

I-Team: Children left alone in cars at Tri-State casinos a growing problem

[Jason Law](#), [Maxim Alter](#) 5:15 PM, Feb 19, 2015

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CINCINNATI – On a cold morning last month, police said Dontae Smith parked his car in Horseshoe Casino Cincinnati’s outdoor garage and walked inside. His 6-year-old son didn’t go with him.

Instead, police said Smith locked the boy alone in his car with the engine and heat running for nearly an hour so he could play blackjack.

The wind chill that morning on Jan. 8 was 12 degrees below zero, according to the National Weather Service.

The 34-year-old was arrested that same day and charged with [child endangerment](#).

Smith’s case is not only part of a growing problem nationwide – it has become a stain on the Tri-State casino industry.

There were 262 cases of children left in cars at casinos in the United States in the last 20 years, according to data from [KidsAndCars.org](#). Forty of those cases involved casinos in Ohio and Indiana.

There were also more reports of children left alone in cars at casinos between 2010 and 2014 than any other five-year span.

The problem is so bad, the American Gaming Association (AGA) announced in August it is working with KidsAndCars.org to raise awareness and strengthen the industry’s security practices.

The AGA includes members from Horseshoe Casino Cincinnati owner Caesars Entertainment and Hollywood Casino Lawrenceburg owner Penn National Gaming.

KidsandCars.org President Janette Fennell said the stats, while already alarming, could actually be higher.

She said many cases of children left alone at casinos are not reported. “It’s very underreported,” Fennell said. “People are doing this and a lot of this has to do with gambling addiction.”

It is illegal for anyone under 21 years of age to enter a casino in Indiana and Ohio without an adult – and that minor is only allowed in designated areas of the casino where there is no gambling. Breaking this law is a felony.

There are [only 19 states](#) in the U.S. with laws that specifically make it illegal to leave a child unattended in a vehicle. Ohio and Indiana are not one of those 19.

But cars are not the only place children are being left while their parents gamble.

The I-Team discovered six cases of parents leaving children alone at restaurants like Starbucks and Bobby’s Burger Place inside Horseshoe Casino Cincinnati since it opened in 2013. These parents were given warnings and asked to leave the property.

CASES AT HORSESHOE CASINO CINCINNATI

• **MARCH 11, 2013:** 38-year-old mother leaves three 12-year-old girls free to “walk around” the casino. Warning issued and no charges filed.

• **MARCH 13, 2013:** 33-year-old mother leaves “young boy” leaning against a wall while she and two friends play slots. Warning issued and no charges filed.

• **APRIL 7, 2013:** 28-year-old man brings 16 and 17-year-old cousins into casino. Teens illegally play slots while man plays blackjack. Case is forwarded to the Juvenile Prosecutor’s Office.

• **APRIL 18, 2013:** Adults, ages 26, 37 and 45, leave two children, 8 and 9, in Starbucks while gambling. Group is escorted off property and no charges filed.

• **APRIL 21, 2013:** 42-year-old mother brings 15-year-old daughter to casino to eat at Bobby’s Burger Place. Mom then allows girl to roam casino floor while she gambles. Warnings issued and no charges filed.

• **JUNE 5, 2013:** 61-year-old grandmother plays slots with two small grandchildren nearby. Security guards said “children were out of grandmother’s view... and climbing slot machine chairs.” Grandmother banned from casino for 30 days.

• **JULY 6, 2013:** 45-year-old dad leaves two daughters, both under 21, in Starbucks unattended. Dad is banned from casino for 24 hours.

• **JULY 22, 2013:** 43-year-old father leaves 14-year-old son at Starbucks while he gambles. Warning issued and no charges filed.

• **JULY 29, 2013:** 37-year-old parents leave 13-year-old child in Starbucks while they play slots. Warnings issued and no charges filed.

• **JULY 31, 2013:** 45-year-old dad leaves 15-year-old daughter at Bobby’s Burger Place while he and his 40-year-old girlfriend gamble. Warnings issued and no charges filed.

• **JULY 8, 2014:** 5-year-old and 7-year-old left alone in parking garage after mother goes into retrieve their grandmother in the casino. Warnings issued and no charges filed.

• **JAN. 8, 2015:** Dontae Smith is arrested after he leaves his 6-year-old son locked in his running car with the heat on to play blackjack. Smith is banned from casino for life.

ALL INFORMATION ACCORDING TO PUBLIC RECORDS

On March 11, 2013, a 38-year-old mother allowed her three 12-year-old girls to “walk around” the casino alone, according to records. The mother was warned and not charged.

Two days later, a 33-year-old mother left her “young boy” leaning against a wall while she and two friends played with slot machines, records state. The mother was also not charged.

Cincinnati police said a 28-year-old man brought his 16 and 17-year-old cousins into the casino in April of 2013. They said the teens illegally played slots while the 28-year-old played blackjack. The case was forwarded to the county juvenile prosecutor's office for consideration.

In July of 2014, a 5-year-old and 7-year-old were left alone in Horseshoe's parking garage after their mother went inside the casino to retrieve their grandmother. The woman was warned and not charged.

Dr. Ronald Sachs, an addiction therapist with more than 30 years of experience, said he attributes this behavior in part to gambling addiction.

“It indicates there's a loss of control – that somebody intends to do something for a short period of time and they lose track of it that,” he said. “Is it causing financial problems? Is it causing legal problems? Yes. Is it causing family problems? Those are the areas you look at.”

Sachs said there is no medication to treat gambling addiction like there is to treat opiate or other drug addictions.

The only way to break free of a gambling addiction is with a 12-step program or similar treatment, he said.

“A lot of people don't believe (addiction) is an illness. They say it's just a bad choice. It's bad morals,” he said. “Addiction is much deeper than that. It gets in and it sinks these hooks into you.”

Mike, a member of the international organization Gamblers Anonymous who asked not to be identified by his full name, said he was disappointed by the limited amount of places locally for gambling addicts to seek treatment.

A Google search found only eight places near Cincinnati and Lawrenceburg that help gamblers overcome addiction.

Alcoholics Anonymous, however, has hundreds of local meetings throughout the week.

Gamblers Anonymous is a 12-step program and support network set up to assist people who have a gambling problem.

To find Gamblers Anonymous meetings near you, [click here](#).

You can also call the National Council on Problem Gambling Helpline at 1-800-522-4700. They offer free, confidential help for problem gamblers and their family members.

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