

MGC Research Snapshot

Gambling and Problem Gambling in Massachusetts: Results of Three Online Panel Surveys

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What you need to know

This report assesses changes among monthly gamblers in online panel surveys in Massachusetts in gambling attitudes, gambling participation and problem gambling prevalence from 2014 to 2023. Results refer only to panel members and not to the population of Massachusetts. Among monthly gamblers, attitudes toward gambling have grown more negative. Between 2022 and 2023, there were increases in gambling participation among monthly gamblers, which suggests that the lingering impact of COVID-19 on gambling behavior among monthly gamblers may be diminishing. There was an increase in sports betting participation among monthly gamblers, but there does not yet appear to be substantial recapture of sports betting revenues among monthly gamblers in the wake of legalization despite a reduction in the proportion of sports bettors among monthly gamblers who only gamble on sports illegally. Finally, among monthly gamblers, there may have been an increase in people experiencing gambling harms and gambling problems between 2014 and 2023.

What is this research about?

Population surveys of gambling participation and gambling problems have become increasingly expensive and complex over time. An emerging option to improve surveillance is the use of annual online panel surveys to supplement less frequent population surveys. Online panels consist of groups of people recruited to participate in online surveys in return for compensation. While online panels are not representative of the population, individuals who participate in such surveys tend to be heavy gamblers which provides a much greater 'yield' of individuals with characteristics of the greatest concern to policymakers, regulators, and others seeking to minimize and mitigate gambling harm.

This report assesses changes among monthly gamblers in the online panels in Massachusetts in gambling attitudes, gambling participation and problem gambling prevalence from 2014 to 2023. While online panels cannot be used to estimate population prevalence rates, it is reasonable to assume that changes in the behavior of monthly gamblers in the online panels do reflect changes in how regular gamblers in the population might be behaving.

What did the researchers do?

Three online panel surveys have been carried out in Massachusetts as part of the SEIGMA study. The Baseline Online Panel Survey (BOPS) was fielded in 2013 and 2014; the Follow-up Online Panel Survey (FOPS) was fielded in March 2022; and the 2023 Online Panel Survey (OPS23) was fielded one year later in March 2023. The goal of the online surveys was not to generate estimates of behaviors in the population but instead to track changes in behavior over time among regular (monthly or more frequent) gamblers.

What did the researchers find?

This report includes results for monthly gamblers in the online panel surveys. We use the terms "among monthly gamblers in the online panels" and "among monthly gamblers" but this always refers only to panel members and not to the population of Massachusetts.

Attitudes Toward Gambling

- Increase in proportion of monthly gamblers in the online panels who believe that the harm of gambling outweighs the benefits;
- Decrease in the proportion of monthly gamblers who believe that all types of gambling should be legal;
- Decrease in the proportion of monthly gamblers who believe that gambling in Massachusetts is too available;
- More neutral attitudes about the overall impact of casinos;
- Decline in the proportion of panelists who believe that employment is the most important positive impact of casinos;
- Increase in the proportion of panelists who believe that gambling addiction is the most important negative impact of casinos.

Gambling Behavior

- Increases in participation in daily lottery games, sports betting, private wagering, horse racing, bingo and online gambling among monthly gamblers in the online panels;
 - This result contrasts with across-the-board decreases in gambling participation in the 2021 population survey compared to 2013; we believe that these decreases in the population were at least partly due to lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic;



- Increase in gambling intensity (number of types of gambling, number of days gambled) among monthly gamblers;
- Increases in monthly and weekly betting on sports among monthly gamblers from 2014 to 2022 and from 2022 to 2023;
- From 2022 to 2023, betting on sports parlays increased among monthly gamblers although betting on professional sports events remained the most frequent type of sports wager;
- From 2022 to 2023, betting on sports with Massachusetts sports betting operators increased among monthly gamblers;
- No substantial recapture of spending on sports betting outside of Massachusetts among monthly gamblers as yet.

Gambling Problems and Harms

- Increase in problem gambling prevalence among monthly gamblers in the online panels between 2014 and 2022 and between 2022 and 2023;
- Increases in five of the six domains of gambling-related harm among monthly gamblers, including financial harms, emotional and/or psychological harms, family and relationship harms, work or school harms, and harms related to illegal activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To summarize:

- Attitudes among monthly gamblers in the online panels, and possibly in the population, have grown more negative with more monthly gamblers believing that gambling harm outweighs the benefits and fewer monthly gamblers believing that all types of gambling should be legal.
- Between 2022 and 2023, there were increases in gambling participation among monthly gamblers in a range of gambling activities which suggests that the lingering impact of COVID-19 on gambling behavior among monthly gamblers in Massachusetts may be diminishing.
- While there was an increase in sports betting participation among monthly gamblers, there does not yet appear to have been substantial recapture of sports betting revenues among monthly gamblers in the wake of legalization although there has been a reduction in the proportion of sports bettors among monthly gamblers who only gambling on sports illegally.
- Finally, there may have been an increase in people experiencing gambling harms and gambling problems among monthly gamblers in Massachusetts between 2014 and 2023.

About the researchers

Rachel A. Volberg, Martha Zorn, and Valerie Evans are part of the SEIGMA team at the School of Public Health and Health Sciences University of Massachusetts Amherst. Robert J. Williams is the Co-Principal Investigator on the SEIGMA project and is with the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. For more information about this study, please contact Rachel Volberg at rvolberg@schoolph.umass.edu.

Future work will include analyses comparing recreational, at-risk and problem gamblers to identify predictors of at-risk and problem gambling and identification of the specific types of gambling contributing to experiences of gambling harm in Massachusetts. This report may also serve as a template going forward for a series of brief reports on gambling and problem gambling among regular gamblers in Massachusetts as an early warning system to allow for timely efforts at harm minimization and mitigation.

Citation

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<https://massgaming.com/about/research-agenda-search/?cat=social-impact>

Key Words

Social Impact; Online Panel Surveys

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About this Snapshot

MGC Snapshots are intended to translate lengthy and sometimes technical reports into an easily understandable overview of the research. The findings and recommendations in the Snapshot are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the position of the MGC.

