

MGC Research Snapshot

Gambling and Problem Gambling in Massachusetts: Results of a Follow-up Population Survey

Focus on Gambling Behavior

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What you need to know

There has been a significant decrease in past year participation in most types of gambling from 2013 to 2021, and an increase in the percentage of people who report not gambling at all. The exception to this pattern is that no significant declines were seen in daily lottery games, horse racing, and online gambling. The lingering effects of COVID-19 and the associated restrictions are likely partly responsible for these broad declines. There has been no significant change in the rate of problem gambling from 2013 (2.0%) to 2021 (1.4%), which is notable considering the introduction of three casinos.

What is this research about?

In November 2011, an Act Establishing Expanded Gaming in the Commonwealth permitted casinos and slot parlors to be introduced in Massachusetts. Section 71 of the Expanded Gaming Act requires the Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC) to establish an annual research agenda to understand the social and economic impacts of these new venues. In March 2013, the MGC selected a research team from the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass) School of Public Health and Health Sciences to carry out the Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts (SEIGMA) study to monitor these impacts over time. This study included a baseline general population survey conducted in Massachusetts in 2013 and 2014, before any of the casinos had opened.

The main purpose of this report is to determine whether and how gambling attitudes, gambling behavior, and problem gambling prevalence changed in Massachusetts following the introduction of casinos. Results from this Follow-up General Population Survey (FGPS) are directly comparable to the 2013-14 baseline survey. In addition to these overall assessments, the report addresses the question of whether the demographic and behavioral patterns of gambling and problem gambling prevalence changed in Massachusetts between 2013 and 2021. This snapshot will focus mainly on findings related to gambling behavior.

What did the researchers do?

The research team obtained a probability sample of all Massachusetts households and allowed survey

respondents aged 18 and over to complete the survey online, on paper, or by telephone. The sample included targets for adults identifying as Asian, Hispanic, Black, and adults aged 18-29, groups who are less likely to participate in surveys than other groups in the population. The survey was conducted from September 2021 through April 2022, had a weighted response rate of 27.5% and achieved a final sample size of 6,293 respondents.

The researchers defined “gambling” as betting money or material goods on an event with an uncertain outcome in the hopes of winning additional money or material goods. This includes things such as lottery games, bingo, betting against a friend on a game of skill or chance, and betting on sports or horse racing.

What did the researchers find?

Gambling in Massachusetts

- Overall, 60.2% of Massachusetts adults reported participating in one or more gambling activities in the past year. This compares to 73.1% in 2013.
- There has been a significant decrease in past year participation in most types of gambling from 2013 to 2021, and an increase in the percentage of people who report not gambling at all (38.7% non-gamblers in 2021 compared to 26.6% in 2013). The exception to this pattern is that no significant declines were seen in daily lottery games, horse racing, and online gambling. The lingering effects of COVID-19 and the associated restrictions are likely partly responsible for these broad declines.



- Decreased past year gambling participation includes decreased casino participation, which declined from 21.5% to 15.7%, despite the introduction of three casinos in Massachusetts. However, one of the reasons for the introduction of casinos in Massachusetts was to recapture out-of-state expenditure, and there has been a significant decrease in out-of-state casino patronage from 21.5% in 2013 to 10.2% in 2021, with most of the reduction occurring in the patronage of Connecticut casinos.
- Although the survey was carried out before sports betting was legalized in Massachusetts, 9.9% of Massachusetts adults reported betting on sports in the past year. Sports bettors in Massachusetts were most likely to be male, aged 25-54, White, employed, and with annual household incomes of \$150,000 or over.
- Massachusetts adults in 2021 reported spending the largest proportion of self-reported expenditures on lottery games (42%) followed by casino gambling (21%) and sports betting (16%). The only form of sports betting that was legal in Massachusetts in 2021 was daily fantasy sports (DFS).

Problem Gambling in Massachusetts

Based on their answers to a standard set of questions, researchers classified people who gambled in the past year as recreational gamblers, at-risk gamblers, and problem gamblers. Recreational gamblers gamble because they enjoy these activities. At-risk gamblers engage in a range of behaviors that place them at greater risk of experiencing a gambling problem, such as persistently betting more than planned, spending more time gambling than intended, chasing losses, and borrowing money to gamble. Problem gamblers are individuals who experience significant impaired control over their gambling and negative consequences as a result of their impaired control.

- The prevalence of problem gambling in Massachusetts in 2021 was 1.4% of the population aged 18 and over. An additional 8.5% of the population aged 18 and over were classified as at-risk gamblers. It should be noted that because gambling participation was suppressed to some extent in 2021 by COVID-19, it is reasonable to assume that problem gambling may also have been suppressed to some extent.
- The prevalence of problem gambling in Massachusetts in 2021 was not significantly different from the prevalence rate of 2.0% identified in Massachusetts in 2013. The rate of at-risk gambling was also not significantly different from the rate of 8.4% identified in 2013. This is notable considering the introduction of three casinos.
- The prevalence of problem gambling in Massachusetts in 2021 was mid-range compared to prevalence rates identified in other U.S. states since 2015.
- Compared to recreational gamblers, problem gamblers in Massachusetts in 2021 were most likely to be:
 - Male
 - Non-White
 - Have a high school diploma or less
 - Have an annual household income under \$50,000

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.

- Problem gamblers accounted for approximately 20% of total gambling expenditure in Massachusetts in 2021.
- Results of the survey show that, compared to recreational gamblers, at-risk and problem gamblers were more likely to report most or all of their friends and family gambled regularly, poor or fair physical health as opposed to good or excellent health, and using tobacco.
- Unlike in 2013, in 2021, there were no longer significant differences in rates of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems between recreational gamblers and at-risk and problem gamblers.

Citation

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Key Words

Problem Gambling; Gambling Behavior; Social Impact

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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.

