

Protecting Canada's youth from the risks of exposure to gambling advertising

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Before 2021, single-game sports betting was illegal in Canada; now, in 2025, advertisements for sports betting platforms punctuate screened competitive sports games without limits on their duration or frequency. Sports betting advertisements are seen on player jerseys and digitally projected onto playing areas, and commentator segments are sponsored by betting platforms.¹ Such advertising insidiously normalizes a harmful activity, and children are being exposed, to their detriment. Despite official age restrictions for participating in gambling and using betting platforms, Canada's youth are being harmed.^{2,3}

Even before single-game sports betting was legalized, a 2019 survey of 14 142 Ontario grade 7–12 students showed that about 4% of Ontario high school students reported symptoms of low to moderately severe gambling problems (the urge to gamble despite negative consequences), and about 2% reported behaviour consistent with gambling addiction.⁴ In a 2018 poll, 15% of Canadians aged 18–24 years endorsed problem gambling, compared with 7% in the general population.³ The problem is not unique to Canada. The United Kingdom's 2024 Young People and Gambling study found that 1.5% of UK children aged 11–17 years were experiencing problem gambling and that an additional 1.9% were at risk.⁵

The legalization of online gambling (iGaming) in Ontario in 2022 turned any smartphone into a betting platform, compounding existing epidemics of technology and social media use addiction. Although youth are theoretically banned from iGaming, advertising influences young people to start gambling and to gamble more, and it likely makes recovery from problem gambling more difficult.⁶

Problem gambling has been associated with increased risks of suicide, substance use disorders, crime, and broader social harms.^{3,7} Suicide was the leading cause of death in a longitudinal study of Norwegians diagnosed with problem gambling between 2008 and 2021.⁸ In a 2021 UK cross-sectional study involving individuals aged 16–24 years with problem gambling, the odds ratio for attempted suicide was 9.0 in men and 4.9 in women.⁹ A 2018 scoping review found that youth gambling is additionally associated with theft, weapons-related, and assault charges.¹⁰

Recognizing that youth are particularly vulnerable to the messaging of betting as an augmentation of spectatorship, in 2024

the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario banned online gambling ads that feature athletes and celebrities. However, within days, commercials with celebrity athletes promoting “responsible gaming” features of sports betting platforms were released to sidestep the ban.¹¹ Warnings to game responsibly have, however, been shown in a systematic review of 166 studies to be ineffective,¹² which highlights the weak efforts of provincial governments who stand to make substantial revenue from iGaming (Ontario's open single-game industry produced a total tax revenue of more than \$1.4 billion during its first 3 years).¹³

Allowing glaring and ubiquitous promotion of sports betting is a wilful mortgage of Canada's future to the interests of private profit and tax revenue. Canadian jurisdictions should act to eliminate all commercials that promote sports betting during broadcasts where minors are likely to see them. Legislation at the federal level is required given that piecemeal interventions by jurisdictions are likely to be ineffective.¹⁴ Canadian Bill S-211, which passed its second reading in the Senate on June 12, 2025, provides for the development of a national framework to regulate sports betting advertising and set national standards for the prevention of risk for people negatively affected.¹⁵ The bill is only a start but must be expedited and passed now to protect Canada's youth from the harms of exposure to aggressive sports betting advertising.

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