

Boom in youth gambling in Mass. fueled by online sports betting apps

A growing number of young people are showing up at mental health clinics and Gamblers Anonymous meetings

By **Chris Serres** Globe Staff, Updated February 11, 2024, 12:01 a.m.

Marlene Warner suspected something was wrong when she spotted several mysterious money transfers on her teenage son's bank account.

The amounts were relatively small — just \$50 each — but they were more than she thought her 18-year-old son could afford as a student with a part-time job at a YMCA.

When asked about the transfers, the teenager admitted he and several of his friends from the Boston area had been pooling money to make online sport bets in New Hampshire, where it's legal for those 18 or older to gamble online, even if they live in another state.



Marlene Warner, CEO of the Massachusetts Council on Gaming and Health, recently discovered that her 18-year-old son had been pooling money with friends to place sports bets online in New Hampshire. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

“I was horrified,” said Warner, who lives in Salem and is chief executive of the [Massachusetts Council on Gaming and Health](#), a nonprofit that helps people with gambling problems and advocates for protections. “If my own son is gambling, and he knows the risks, then how many other young folks are accessing these sites?”

Placing a bet on sports has never been easier, faster and more alluring, and a flood of [celebrity endorsements](#) has even made it appear glamorous. But from Boston to Springfield, treatment clinics are experiencing an influx of young people — some as young as 14 — seeking help for gambling problems. And in a troubling new trend, college students are showing up at Gamblers Anonymous meetings across the state, sometimes accompanied by their parents, say leaders of the fellowship group.

“We are creating the conditions of a future public health crisis, in the same way that the Sacklers did with OxyContin,” said Cara Ferguson, prevention coordinator at High Point

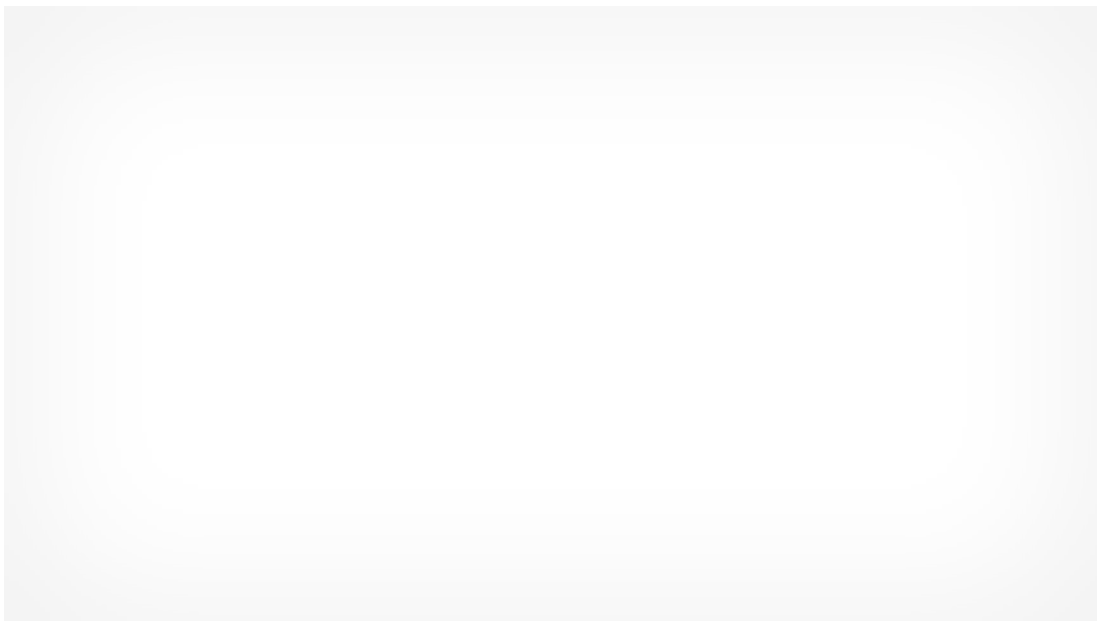
Treatment Center in Brockton, which provides [outpatient counseling](#) for gambling addictions.

Online sports betting has exploded in Massachusetts since the state legalized the practice a little over a year ago, and now families and mental health therapists are scrambling to protect those most vulnerable to the mobile betting apps: adolescents and teenagers.

It is illegal for anyone under 21 in Massachusetts to gamble online on sports, and operators DraftKings, FanDuel, and BetMGM have introduced safeguards designed to deter underage bettors from accessing the platforms. Those include some of the same tools used by financial institutions to verify identity, such as two-factor authentication, verification of a user's location, and a Social Security number.

Yet there is growing evidence that tech-savvy youths are finding ways to circumvent the security measures, and engage in a highly addictive form of rapid-fire betting on mobile apps. Increasingly, they are lying about their age or using their parents' or older friends' accounts to make bets on everything from their hometown college team to the number of touchdowns their favorite quarterback will throw on Sunday, according to gaming researchers, addiction therapists, and [Gamblers Anonymous](#) volunteers.

ADVERTISING



The trend worries officials with the state Office of Problem Gambling Services, which is rolling out several new gambling education campaigns targeted at young people. Starting this summer, the office will recruit scores of young people for a [Youth Leaders Project](#) to raise awareness about the risks of gambling. Student leaders who participate in the project can receive \$5,000 college scholarships.

Still, gaming researchers and public health advocates say state regulators have not kept pace with the rapid growth and technological sophistication of online gaming platforms, which are inundating the sports airwaves with ads. An estimated \$1.8 billion was spent to advertise online gambling last year across the country, up nearly 70 percent in one year, according to media consulting firm BIA Advisory Services.

Since mobile sports betting launched in Massachusetts last March, gamblers have wagered [about \\$4.8 billion](#), much of it fueled by the surging popularity of so-called [prop betting](#). These are wagers not tied to the final score or outcome, but are related to hundreds of specific events or accomplishments within a game. For the Super Bowl this Sunday, bettors will be able to place online bets on everything from which team will score first to how many touchdowns will be scored by halftime. FanDuel Canada is even [taking online bets](#) on whether the Kansas City Chiefs' Travis Kelce will propose to Taylor Swift during the game.

"A lot of problem gamblers make their first bet on the Super Bowl, and this year we have all the added hype of Taylor and Travis," said Lia Nower, a professor and director of the [Center for Gambling Studies](#) at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J. "A lot of 'Swifties' are young adolescents, and it's going to be easier than ever for them to place a bet down."

PROBLEM GAMBLING: WHERE TO GO FOR HELP

MA Problem Gambling Helpline

If you or a loved one is having problems with gambling and needs support, you can call the MA Problem Gambling Helpline at 1-800-327-5050 or visit <https://gamblinghelpline.ma.org/> to speak with a trained specialist. The free helpline is available 24/7 and available in multiple languages.

Gamblers Anonymous

If you are looking for guidance from people who have experienced gambling problems, the group Gamblers Anonymous has in-person and online meetings. The hotline for people in New England is (888) 830-2271 and a list of meetings is accessible by visiting <http://newenglandga.com>.

The Supreme Court in 2018 paved the way for the expansion of sports wagering when it [struck down](#) a 1992 federal law that effectively banned the practice in most states. Since then, sports betting has been legalized in 33 states and the District of Columbia.

The growth of prop betting particularly worries addiction treatment experts and youth mental health counselors, who say the rapid-play format is highly addictive to the developing brains of adolescents. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with reasoning and impulse control, is not fully developed until a person reaches their late 20s, health researchers have found.

“Kids are being marketed an addictive product long before their brains are capable of understanding the risks, and that’s a recipe for disaster,” said Harry Levant, who previously had a gambling problem and is now a therapist near Philadelphia.

Jennifer Aguiar, chief compliance officer at Boston-based DraftKings, the largest online sportsbook in Massachusetts, said customers are required to verify their identity and age when opening an account. DraftKings also takes steps to prevent account sharing, she added, by requiring customers to complete a two-factor authentication process when logging in from unrecognized devices. The company also uses geolocation technology to verify a customer’s location, and technology that can detect “behavioral changes or activity indicative of a third party attempting to access or operate an account,” she added.

“In most cases when we identify someone who is underage that has used our platform it is because they have gained access through an adult family member or friend’s account,” Aguiar said in a written response to questions.

Youth gambling was a concern long before the advent of online sports betting. Every two years, the state surveys thousands of middle and high school students to gauge their levels of risky behaviors. Over the past decade, the [behavioral health surveys](#) have consistently shown that 40 to 50 percent of Massachusetts students engage in some form of gambling, such as playing the lottery or participating in fantasy sports.



FanDuel, DraftKings and other online gambling apps are displayed on a phone. JEFF CHIU/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Still, [a national survey](#) released Monday highlighted the pervasiveness of online sports betting, particularly among young men. Nearly 40 percent of American men age 18 to 49 have at least one account with online sports betting services. Of those who place bets online, 38 percent said they gambled more than they should have and 18 percent bet

money meant for financial obligations — common [signs of compulsive gambling](#), according to the survey by Siena College and St. Bonaventure University.

In a break with the past, more teenagers and people in their early 20s are showing up at Gamblers Anonymous meetings. The [New England chapter](#) holds about two dozen in-person meetings a week at churches, synagogues, and community halls across the region. Attendance at some meetings in Massachusetts has doubled since the state legalized online sports betting, volunteers with the group said.

“The big thing we’re seeing is that compulsive sports gamblers keep getting younger and younger,” said Ed, a volunteer coordinator for Gamblers Anonymous who asked not to use his last name.

THINK YOU MIGHT HAVE A GAMBLING PROBLEM?

The following are some common signs and symptoms of compulsive gambling:

- Gambling to escape problems or relieve feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety or depression.
- Need to gamble with increasing amounts of money to get the same thrill.
- Lying to family or friends to hide the extent of gambling.
- Trying to get back lost money by gambling more, known as “chasing losses.”
- Feel restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling.
- Jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or career opportunity because of gambling.
- Have persistent thoughts of reliving past gambling experiences.
- Ask others to bail you out of financial trouble because you gambled money away.
- Made repeated unsuccessful efforts to cut back or stop gambling.

One is Matthew, who is 26 and grew up in a suburb west of Boston. He said his descent into compulsive sports gambling began innocently enough.

It started last year when he saw that an online sports betting platform was promoting “risk-free” bets of up to \$500 on its mobile app. It was near the end of the NCAA “March Madness” basketball tournament, and Matthew placed \$20 on Florida Atlantic University beating San Diego State University in the semifinals. To his dismay, San Diego State [clawed back](#) from a 14-point deficit to win on a buzzer-beater.

Determined to recoup the loss, Matthew immediately scoured the app for more betting opportunities. Within weeks, he was wagering \$1,000 on whether the next pitch at a Red Sox game would be a ball or a strike. He was prop betting on his smartphone 30 to 50 times a day, even while taking a shower in the morning or while driving to work. He recalls desperately checking a \$9,000 bet on a Red Sox game while people at his customer service job were trying to get his attention.

“Anytime you’re chasing losses you don’t have a clear sense of consciousness,” said Matthew, who declined to share his full name due to concerns that it would jeopardize his work prospects. “It’s the most alone feeling in the world . . . all your pain is invisible to the outside world.”

Matthew said it wasn’t until he lost nearly \$70,000 in three months of online betting that he decided to attend a Gamblers Anonymous meeting. It was there that he met several older men with gambling addictions who described losses even more devastating than his — including shattered families, ruptured friendships, lost jobs, and foreclosed homes, he said.

“That [meeting] scared me straight,” said Matthew, who stopped making online bets last May. “I realized there were people out there who had it even worse than me, and that was my future if I didn’t stop.”

Christopher Brice, 19, a recent high school graduate from Brockton, traced the interest in online betting among his classmates to the early isolating days of the pandemic, when many turned to video games and to messaging platforms like Discord for entertainment.

Many games, he said, offer virtual rewards that can be bought with real money — resembling the quick-strike nature of prop betting. Older, professional gamers would post tips in gaming chat rooms about bypassing security measures on sports betting sites, he recalled.

“The betting provided the opportunity for freedom — an escape from boredom,” said Brice, an aspiring photographer. “And for some, it offered the hope of a high payout.”

Warner said she had a “long conversation” with her son after discovering his online wagers, though she remains worried by the relentless barrage of sports gambling ads and celebrity endorsements. A growing number of athletes adolescents admire — including Los Angeles Lakers [star LeBron James](#) and skateboarding legend Tony Hawk — have signed promotional deals with sports betting operators. Unlike with tobacco or alcohol, she noted, there are no national standards for sports betting advertising.

“When you have larger-than-life people lending their names to sports betting,” she said, “then it’s not a shocker that our kids might be gambling.”

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