

Community Perspectives on Encore Boston Harbor Casino

What this report is about

Despite overall support, fewer than half of American adults believe that casinos help their local communities. Research shows that communities of color are often disproportionately impacted by gambling, raising concerns that the introduction of casinos might generate increased crime, racial discrimination, and problem gambling which is characterized by frequent negative consequences and possible loss of control over behavior. It is important that research on the effects of casinos includes the people who live and work in the communities surrounding the casinos.

This study is about one of the three casinos operating in Massachusetts—Encore Boston Harbor, which opened in June 2019. An estimated 5.6 million people of legal gambling age live within a 90-minute drive of Encore. The Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC) funded NORC at the University of Chicago (NORC) and the Institute for Community Health (ICH) to engage with community members to design and conduct a research study that captured perspectives on the introduction of Encore and how it has affected the day-to-day quality of life of people in the casino's surrounding communities.

What the study team did

The study team consisted of NORC, ICH, and a Community Advisory Board of community members living and working around Encore. The Community Advisory Board ensured that the community's needs and perspectives were represented throughout the study (e.g., in the study's research design, data collection, analysis, and sharing of findings).

The study team recruited four community members to serve as interviewers along with one ICH team member. These interviewers conducted 47 virtual interviews with community members living in eight communities around Encore. Participants had diverse racial and ethnic identities, represented diverse communities, and spoke five different languages: English, Chinese [Mandarin or Cantonese], Haitian Creole, Portuguese, and Spanish. Half of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/e. A majority were women and were between 25 and 54 years of age. Almost half of participants had lived in their community for over 10 years.

The study team analyzed the interview transcripts and notes to identify themes, shared sentiments, and differences across participants' perspectives. They also analyzed and interpreted the findings with interviewers and a subset of participants.

Who this study is intended for

This study is intended for community members in Boston, Cambridge, Chelsea, Everett, Malden, Medford, Revere, Somerville, or Winthrop, as well as government officials, casino operators, and researchers. Government officials and casino operators could consider actively engaging community members in decision making to ensure community needs are considered. Further research could be conducted on the disproportionate effects of casinos on different socio-economic groups in the host community.

Key findings

Participants had mixed views on legalized gambling

Some participants shared negative views, noting they believed the introduction of a casino normalized gambling and promoted problem gambling behaviors. Some had positive views on legalized gambling and supported having a casino in their neighborhood. They believed that gambling is a form of entertainment, therefore community members should have the freedom to gamble if it is legal and regulated. A few participants had neutral views on legalized gambling including both ambivalent and mixed perspectives.

Participants had mixed views on the effects of Encore on the local economy, including employment, housing, and small businesses

Some participants believed Encore created jobs in the area. However, several anticipated that Encore would bring jobs and money to local communities prior to its development but have yet to see this happen. Participants who identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/e and those who had lived in the communities surrounding Encore for more than 10 years often had negative views of the casino's effects on jobs, including the quality of jobs. Many participants noted the COVID-19 pandemic led to job losses at Encore and uncertainty, which negatively affected the finances of its employees.

Some participants described increasing rent and home prices in the communities surrounding Encore. Some described seeing an increase in luxury apartments and condos in the area, but not of affordable housing. However, a few noted that many effects may not be attributable to Encore but rather reflect broader market trends.

Participants had mixed views on the effects of Encore on local small businesses. Some participants noted that small businesses in the surrounding community closed or lost employees and customers after Encore opened. Some participants stated that the presence of Encore made Everett a "destination" that attracts people who might not have visited the area otherwise. These participants noted that this boosted the local economy and clientele for surrounding small businesses.

Participants had mixed views on the effects of Encore on various social and environmental factors

While several participants noted that Encore brought more beautiful landscapes, parks, and recreational spaces to the area, a few others had mixed views on the changes to the skyline. Many participants who reported driving past Encore noted that its presence increased traffic in the area and that this resulted in longer commute times and increased congestion, particularly during its construction. Many participants said that roads surrounding Encore are now easier to travel on. Some thought Encore brought new construction and development to the area. However, several participants felt that Encore could do more to improve local infrastructure beyond the immediate casino grounds.

A few participants described an increased presence of police and ambulances in surrounding neighborhoods, as well as more criminal activity. A few participants also expressed concerns about Encore's effect on youth. They noted that exposure to casinos normalizes gambling behaviors for young people.

Participants had mixed feelings about Encore's effects on relationships in their community. For several, Encore is a new, fun place in town to gather with friends and host events, which strengthens relationships in the community. For a few other participants, Encore strained relationships with friends and family, and did not build a sense of community.

Participants expressed concerns about the effects of Encore on health

Some participants believed that Encore has negatively affected the mental health of community members. They felt that this is due to increased stress. Some participants expressed concerns that the atmosphere that Encore creates is the main reason for higher alcohol consumption. Some participants believed that Encore has contributed to more problem gambling. A few noted that it is likely that many community members who would never have gambled only did so only because of Encore's proximity. Several participants shared personal or anecdotal stories about community members losing friends or family relationships due to problem gambling. Some believed that Encore has contributed to personal financial loss. This loss of money has led to difficulty for some people to afford groceries, utilities, and rent.

What participants recommend

1 Reinvest money in nearby communities:

Several participants believed Encore should fund community programs and the development of more parks and green spaces and recommended that Encore fund walking bridges and public transportation beyond the casino grounds. Several participants described the need for Encore to develop or invest in community programs for families and youth. Other recommendations included investing in the environment (e.g., clean energy), providing more local job opportunities, and supporting local small businesses and immigrant communities.

2 Support and resources for people who experience problem gambling:

Some participants described a need for Encore to provide educational materials and resources for people who experience or are at risk of gambling-related harms. This could involve sharing pamphlets, posting visible signage, establishing programs that restrict entry to people with a history of problem gambling, and providing resources for loved ones of people who experience problem gambling.

3 More actively engage with community members:

A few participants wanted Encore to engage with community members directly, participate in community meetings, and listen to community needs. This would allow Encore to develop programs and opportunities based on those needs.

Conclusion

It is challenging to disentangle Encore's impact from broader factors like the COVID-19 public health emergency and rising inflation. However, participants shared specific concerns and perceptions about Encore's community impact on the economy, social and environmental factors, and health. Participants also highlighted concerns about "*Encore for whom?*" noting casinos likely have disproportionate effects on their surrounding communities depending on socioeconomics and cultural background. Encore and local governments should recognize these potential impacts and engage with the community for input on their needs and how resources are allocated.

About the study team

NORC at the University of Chicago is an objective, nonpartisan research organization that delivers insights and analysis decision-makers trust. The NORC team included Jenna T. Sirkin, Petry S. Ubri, Jared Sawyer, Christina Drymon, and Meghan Woo.

ICH is a non-profit consulting organization that provides participatory evaluation, applied research, assessment, planning, and data services. ICH helps healthcare institutions, government agencies, and community-based organizations improve their services and maximize program impact. The ICH team included Sofia Ladner, Danielle Chun, and Sarah Jalbert.

Community Advisory Board members included Diego Nascimento, Hugo Rengifo, James Eliscar, Jessica Thai, Linh Ho, Veronica Monserrat, and Wil Renderos.

Community interviewers included Tatiana Antoine, Yanqing Huang, Milla Maia, and Josh Zhu.

Study funding

Financial support for this study comes from the Massachusetts Gaming Commission through the Public Health Trust Fund. This project was competitively bid and awarded to NORC and ICH in May 2021.



Where to access the full report

NORC at the University of Chicago, Institute for Community Health (2022).
Community Perspectives on Encore Boston Harbor Casino: Final Report. Available from:
<https://massgaming.com/research/community-perspectives-on-encore-boston-harbor-casino/>