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Two Letters Make a Big Difference: Illegal Gambling Disguised in Florida as Arcade Gaming

Easily accessible, illegal gambling disguised as arcade gaming has spread to thousands of strip malls and stand-alone storefronts all over Florida. As a result, the FCCG's 888-ADMIT-IT Problem Gambling HelpLine is experiencing a surge in contacts related to these shady establishments¹, sometimes referred to as “game rooms” or “gambling houses.”

The arcades in question started springing up all over the Sunshine State in the early 2000s under the guise of “internet cafés.” In 2013, a new law was passed to “give law enforcement authorities better tools to put an end to illegal gambling devices in strip malls and arcades throughout the state.”² Even so, authorities struggled with effective enforcement – that is, until the Florida Gaming Control Commission (FGCC) was formed in 2021 and began mobilizing law enforcement to act on illegal gambling complaints fielded by consumers.³ FGCC tracks news about illegal gambling enforcement activities on its website.⁴ **Today, Florida's laws are clear: Slot machines and slot simulations are illegal, outside the eight pari-mutuel facilities in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties and at tribal facilities.**

Slot machines are strictly regulated by FGCC and are legal only in the eight pari-mutuel facilities in Miami-Dade and Broward Counties and at tribal facilities.

The impacts illegal gambling establishments are having on patrons and employees, who may not otherwise gamble or would not make the drive to a slot-licensed facility, have grown exponentially and are of particular concern to older adults. It's why AARP and the FGCC are teaming up to issue warnings saying these operators are specifically targeting vulnerable aging populations. **“When they open up in a neighborhood, they dial up the winnings to entice the neighborhood to come in and play. Once they get a packed house, they can literally dial down the winnings to almost zero. Then at that point, they're just stealing and using predatory practices and taking money from Florida's most vulnerable, especially the senior population,”** said Eric Carr, the FGCC's Director of External Affairs.⁵ On top of that, players often do not realize the establishments are illegal and often become magnets for crime.

Most concerning of all, illegal gambling establishments are breeding grounds for gambling problems. Though most who gamble can do so safely, the tables are turned when predatory practices are combined with a lack of even basic consumer protections, such as signage for the 888-ADMIT-IT Problem Gambling HelpLine or facility staff training to identify concerning signs and respond appropriately, a tenet of the FCCG's Responsible Gambling and Player Protection Program (RGPPP) in place at Florida's slot-licensed facilities. An individual suffering from problem gambling will do anything to stay in the action, even if it means continuing to gamble at an illegal arcade which has cheated them time and time again.

Can you walk away? Can a loved one? If you or a loved one is spending too much time and money gambling, whether in these illegal arcades or otherwise, call or text the FCCG's 24/7, **Confidential, and Multilingual 888-ADMIT-IT HelpLine** and get connected to a wide range of free, personalized resources through an informative dialogue with one of our HelpLine Specialists. Recovery is possible, and treatment is available!



References: 🔍

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3. Spata, Christopher. “As Florida Eyes Illegal Casinos, History Shows Cracking down Isn't Easy.” *Tampa Bay Times*, 21 May 2023, www.tampabay.com/news/florida/2023/05/16/florida-eyes-illegal-casinos-history-shows-cracking-down-isnt-easy/.
4. “Latest News.” Florida Gaming Control Commission, 2023, flgaming.gov/news/.
5. Bowen, Jordan. Florida Seniors Warned to be Cautious of Shady Slot Machines. *Fox 13 News*. May 23, 2023. <https://www.fox13news.com/news/illegal-gambling-operations-in-florida-re-targeting-aging-populations>.