

# MGC Research Snapshot

## Impacts of Advertising on Gambling Behavior in Massachusetts

June 2024

### What you need to know

Advertising has substantial impacts on attitudes toward and consumption of addictive products, including gambling. Review of available data raises concerns about the impact of gambling advertising on vulnerable groups in the Massachusetts population such as individuals who are underage and individuals in recovery from gambling problems. Recommendations to prevent and mitigate harm include limitations on gambling advertising including types of games, advertising focused on specific purposes, and celebrity endorsements; restrictions on inducements; and monitoring emerging forms of gambling advertising.

### What is this research about?

Advertising regulations exist to prevent known or assumed harm caused by use of the advertised products. Many jurisdictions have implemented tobacco and alcohol advertising restrictions to control exposure to these types of advertising. An abundance of research into the impacts of alcohol and tobacco advertising exists, but relatively few studies have examined the relationship between gambling advertising and the potential impacts on gambling behavior that may lead to increased harm. This is an increasing concern given the rapid introduction of sports betting in the U.S. and a quickly evolving shift of both gambling and advertising to predominantly online platforms.

The purpose of this report, prepared by researchers from the Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts (SEIGMA) team at UMass Amherst, is to assist the Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC) to understand the likely impacts of gambling advertising, determine the extent to which gambling behavior and gambling problems in Massachusetts are influenced by gambling advertising, and provide recommendations for how to prevent or mitigate harm resulting from gambling advertising in Massachusetts.

### What did the researchers do?

The report is organized into several sections. These include:

- A brief overview of research on the impacts of advertising related to tobacco and alcohol, two other potentially harmful products of consumption;
- A summary of existing research on the relationship between gambling advertising and gambling behavior;
- Results from three online panel surveys of Massachusetts adults completed in 2014, 2022 and 2023 to help understand the extent to which

- gambling behavior in Massachusetts may be influenced by gambling advertising; and
- Recommendations to mitigate or prevent harm resulting from gambling advertising in Massachusetts.

This report contains lessons from the extensive literature that already exists on the impacts of advertising generally, as well as what is known specifically about the impacts of advertising on gambling behavior. Data from the three SEIGMA online panel surveys is useful in highlighting the potential impacts of gambling advertising in Massachusetts. Readers are cautioned that the results of online panel surveys, which typically include high proportions of regular gamblers, cannot be generalized to the population but are informative regarding the direction of changes in the behavior of populations.

### What did the researchers find?

#### Lessons from Existing Research

Advertising has substantial impacts on attitudes toward and consumption of addictive products, including gambling. Advertising of these products generally emphasizes the positive experiences of use while downplaying the potentially negative aspects; further, the amount of advertising of such products far outstrips the amount of advertising about the risks of consumption or the availability of help for problems associated with consumption. The recent and rapid shift in advertising to digital channels and the evolution of highly targeted approaches to individual consumers raises further concerns about the potential negative effects of widespread gambling advertising.

#### Online Panel Surveys in Massachusetts

While the results of online panel surveys cannot be generalized to the population, the data are useful in the early detection of possible negative impacts.



The panel surveys carried out in Massachusetts included much larger numbers of people who gamble, including people who gamble and are at risk of and experiencing problems, than the general population surveys conducted in the same time periods. Surveys found:

- While past year sports betting participation declined in the general population between 2013 and 2021, past year sports betting among the online panelists increased from 2014 to 2022 and rose again in 2023.
- The proportion of past year sports bettors in the online panels who participated at least monthly or weekly also increased, from 51% in 2014 to 71% in 2022 and to 80% in 2023.
- With respect to the impacts of gambling advertising, only a small proportion of online panelists in Massachusetts in 2023 (7.1%) felt that such advertising or news coverage had caused them to gamble more. It is notable, however, that online panelists at risk of or experiencing gambling problems were more likely to recall substantial amounts of advertising and news coverage and more likely to believe that this exposure had led them to gamble more.

Taken together, this information raises concerns about the impact of gambling advertising on vulnerable groups in the population. While many jurisdictions have implemented regulations to limit the exposure of underage individuals to gambling advertising, few have addressed the vulnerability of individuals in recovery from gambling problems and their susceptibility to relapse in response to gambling advertising or news coverage. Another concern is the scarcity of population-level approaches to minimizing and mitigating gambling harms and the nearly exclusive focus on individual responsibility for gambling behavior.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The MGC published a report on advertising and gambling in 2022 that included specific recommendations to strengthen current gambling advertising regulations:

- Strengthening protections of underage populations;
- Restricting advertising campaigns that target vulnerable groups;
- Requiring inclusion of messages about where to obtain help in all advertising and marketing materials;
- Limiting the intensity and frequency of advertising;
- Ensuring that restrictions include digital media and third parties;
- Prohibiting false or misleading advertising; and
- Restricting communications about inducements, bonuses and credits.

The researchers strongly agreed with all of these recommendations and additionally recommend:

- Limiting advertising of higher-risk games;
- Limiting advertising focused on specific purposes (e.g., gambling as entertainment, gambling to support good causes);

## 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](mailto:rvolberg@schoolph.umass.edu).

- Requiring that inducements not create a sense of urgency, be limited in value, and be offered only when customers are opening an account;
- Restricting celebrity endorsements, as these tend to promote subsequent gambling involvement by young people; precipitate relapse in people in recovery from gambling addiction; and counteract the effectiveness of public health messages advocating limited use.

Finally, the researchers recommend monitoring emerging forms of gambling advertising, including:

- Regularly obtaining information about trends, tactics and engagement with gambling-related advertising, marketing and influencer promotion strategies;
- Measuring the potential reach of gambling-related posts on social media platforms; and
- Assessing the prevalence and effectiveness of gambling prevention and treatment messages within the broader social media landscape.

## Citation

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

## Key Words

Social Impact; Gambling Advertising

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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.

