

Massachusetts legalizing sports betting brings more harm than good, experts say

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Northeastern public health experts are concerned that a new bill to legalize sports betting in the Bay State, with very little regulation, could present a public health risk for gambling addicts and those at risk of gambling addiction. Credit: Alyssa Stone/Northeastern University

Harry Levant knows all too well the devastation that gambling addiction

can cause.

Levant, a doctorate in law and policy candidate at Northeastern, is a recovering gambling addict and has seen the impacts of unregulated gambling first-hand.

"Right now we're devoid of any public health consideration when it comes to this issue because the model that the gambling industry, the sports leagues and [state government](#) itself are embracing is 'We have this new toy, it's going to make all of us a lot of money—what's not to like?'" Levant says. "It's not whether this is good or bad. It is a known addictive product. Therefore, there has to be harm—there can't be any other result."

Massachusetts lawmakers recently wrapped up a marathon legislative session that resulted in, among many changes, the legalization of sports betting in the state. While state politicians and betting sites, like Massachusetts-based DraftKings, have welcomed the change, Levant and other experts at Northeastern have serious concerns about the public health impacts of the new legislation.

Legalized sports betting has become a common trend across the country. The Bay State joins 30 other states, including Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire and New York, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, in adopting the policy.

The Massachusetts bill allows anyone 21 years or older to legally bet on professional and college sports, except for in-state schools (although bets can still be placed on those teams that play in "collegiate tournaments" such as March Madness). Wagers can be placed online and in-person. The bill is now headed to Gov. Charlie Baker, who has 10 days to sign or reject it.

Massachusetts legislators are hopeful the move toward legalized sports betting will bring both dollars and jobs to the state.

"Once signed by the governor, this new law will open a new industry for our commonwealth, creating jobs and economic growth," state Sen. Eric Lesser said in a statement. "It will also safeguard consumers and athletes with some of the strongest protections in the country while maintaining the integrity of sports."

There will be a 15% tax on in-person wagers and a 20% tax on mobile bets, as well as a \$5 million application fee for casinos, race tracks and slot parlors to obtain a sports betting license, with seven licenses available for mobile betting platforms too. Lesser previously told CBS Boston that legalized sports betting could bring \$60 million to \$65 million a year to the state.

However, some members of the public health community, including Levant, have said the shift toward legalized sports betting ignores the threat posed by gambling and gambling addiction.

"They're simply exchanging money from people to large corporate entities and the government's taking its cut," says Levant, who serves as a substance abuse counselor at Mirmont Treatment Center. "People will get hurt. Addicts will get hurt, people at risk of addiction will get hurt, families will get hurt, communities will get hurt."

According to Mark Gottlieb, executive director of Northeastern's Public Health Advocacy Institute, the sports gambling industry is still in its infancy and, like with the early days of the tobacco and alcohol industries, there is very little regulation.

Although the Massachusetts bill includes provisions like the protections for in-state college athletics, Gottlieb said restrictions like these are

"somewhat of a fig leaf on the legislation."

"We can say we're protecting the sanctity of our collegiate sports and our [educational institutions](#) here in Massachusetts—unless we get into a national game, in which case all bets are on," he says.

Researchers have long known about the gambling industry's use of technology to get patrons "playing to extinction," following loss with loss in a deadly cycle that sees them draining their own bank accounts and those of family members, trust funds and college accounts for their kids.

"You're looking at someone who did all those things and more and then stuck his head inside a noose," Levant says. "This is real."

Gambling addiction, like any form of addiction, is not about the drug of choice, in this case money. It's more about how the product makes the addict feel.

"It's about dopamine more than dollars," Gottlieb says.

And the gambling industry has engineered the experience to ensure that the dopamine hit keeps on coming. In-game betting, which allows people to bet on specific plays during a game, is a particularly pernicious way that these companies have "deliberately engineered" the process to guarantee addicts stay hooked, says Richard Daynard, university distinguished professor of law and president of the Public Health Advocacy Institute.

"What that means is that you can do basically continuous betting," Daynard says.

More recently, the [gambling](#) industry has adopted the "responsible gaming model," as companies publicly state their intent to be more

responsible by funding treatment for addicts all while making their products more addictive through in-game betting, advertising and integration with sports programming.

"Responsible gaming is a model designed to get people out of the river once they are drowning," Levant says. "It's not designed to go back up to the top of the stream and say, 'Wait a minute, what can we do to this product to make sure people don't fall in the river in the first place.'"

When it comes to regulations, firm limits on what kinds of in-game betting is permitted is a good place to start, but only if used together with other systemic changes. Levant points to advertising restrictions and affordability checks, similar to credit checks during a car purchase, as a possible solution.

A provision in the Massachusetts bill that prohibits patrons from using their credit cards for wagers is a step in the right direction, Gottlieb says.

"That's important, and it's going to also be important to make sure we regulate predatory lenders who are going to be filling that role that the [credit cards](#) would normally be handling," Gottlieb says.

As sportsbooks and online sports betting companies start to enter Massachusetts, Levant warns the public that they will lead with advertising featuring enticing promotions like "risk-free bets." There is no such thing, Levant says. These promotions are designed to get people making a large first wager with the promise that any losses will be returned in the form of credits that can be used to make more wagers.

"Consider how that is consistent with a public health approach at all and whether we would tolerate such a thing with cigarettes, alcohol, pharmaceuticals, or whether it's more like the local drug dealer who gives the customer just enough to get them hooked so they keep on

coming back," Levant says.

Provided by Northeastern University

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