABLE 2—Variable Sources, Measurement, and Descriptive Statistics

Variable Notation	Source	Measurement	Mean (St. Dev.)
COUNTY_UNEMP	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics	Percent	5.734 (2.205)
STATE_UNEMP	U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics	Percent	5.480 (1.9127)
REAL_PCI	U.S. Census Bureau	Thousands of dollars	15.628 (2.870)
WHITE	U.S. Census Bureau	Percent	86.824 (12.037)
TEEN	U.S. Census Bureau	Percent	11.086 (1.023)
OVER65	U.S. Census Bureau	Percent	13.722 (2.800)
POP_DENSITY	U.S. Census Bureau	Thousands per square mile	0.673 (0.883)
COUNTY_POP	U.S. Census Bureau	Thousands	369.02 (503.5)
POP_CHANGE	U.S. Census Bureau	Percent	0.441 (6.524)
CASINO_DUM	See Appendix A	Integer (0 or 1)	0.592 (0.492)

V. Results

An ordinary least squares regression is run with fixed effects and robust standard errors. The data are paneled data of 56 cross sections (casinos) and 23 time periods (1990-2012). The results are as follows:

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Variable	Coefficient	Std Error	P-value
Constant **	10.0967	3.9194	0.0101
STATE_UNEMP***	0.9452	0.0335	0.0000
REAL_PCI **	-0.1084	0.0471	0.0216
WHITE ***	-0.1238	0.0303	0.0000
TEEN	0.0743	0.0866	0.3914
OVER65 *	0.1679	0.0941	0.0747
POP_DENSITY	1.4617	2.1321	0.4931
COUNTY_POP	-0.0028	0.0025	0.2627
POP_CHANGE	0.0005	0.0028	0.8484
CASINO_DUM **	-0.2854	0.1115	0.0106

*significant at the 10% level; **significant at the 5% level; ***significant at the 1% level

The R-squared is 0.909950 and the adjusted R-squared is 0.905238. This indicates that 90.5238% of the variation in county unemployment has been explained by the independent variables.

None of the population variables, POP_DENSITY, COUNTY_POP, or POP_CHANGE, were significant. This could be because the unemployment rate is based on the population that is of working age so if the population changes, the unemployment rate already reflects this change. The TEEN variable was also not significant. This indicates that the number of teenagers in the county does not affect the unemployment rate significantly.

STATE_UNEMP, REAL_PCI, WHITE, and CASINO_DUM are all statistically significant. The state unemployment rate (STATE_UNEMP) is significant at the 1% level. This means that there is 99% confidence that there is a correlation between the state unemployment rate and the county unemployment rate. The correlation is nearly one for one; if the state unemployment rate increases by 1%, the expectation is that the county unemployment rate will increase by .9452%.

The second significant variable is the real per capita income (REAL_PCI). It is significant at the 5% level. The coefficient on this

variable predicts that an increase in the real per capita income of one thousand dollars will result in a 0.1084% reduction in the unemployment rate. In other words, as the earning potential for having a job increases, fewer people will be unemployed.

The third significant variable is the percentage of the county population that is white (WHITE). This variable is significant at the 1% level. The regression predicts that an increase in the percentage of the county that is white by 1% will result in a reduction of the county unemployment rate of 0.1238%. A correlation between higher percentage of white people and a lower unemployment rate is consistent with past economic studies.

The variable of particular interest for this study is CASINO_DUM, which is statistically significant at the 5% level and negatively correlated with the county unemployment rate. If a county has a riverboat or land-based casino, this should result on average of an unemployment rate that is .2854% lower than when the county did not have the casino.

VI. Conclusion and Further Research

This is the first study to look at a large sample of casinos in the Midwest and the first to look at the effect casinos have on unemployment in a longitudinal study. The findings are in support of casinos. Casinos are correlated with a reduction in county unemployment. The question now becomes: are the consequences of casinos such as pathological gambling and increased crime worth the decrease in unemployment? This is for legislators and community members to decide.

Further research could be conducted on this data to look at the effect casinos have on county per capita income. Whether using county unemployment or county per capita income as the dependent variable, one variable that would be beneficial to include in future studies is the distance to the nearest casino. This would be a very intensive study, however, because it would need to include all types of casinos (tribal casinos, racetrack casinos, and land-based or riverboat casinos) unless justification can be given as to why someone would choose to attend one type of casino exclusively over the other types of casinos.

Similar comprehensive studies to this study could be completed for other regions of the United States to see if the results vary by region or if the unemployment rate is consistently correlated with a reduction in the unemployment rate as it was for for the Midwestern United States.

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Appendix A: Sources of Casino Opening Dates

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