

# Owner says abandoned kids all too common

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The only time words like "baby" and "not unusual" should be used in a casino context is when Tom Jones and his band are headlining the after-dinner cabaret.

But that the most famous retired casino owner in Calgary says "not unusual" when describing parents leaving children outside in cars during all-night gambling sessions?

Somewhere in Alberta, alarm bells should be sounding like the sirens on a freshly-drained slot machine.

"Not unusual" is the matter-of-fact phrase used by Frank Sisson, when told about a 21-month-old baby left inside a car for six shivering hours Sunday night, while the dad gambled inside Sisson's former casino, the Silver Dollar.

"It happens -- the only thing unusual is you guys in the media hearing about it this time," said Sisson, who sold his casino in 2007, after a half-century in the gaming business.

Sisson said cases of parents leaving children outside are something every Alberta casino deals with, and while not a daily or even weekly occurrence, he recalls it happening at his place every month or so.

The Silver Dollar, under Sisson's management and Alberta casino rules, had a no-tolerance policy for gamblers who used the parking-lot as an unsupervised daycare.

"We'd have security go around and find them, and then we'd tell them to leave -- we banned them from the casino," said Sisson.

"It's an unfortunate thing, where people sometimes don't use common sense. People get foolish."

Sometimes it was Silver Dollar security doing parking lot patrols who found the children, sometimes it was casino patrons reporting unsupervised kids to staff.

There are no provincial regulations requiring casinos to monitor their lots -- like many other owners, Sisson sent security out to scour parking area as a matter of routine, and sometimes, kids were found.

The negligent parent would be punted and the incident would end there.

Police were almost never involved, as they were Sunday night when the baby was found, crying and sick, wearing scant clothing in sub-zero temperatures.

Provincial regulations state that police must be called only when a child is in immediate danger or a parent can't be found -- there's no rule saying police must automatically be called.

Sisson has little sympathy for those who ditch their kids to roll the dice, saying he isn't sure problem gambling is the issue, so much as a lack of brains.

"They probably do the same thing at Christmas, leaving the kids in the car outside the mall while they go shopping inside," said Sisson.

"That doesn't condone what he did, and the man's clearly an idiot -- I feel sorry for the kid, having to live with an idiot like that."

And thus the sympathy pendulum swings, from those who see a parent so desperate to gamble as a victim needing help, to those who'd happily see the 50-year-old father strapped to a roulette wheel and flogged.

Alberta currently has over 100,000 adults considered gambling addicts, while reaping \$1.5 billion in revenue via slot machines and VLTs every four months.

Dr. Garry Smith, a gambling research specialist at the University of Alberta, confirms what Sisson reports -- that kids being abandoned outside while parents gamble inside isn't unusual. "It happens every so often, but usually the child is older, found playing around outside -- a child this young is rare," said Smith.

"It is typical of gambling addiction, to neglect really important responsibility, but I wouldn't say he's a victim -- anybody should know better than this."

Smith agrees that the current model, where casinos monitor their lots as they see fit, may not go far enough in protecting children -- he says mandatory lot checks may be a better option.

"It should be written right into the regulations, and maybe each person entering the casino should have to give ID, so they can be found quickly, and they know who is inside," said Smith.

Alberta, says the professor, has to expect this kind of negligent behaviour, the way a society that allows drinking should expect alcoholism.

"Alberta has 23 casinos -- if you're going to allow a harder calibre of gambling, you're going to get incidents like this," said Smith.