



The Changing Landscape of Sports Gambling Executive Summary

Sports gambling, in its many forms, is one of the most popular forms of gambling. A combination of the Supreme Court’s landmark ruling in 2018 opening the door for states to offer sports gambling along with evolving mobile and online technologies means an era of unprecedented growth is likely on the horizon. While the exact implications and impacts of this growth on problem gambling are not clear, the changing landscape should concern a range of stakeholders, including state legislatures and policy makers, sports league executives, college athletic directors, mental health professionals and prevention specialists.

Not Your Father’s Sports Gambling Landscape

The nature of sports gambling is rapidly changing. Newer modes of sports gambling (and gambling in general) and new types of wagers have only recently come into existence. Much of the available sports gambling problem gambling research was conducted before the proliferation of sports gambling in electronic forms; thus an analysis of sports gambling behavior must be considered within the context of a landscape that’s constantly changing.

Popularity and Growth of Sports Gambling

Sports gambling is popular — and growing. Nearly half of American consumers have placed a bet on a sporting event. In 2015, sports wagering represented 45% of the gambling done online. Online sports betting has increased considerably over the past few years.

Fantasy sports gambling continues to experience explosive growth. Studies suggest the number of people participating in fantasy sports grew from approximately 14 million people in 2004 to 57 million people in 2018. This is particularly concerning from a problem gambling perspective given that higher fantasy game participation has been associated with significant increases in problem gambling severity.

Sports Betting And Online Gambling: A Potentially Volatile Mix

The rates of problem gambling among sports are much higher than the general population. While international data suggests that approximately 1% of those who gamble experience a serious problem at some point in their life, a study in 2010 indicated that 4.4% of sports bettors met DSM-IV criteria for problem gambling. When gambling on sports online is considered, the rate is significantly higher. A study of online sports gamblers indicated that 16.2% were compulsive gamblers while 13.2% were problem gamblers.



The Profile of a Sports Bettor

There are several characteristics of heavy sports bettors who meet the definition of problem gambling. They are typically male, young (up to age 35), single, fully employed, and have a high level of education. Sports bettors consider gambling to be more related to skill than luck and thus may be more prone to distortions in their thinking. They affiliate with others who favor sports betting, frequently take advantage of different types of promotions and are generally highly impulsive. The characteristics of sports bettors who gamble online are similar to those who use the internet to gamble in non-sports games.

The Concerns About Modern Sports Gambling

There are several aspects of modern online sports betting that fuel public health concerns about the amount of problem gambling that may arise from it.

Access. The great availability of internet gambling, including the ability to bet from a laptop computer or a mobile device, allows for patterns of use that are different than a brick-and-mortar venue. Those who gamble to alleviate psychological distress may find online gambling to be more convenient, provide more privacy, be less socially demanding, allow greater use of substance use while gambling and result in betting late into the night. Early indications are that those who bet through mobile devices have higher rates of problems than those who prefer land-based betting.

Live In-Play Betting and Micro Betting. In addition to traditional sports betting that revolves around the winner of the game, today's sports gamblers can bet — in game — on discrete events such as the winner of the next point in tennis. This greatly reduces the delay between bet and reward, a cycle of betting associated with impulsive behaviors that can be risky for some gamblers.

Youth Are at Higher Risk

There is considerable evidence that gambling begins early. Youth, in general, have higher rates of gambling problems than their adult counterparts. More than 13% of adolescents had wagered money on sports teams according to a study in 2017. Gambling — of any kind — is widespread in college, with 75-80% of student having gambled within the last year. Given their age, access to gambling, propensity for risk taking and the social acceptability and glamorization of gambling, college students may be particularly susceptible to developing gambling problems.



Students most often bet on professional football and college basketball. Male college students are far more likely than females to participate in sports gambling and are also more likely to experience gambling-related problems.

Professional Athletes Frequently Gamble on Sports

Gambling on sports is widespread among professional athletes. A study in Europe showed that 56.6% of professional athletes gambled in the previous year, with 8.2% exhibiting problem gambling. Other studies reflect that the rate of problem gambling is significantly higher in professional athletes than among the general population.

Marketing Inhibits Ability to Stop Gambling

The betting environment is being shaped by promotions made by internet gambling providers. While it's too early to say what effect this messaging has on problem gambling sports bettors, one study found that problem bettors found it more difficult to discontinue betting in light of promotions that emphasize the ease of placing a bet and offers of risk-free bonuses.

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