

Casinos work to keep underage gamblers off riverboats

Indianapolis (AP) – Indiana’s riverboat casinos have paid nearly USD 300,000 in fines over the last decade for letting in 90 underage gamblers despite rules that say patrons must be 21 years old to enter.

The casino industry says it works to prevent those under 21 from getting onto riverboats, but the problem is becoming similar to the underage drinking issue for bars and liquor stores. And experts say early gambling exposure, like teen use of alcohol, increases the likelihood of addiction problems later in life.

Young people get mixed messages about gambling, said David Giancopassi, a University of Memphis researcher who has studied underage casino gambling. Laws allow 18-year-olds to wager in Texas Hold ’em tournaments and on lotteries and horse racing, and casinos bill themselves as fun places where anybody can get lucky,

“In many ways, it’s more appealing to sneak into a casino now than getting served in a bar,” he said.

Mike Smith, executive director of the Indiana Casino Association, said the riverboats put a lot of work into checking identification. Anyone who looks younger than 30 is asked to show an ID before entering most casinos, and boats must report the number of ID checks and the results to the Indiana Gaming Commission.

Those efforts seem to be paying off – especially when compared to states like New Jersey that allow young visitors to come in with adult family members. An average of 350 underage patrons a year have been caught playing at slot machines and tables in New Jersey’s 11 casinos since 2003.

Even with Indiana's checks, the system is not fail-safe, security experts say, because of counterfeit IDs.

"If a person is really determined to get in they can find a way. Some fake IDs are pretty convincing," said Larry Buck, regional general manager with Pinnacle Entertainment, which owns Belterra Casino in Switzerland County.

Xidi Zheng, who tried to get more money from an ATM after losing at blackjack, was tossed out of Caesars Casino in November when a cashier discovered he was 19 years old.

Caesars and its parent company, Harrah's Entertainment properties, evicted Zheng for life and he was charged with unlawfully entering the casino. He is now in a year of pre-trial diversion, but Zheng said there will always be a place he can find to play blackjack.

"They don't really check too often," he said.