

B.C. sees record tally of gambling parents leaving kids in cars

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British Columbia tallied a record number of incidents last year in which parents - and sometimes grandparents - were barred from casinos for gambling while leaving babies and children in cars, darkened parking lots and even the trunk of a vehicle.

The 35 cases resulted in gamblers being barred for at least one year, according to reports obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, which provide a harrowing portrait of the social costs of gambling. In all, B.C. imposed such bans in 87 incidents of gambling-related child abandonment from 2004 to 2008.

The cases include:

A mother left her two children, aged 7 and 9, in the trunk of her burgundy Chrysler Intrepid on June 17, 2004, while she gambled at Boulevard Casino in Coquitlam.

A crying child was walking through the Boulevard Casino parking lot in Coquitlam on Jan. 19, 2009. When security located the mother in the casino, she returned to the parking lot, then scolded the child for leaving the car.

Three children, including a toddler and six-month-old, were left in a hotel hallway with a diaper bag in Lake City Casinos in Penticton on March 23, 2009, while their mother was in a casino gambling.

Two children under age 10 were left alone in a fifth-wheel trailer at Treasure Cove in Prince George on Aug. 7, 2008, while their grandfather spent nearly an hour at the blackjack table.

Not only are such parents typically barred for at least one year but many face investigations by Ministry of Children and Family Development social services.

"We have made it a top priority for us and our service partners to detect and take immediate action if children are found to be in cars or in any way abandoned on our property," said Kevin Gass, vice-president of corporate affairs for the British Columbia Lottery Corp. "...We have zero tolerance."

BCLC keeps the most detailed figures on child abandonment, but the problem is widespread.

In Alberta, a Calgary father was charged with child abandonment after firefighters rescued a 21-month-old boy from a locked car parked outside a casino in March, when the temperature was -8 C.

A 32-year-old Tilbury, Ont., woman was charged with abandoning a child and failing to provide the necessities of life after her six-month-old daughter was left in a car, sweating profusely, while her mother gambled at Caesar's Windsor one August night. When police told the woman she could no longer enter the casino, she asked if she could go back and cash in her chips - she'd been on "a roll," she said.