

The Impact of Legalized Gambling on Recovery Communities: A Community-Based Participatory Research Study

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The Massachusetts Council
ON GAMING AND HEALTH
We Understand the Problem. We Can Help.

Conflict of Interest and Research Statements

I (**Dr. Mills**) have consulted with the gambling industry on evaluating the effectiveness of responsible gambling initiatives and I have served as an expert witness on gambling-related features in video games.

This work has resulted in some amazing learning and research opportunities



Presentation Objectives

- 1 - Identify key themes of the impact of legalized gambling on addiction recovery communities.
- 2 - Recognize the need for macro-systemic changes to be made to better support recovery communities.
- 3 - Recognize the need for tools assessing personal growth as an indicator of recovery progress.

Current Gambling Landscape

General Knowledge

- Gambling is a recreational activity
- 20-25% of adults, gambling contributes to psychological, social, or financial harms
- 2-6% of adults develop a Gambling Disorder (GD)

Nationally

- 2018 – Overturning the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act
- Recovery specific to **GD remains ill-defined and poorly operationalized**
- Dearth of research on **how gambling legalization is specifically affecting recovery communities**

Massachusetts (MA)

- MA legalized full-scale casinos in 2011 and sports betting in 2023
- Research funded by MA Gambling Commission (MGC) has found increases in gambling participation and gambling harms, but not an increase in GD

Aims of the Study

Aim 1 - Understanding Recovery

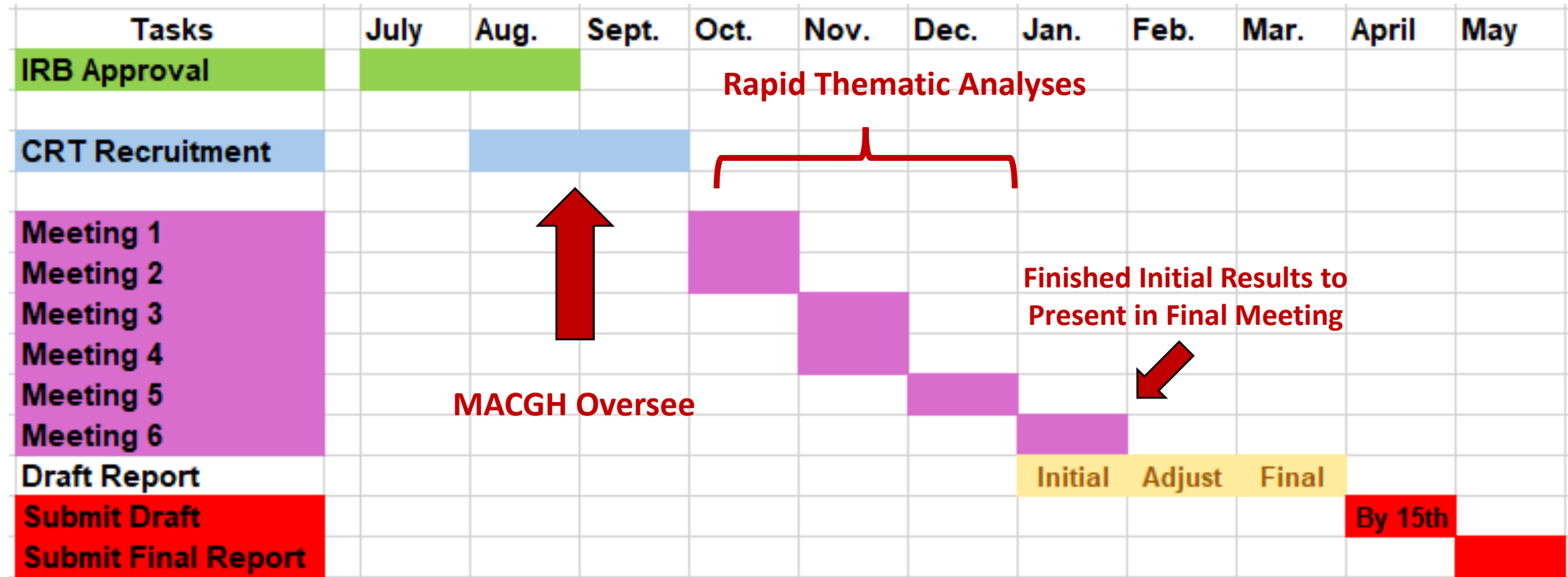
Aim 2 - Assessment Metrics for Recovery Progress

Aim 3 - Risk Factors and Support Systems

Aim 4 - Impact of Legalized Gambling on Recovery Communities



Methodology: CBPR and Rapid Thematic Analysis



Meeting Topics



CRT Recruitment and Retention

- 4 participants with Gambling Disorder primarily
- 4 participants with Substance Use Disorder primarily
- 4 participants with Both GD and SUD as equal
- 5 participants that are mental health professionals/recovery specialists
- 3 dropped, 14 final CRT members
- **91.7%** attendance across the 6 focus groups!

All participants anonymously indicated they would be interested in participating in further aspects of this study

Results

Defining Gambling

1. Difficult for a recovery community to separate gambling from gambling harms.
“industry that often exploits weaknesses of vulnerable populations”
2. “**Responsible Gambling**” is not helpful to the recovery community
3. Gambling becomes a problem when:
 1. Obsession
 2. Isolation
 3. Dishonesty
 4. Reckless Desperation
4. Harms: Financial, Emotional, and Social loss

Community Definition of Recovery From Gambling Disorder

Recovery from gambling addiction/disorder is **a strong commitment** to redefine one's relationship with gambling in **an ongoing effort**, unique to everyone, **to heal** from the harms that gambling has caused while fostering holistic life improvement.

This process involves:

1. Setting and working toward personalized recovery goals through honest and consistent self-reflection and social feedback
2. Gaining self-awareness of underlying factors that lead to triggers and urges to gamble
3. Developing healthier coping processes and tools to manage cravings and triggers
4. Actively participating in social support systems that encourage desired recovery efforts
5. Replacing old patterns by engaging in new meaningful and fulfilling activities.

Factors that Support or Undermine Recovery Efforts

Factors that May Support Recovery	Rating Total	Factors that May Undermine Recovery	Rating Total
1. Willingness to change	60	1. Lack of accountability	57
2. Awareness of triggers and stressors	58	2. Returning to other addictive substances/behaviors	56
3. Building a supportive recovery community and asking for help	55	3. Desperate rumination about winning	56
4. Understanding and remembering your why	55	4. Instability and unwellness	55
5. Connection with others	54	5. Acceptance of gambling	52
6. Changing associations to likeminded supports	54	6. Prevalence of gambling	51
7. Changing activities and lifestyle	54	7. Constant advertising of incentives	50
8. Available and accessible services	52	8. Cultural, societal, and social norms around gambling	49
9. Being mindful of actions	51	9. Experts contributing to advertising	48
10. Stable housing	49	10. Having money	
11. Abstinence focus	47	11. People who are not supportive	45
12. Education of addiction	46	12. Friends and family traditions/rituals	45
13. Changing environments	45	13. Getting help from gamblers with different recovery goals	43
14. Establishing recovery reminders	44	14. People who do not understand	40
15. Stable employment	44		37
16. Family involvement in the recovery process	41		
<i>Added</i>		<i>Added</i>	
17. <i>Addressing underlying mental health issues or stressors with professionals</i>	X	15. <i>Having extra time</i>	
18. <i>Harm reduction focus</i>	X	16. <i>Unmanaged bipolar disorder or other mental health issues that affect impulse control</i>	X
19. <i>Finding a recovery mentor/sponsor</i>	X		

Defining a Recovery Community

1. Connection with a recovery community is essential for lasting success
2. Anyone with a desire to support the person seeking recovery
3. Offers opportunity to support and serve others
4. Recovery in isolation is ineffective
5. Be cautious about who you trust to support your recovery

Recommendations to Increase Community Support in MA

Themes of Community Support	Rating Total
1. Increased education about gambling harms	36
2. Treating gambling as an addiction.	35
3. Increased awareness and access to recovery resources for individuals of diverse cultures.	35
4. Improved health care and treatment coverage and availability for those suffering from gambling addiction.	34
5. Better screening policies and practices for gambling problems.	33
6. Further regulating gambling advertising.	33
7. Better trained professionals that offer treatment to those suffering from gambling addiction.	33
8. Commercials that foster awareness of gambling harms.	32
9. Clinicians assess more often for gambling problems.	30
10. Transparency from gaming organizations.	30
11. Requiring gaming providers to contribute significant funding to recovery resources.	30
12. Offering gambling free environments with sports and other gambling saturated entertainment.	29
13. Accountability to gamers on how much they are spending.	29
14. Companies and organizations taking a stance against gambling harms.	29
15. Establishing better language for problem gaming and gambling.	28
16. Holding the gambling community accountable.	28
17. Increased education on responsible financial practices.	28

Effects of Gambling Legalization in MA

- Increased cultural normalization of gambling, especially among youth
- Emerging adults and college students face heightened financial exploitation
- Sports betting and pervasive media content drive new addiction patterns
- Rise in substitution addictions without matching growth in treatment access
- Gambling stigma persists, making support-seeking more difficult for some
- Recovery pathways are diversifying to meet growing and changing demand

Gambling Legalization in MA

Positives Impacts

- Increased awareness of gambling problems
- Community benefits from redistributed earnings
- Safer gambling environments
- Increased opportunities for social connection
- Employment opportunities
- Increased funding for treatment (though insufficient for rising needs)
- “However, these positives are outweighed by negative consequences of gambling legalization. Better regulations should have been in place from the start, as reversing legalization is not feasible.”

Warning to Recovery Communities

- Increased accessibility means increased triggers
- Emerging adults and college students highly affected
- Younger recovery seekers making online support groups more popular
- Need improved methods to assess emerging gambling problems.
- Legalization has increased gambling harms with lack of increased treatment options.

Thinking Beyond Year 1

Year 1 Sets the Foundation for Further Research

Year 2: *Develop and Pilot Quantitative Instruments*

Themes derived from Year 1 will inform the development of self-report measures of recovery, recovery progress, level of exposure to risk and support factors, and overall impact of gambling.

Year 3: *Launch Quantitative Instrument with Online Samples*

Launch online survey to a representative sample of MA adults affected by gambling problems.

Questions?
Thank you!