

MGC Research Snapshot: Highlights for Providers

Massachusetts Sports Wagering Research: Highlights for Providers

December 2023

What you need to know

If provided in the right fashion, an opportunity exists for legalized sports betting to create some modest economic benefits for Massachusetts that could offset a small and temporary increase in gambling-related harm.

What is this research about?

This snapshot contains findings from two reports: one prepared by the Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC) and one prepared by the Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts (SEIGMA) team.

The MGC research applies previous research, as well as responsible gaming principles, to provide recommendations for sports wagering policy and practice. The SEIGMA research, conducted before sports wagering was legalized in Massachusetts (MA), provides an overview of the impacts that may occur with the introduction of legal sports betting to MA. This research identifies the social and economic outcomes associated with the introduction of sports betting to date and based on this analysis, provides specific policy recommendations intended to optimize the economic and social benefits of sports betting in MA while minimizing social and economic harm.

What did the researchers do?

For the SEIGMA report, authors:

- Examined the current status of legalized sports betting in the U.S.
- Conducted a literature review on the demographics and behaviors of sports bettors, attitudes towards sports betting, harms associated with sports betting, prevention, the economic impacts of sports betting, and the relationship between sports betting and the pandemic, and
- Reviewed findings from 2018 and 2022 U.S. national surveys and from MA studies since 2013.

For the MGC report, authors provided an overall orientation to responsible sports wagering practices and policies and

provided recommendations for conducting sports wagering in a manner that minimizes harm. The authors used both prior research conducted in MA and the [MA Responsible Gaming Framework](#) to inform these recommendations.

What did the researchers find?

The MGC researchers examined two studies from MA:

- A prospective study of gambling and problem gambling conducted over a six-year period
- A study of the extent of positive play (the knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of players about gambling so that it remains a recreational activity and creates minimal risk of experiencing gambling-related harm).

Major findings of the MGC study include:



The SEIGMA study found, in terms of social impact:

- Sports betting seem to occur in all demographic groups but appeals most to young, well-educated men. Nationally and in MA, there is evidence of an increase in sports betting participation since 2018.



- There is some evidence of an increase in gambling harms, nationally and in MA, aligning with a national increase of sports betting participation.
- Problem gambling is higher among sports bettors. However, this is primarily because sports bettors are typically involved in a wide range of gambling activities that collectively contribute to gambling-related harm.
- Legalizing sports betting in MA would likely increase the rates of gambling-related harm and gambling problems. However, the magnitude of these impacts is likely to be modest. This is because current rates of sports betting in MA is similar to states where it has been legal for some years and because only a small proportion of the MA population (13% - 20%) participates in sports betting. Hence, even a high rate of gambling problems among sports bettors would have a fairly small effect on the overall rate in the population.
- That said, concerns remain about groups not previously involved in sports betting, such as adolescents, young adults, women, immigrants, individuals in recovery from gambling problems, and college athletes.
- In a longitudinal study of gambling in Massachusetts, the research team commented on an increase in problem gambling in 2018 relative to 2013-2014. Researchers found that most of this increase was driven by an increased rate of problem gambling relapse in remitted individuals. This, in turn, was potentially due to increased publicity and media attention concerning casinos and gambling, as the increase occurred prior to the actual opening of two casinos. There are two important implications deriving from this research finding.
 - The first is that devoting resources to the successful treatment of existing problem gambling may need to be a higher priority than preventing new cases.
 - The second is that the increase in relapsed problem gambling that occurred in 2018 was prior to the opening of two casinos. The publicity associated with the future opening of casinos may be as problematic as their actual increased physical availability. While prior research has established that advertising is a precipitator for relapse in problem gamblers, the researchers were unaware of any other study that has shown this same effect for media coverage. Taken together, these findings suggest the importance of restricting sports betting advertising once this gambling type is legalized in Massachusetts.

Recommendations

The following three recommendations for considering effective sports wagering policy and practice emerged from the MGC report:

- **Support Positive Play:** Use play management tools to track and limit money and time spent gambling.

About the researchers

Mark Vander Linden and Marie-Claire Flores-Pajot were with the Massachusetts Gaming Commission. 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 the MGC study, please contact Bonnie Andrews at bonnie.andrews@massgaming.gov. For more information about the SEIGMA study, please contact Rachel Volberg at rvolberg@schoolph.umass.edu.

- **Ensure Players Make Informed Decisions:** Invest and expand responsible gaming programs and messages.
- **Increase Gambling Literacy:** Educate players about the nature of gambling and address erroneous beliefs.

The MGC study also recommended four strategies and measures to ensure sports wagering in MA is conducted in a way that minimizes harm (see Figure 1 on next page).

The SEIGMA report provided policy recommendations intended to optimize the economic and social benefits of sports betting in MA while minimizing economic and social harm, including:

- **Requiring operators to provide player data to the MGC** on a regular basis and to cooperate with researchers.
- **Prohibiting in play sports betting** as it is disproportionately utilized by problem gamblers.
- **Restricting advertising and celebrity endorsement.**
- **Requiring responsible gambling features on all online sites.**

Citations

Volberg, R.A., Evans, V., Zorn, M., Williams, R.J. (2022). [Legalized Sports Betting in the United States and Potential Impacts in Massachusetts](#). Amherst, MA: School of Public Health and Health Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Vander Linden, M., & Flores-Pajot, M-C. (2021). [Applying principles of the Massachusetts Responsible Gaming Framework to Sports Wagering Policy and Practice](#). Boston, MA: Massachusetts Gaming Commission.

Acknowledgments

Financial support for these studies came from the Public Health Trust Fund.

About this Snapshot

MGC snapshots are intended to translate lengthy and sometimes technical reports into an easily understandable overview of the research. This snapshot was tailored for a clinical audience.



Figure 1

