

Lottery Lies

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By Alfie Kohn

Sure, I support Freedom of the Press, but I'll tell you what's at the top of my list when I get to censor newspapers: photographs of grinning lottery winners. Also stories about what they plan to do with their millions and puff pieces about the lottery with headlines like "The Possible Dream."

The public relations machinery of the Massachusetts State Lottery was in high gear a few weeks ago when its Megabucks jackpot topped \$18 million, the largest in North American history. Thirteen and a half million tickets were sold. The owners of the seven winning tickets dropped by Lottery headquarters in Braintree to certify their victories, grin for the cameras, and answer the usual insipid questions posed by nine reporters.

I am embarrassed to tell you I was one of those reporters. I was covering this historic event for a certain national newspaper known for its colorful graphics and snappy copy. I dutifully noted that most of the winners had no doubts from the beginning that they had picked the winning numbers. I also reported how much easier life was going to be for these people. The Lottery's advertising campaign for the following week stressed that these folks were "just like you or me," which is sort of true. Talking to them in person enhances this impression, and even I caught myself thinking, "Next time it could be me...if I buy enough tickets." This is just the kind of superstitious conclusion that the folks in Braintree headquarters hope we will draw. In fact, the further we stray from rationality, the more we try to propitiate the God of Luck, the more closely our betting resembles an addiction, the better for the Lottery.

The first state-sponsored gambling in modern times began in New Hampshire in 1964. A lot of people frowned on it. Each state that subsequently got into the business has had its share of indignant critics to soothe. The criticism eventually died down, though, and I could find not a single voice raised against Megabucks during the flurry of publicity surrounding the big payoff a few weeks ago. All I could find were people scurrying to buy tickets – including the people who make their living as reporters and editors.

Two hundred years ago, Adam Smith said this about the forerunner of Megabucks: "That the chance of gain is naturally overvalued, we may learn from the universal success of lotteries....There is not, however, a more certain proposition in mathematics than that the more tickets you adventure upon, the more likely you are a loser." A friend of mine put it more succinctly when she defined the lottery as a tax on ignorance.

Of course we reporters do not scribble in our steno pads about the bitterness or disappointment of thirteen million losers who were also sure they had picked the right numbers. And Lottery patrons prefer not to think about the meaning of the mathematical odds (which, interestingly, appear nowhere on the tickets). Those odds, by the way, are 1,900,000 to one, which is comparable to the chance that you will be struck and killed by lightning.

In a sense, it is natural to shrug off the numbers as an abstraction and focus instead on the very real grinning faces. But this tendency to turn infinitesimal odds into a tempting possibility does not just happen by itself. It is greatly abetted by the Lottery's advertising campaigns. Last year, almost \$6 million of Lottery funds were spent to convince us to ignore the odds, and the services of Hill, Holliday, one of the country's leading advertising agencies, were recruited to this end. Proponents used to argue that the Lottery would simply attract those who were already participating in illegal gambling; the state might as well profit from something that already goes on. Critics were reminded that government is not in the business of legislating morality, after all. But such arguments hold no weight when the state not only gives its imprimatur to gambling but aggressively encourages it.

Massachusetts (along with the other states that promote gambling) is enticing people to act against their own best interests in order to swell the public treasury. "They're making people live on dreams, preying upon people's weaknesses," a member of Gamblers Anonymous complained to me. It is instructive that more tickets are bought when times are bad: At the height of the recession, between 1981 and 1982, nationwide state lottery sales climbed by an astounding 33%.

And who carries the burden of this tax? Those who can least afford it. By now the figures are in, the studies are done, and there's no doubt about it: State lotteries are enormously regressive – twice as regressive as even a standard sales tax.

Even if the same number of tickets were bought by people at all income levels, it would be regressive because a given sum accounts for a greater proportion of a poor person's earnings than of a rich person's. But the news is even worse. The most comprehensive survey of state lottery sales, conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center, found that people with incomes under \$5,000 earned two percent of the nation's total family income but bought six percent of the lottery tickets. Those with incomes over \$30,000, by contrast, earned 23% of total income but bought only eight percent of the tickets. In both cases, the disparity is about 300% in the wrong direction. Wealthier people, when they do participate, usually buy fewer tickets, too. And a New Jersey study found that lottery ticket sales are inversely related to education.

To add insult to financial injury, state lotteries are notoriously inefficient fundraisers. For every dollar the Massachusetts Lottery gave to cities and towns last year, it spent 28 cents in administrative costs, overhead, and advertising. For a typical tax, the comparable figure is five cents.

You've heard much of this before – although not lately. The Lottery profits off desperation, cultivates irrationality, endorses gambling, and hurts the poor most of all. But those of us who think the very structure of this country's economic system needs an overhaul should be adding a new argument to this brief. The Lottery provides a convenient safety valve for unhappiness that might otherwise be transformed into the energy to work for social change.

There's some empirical support for this. A Swedish study of betting on soccer pools found that men who "experienced the most socially derived frustrations" did most of the betting. Instead of agitating for a more equitable system, the powerless, the poor, and the pissed-off can dream of mega-bucks. Instead of joining in collective action for more gratifying work – or, in the case of the unemployed, for any work – let them fantasize about telling the boss to shove it. Or of making the boss work for them.

This is indeed the stuff dreams are made of, as the Lottery's ads emphasize. But dreams are the stuff that preserve the status quo.

Some people despise the Lottery because it threatens the famous Protestant Work Ethic; it holds out the possibility of acquiring a fortune without earning it. But some people already circumvent the Ethic – those who make money while asleep. From where I sit, the Lottery's ugliness comes from holding out a promise of *joining* these privileged few rather than ending a system of privilege.

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