

Sports Betting Among Young Adults in Massachusetts: Preliminary Findings

09.04.2025

NORC at the University of Chicago

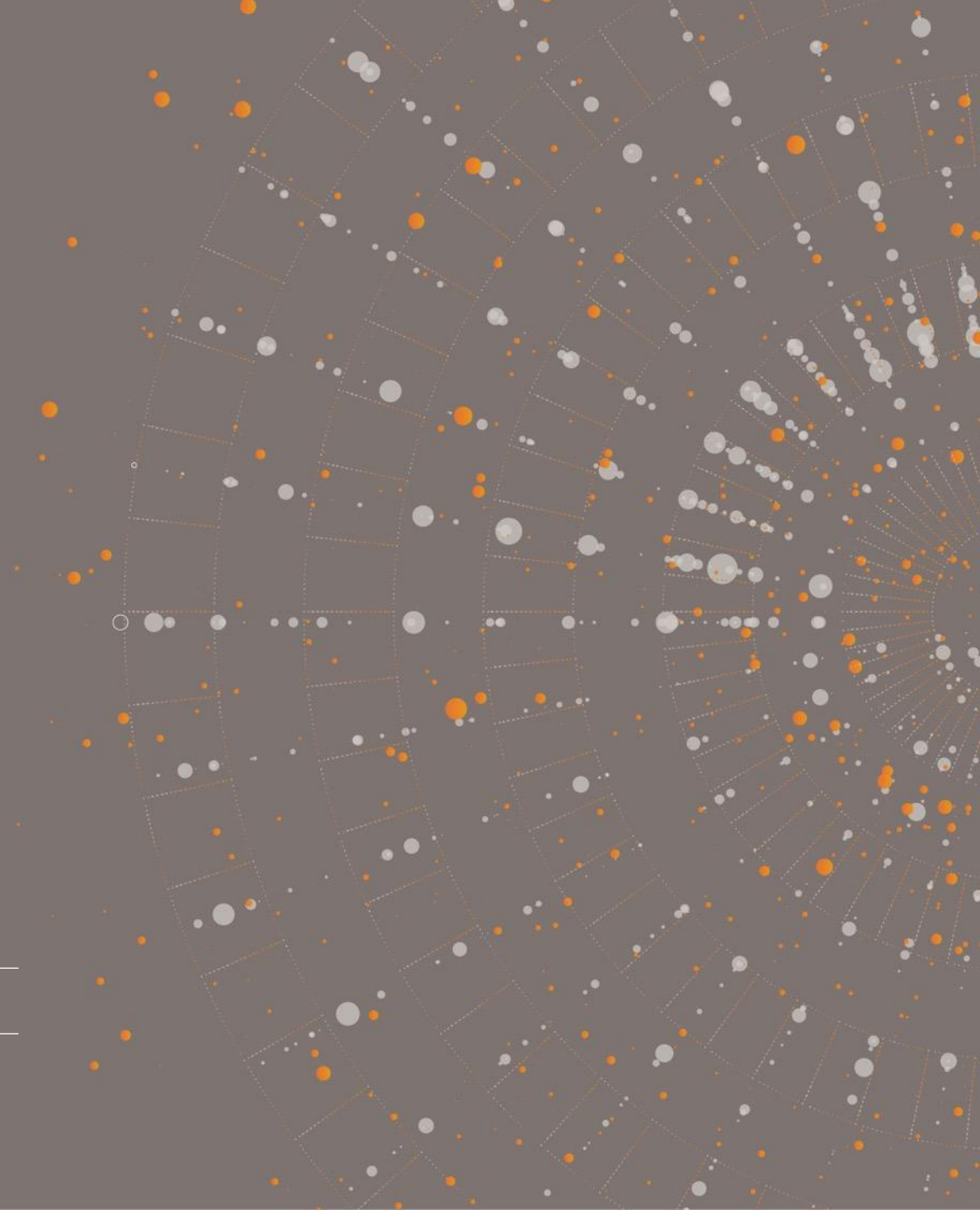


Table of Contents

01 Study Overview and Background

02 Methods

03 Key Findings

04 Discussion

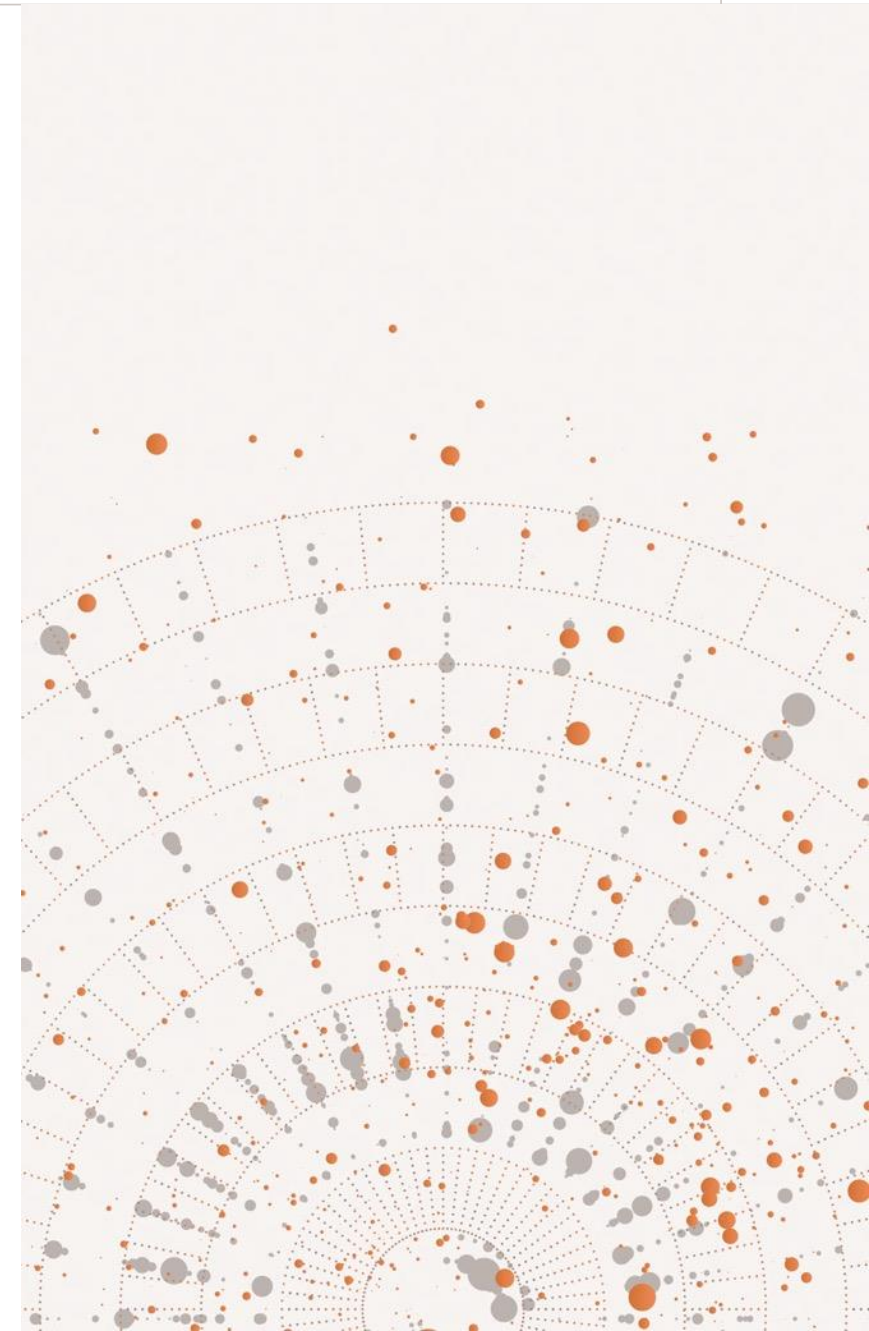
04 Next Steps



Study Overview and Background

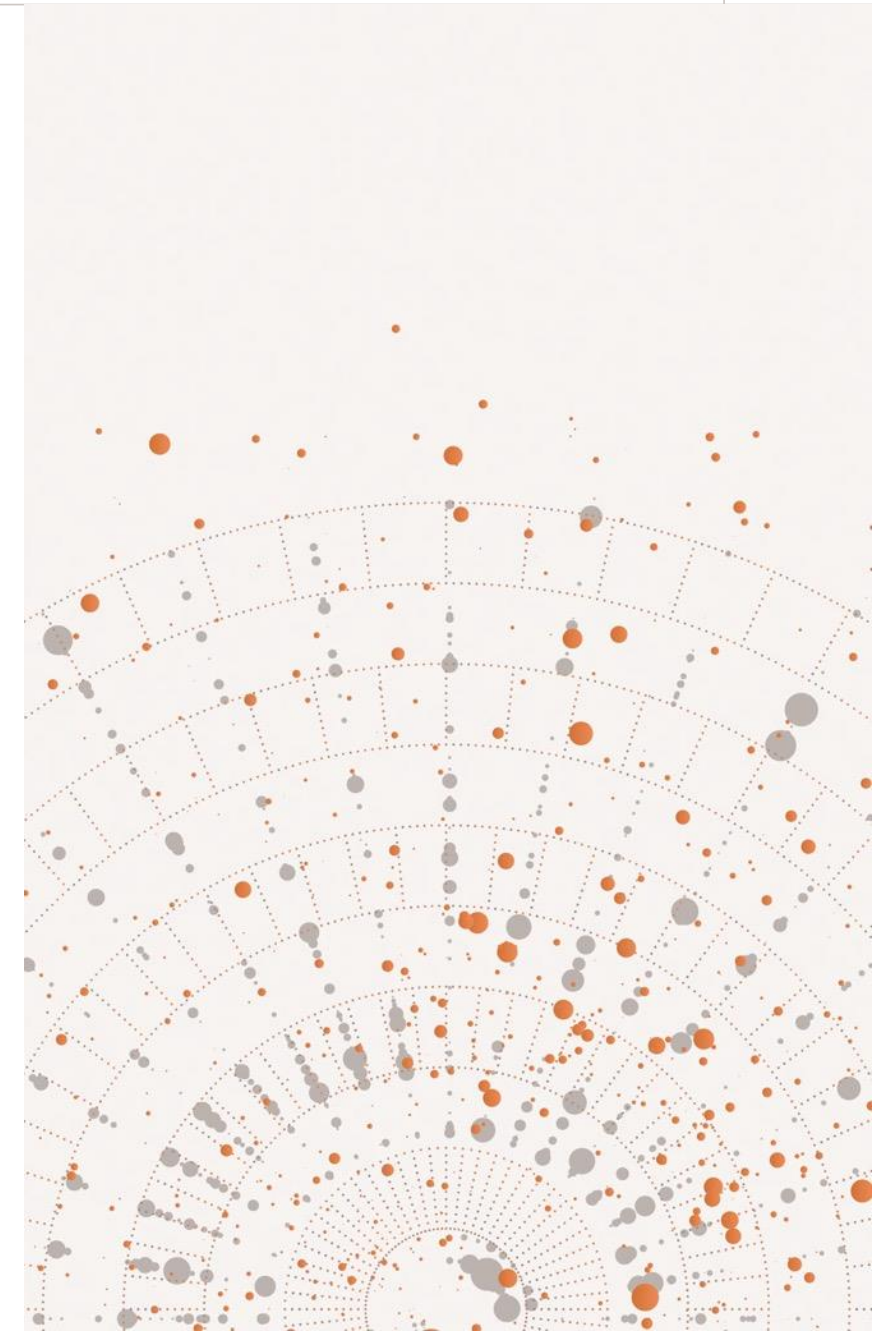
Background on Sports Betting in Massachusetts

- Sports betting was legalized in Massachusetts in August 2022, effective March 2023, for adults 21 and older
- \$772 million was spent on sports wagering in Massachusetts as of March 2025, with \$52 million in taxable gaming revenue
 - Online wagering accounted for nearly 99% of the total spent on sports wagering
- While a 2023 national NCAA study found that 58% of 18–22-year-olds have engaged in sports betting, there is limited data on sports betting among young adults in Massachusetts
 - On college campuses, 70% of students reported placing bets



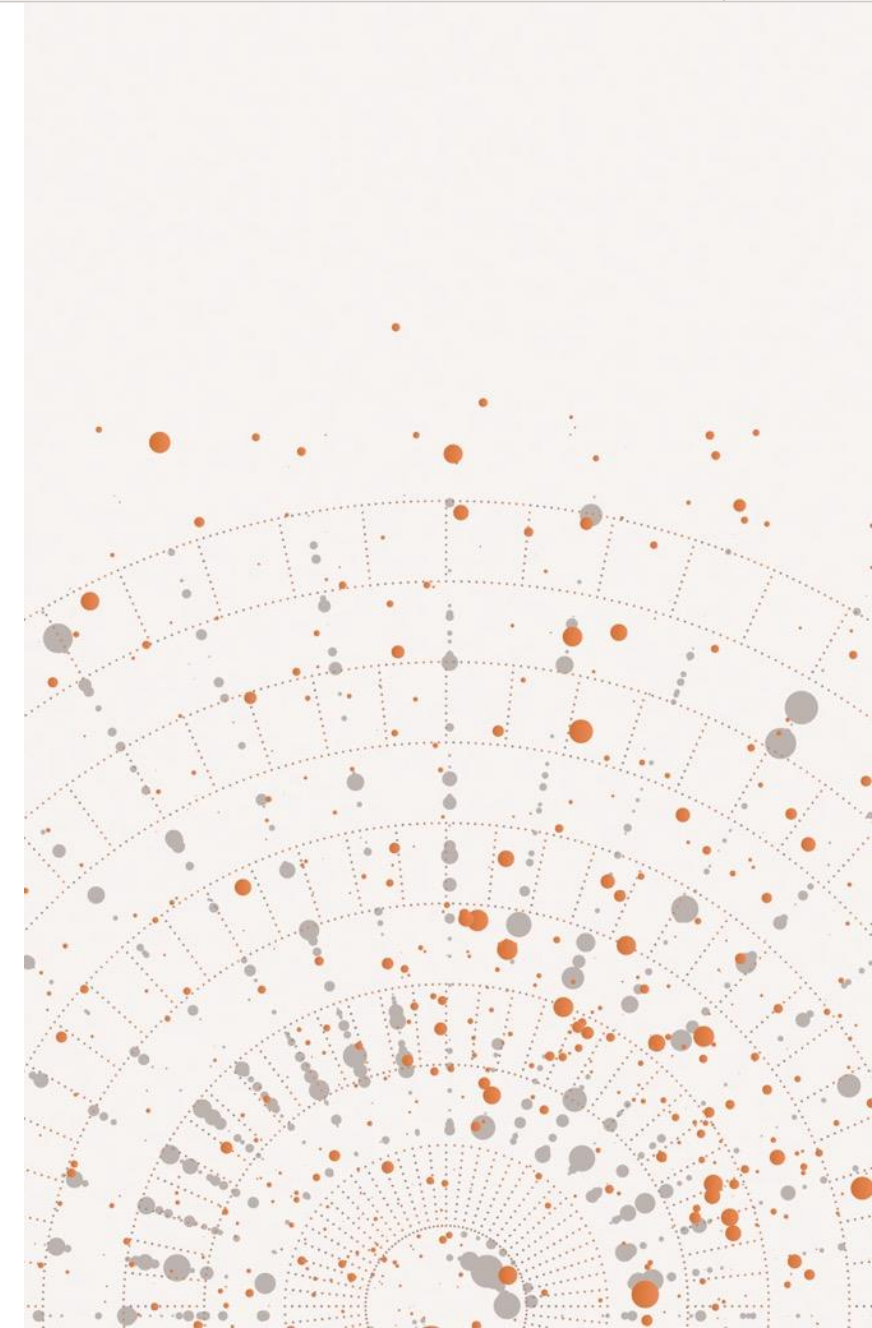
The Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC) funded NORC to conduct a community-engaged research study to assess:

- The social, economic, and health **impacts** of the legalization of sports betting on **young adults** in Massachusetts
- How **legalized sports betting affects sports betting** among young adults, including their attitudes about gambling and its effects on public health, well-being, comorbidity with problem gambling, social inclusion, and financial impact
- What **policies or programs may mitigate negative effects** and/or support the well-being of young adults participating in sports betting



This study builds on prior MGC-funded studies

- The Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts (SEIGMA) study has documented the social and economic impacts of casino gambling at the regional and state levels, including changes in gambling behavior, attitudes, and problem gambling prevalence.
- A separate SEIGMA report found that sports bettors in Massachusetts were more likely than non-sports gamblers to be male, under the age of 35, white, have a Bachelor's degree or higher, and to be employed.
- The Encore Community Perspectives Study examined the effects of casino gambling on communities near the Casino and found that casinos may have disproportionate effects on their surrounding communities.



Methods

The study's approach is based on NORC's Community-Engaged Research Framework

Community engaged-research approach:



Co-developed research questions, study design, and study materials with a Community Advisory Board (CAB)



Recruited and trained 2 young adult community interviewers to facilitate **peer-to-peer** discussion and make it more comfortable for participants to share about a commonly stigmatized topic.

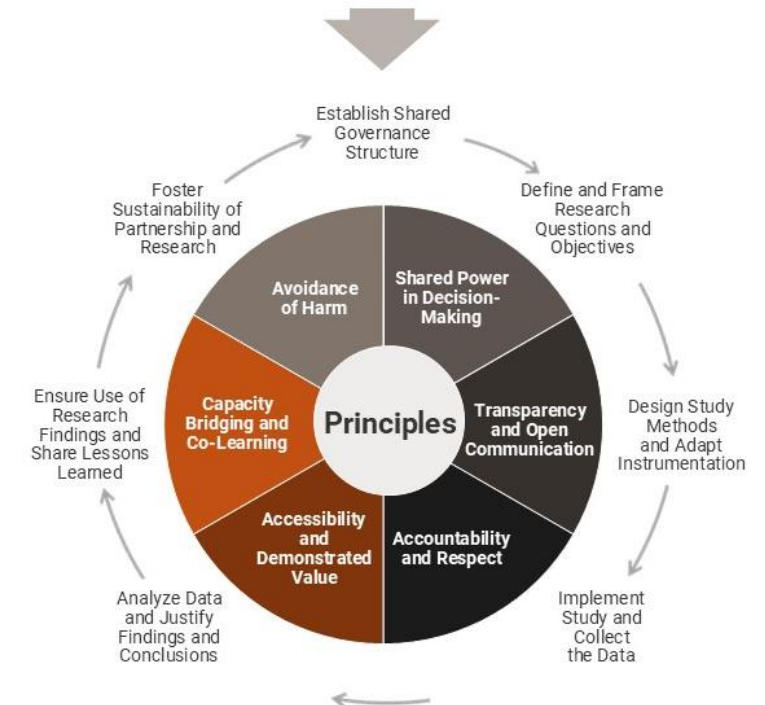


Conducted participatory analysis with the CAB and community interviewers

Benefits of a community-engaged research approach:

Enhances capacity for research; ensures research is culturally and logistically appropriate; improves validity, relevance, interpretability, and contextualization of findings; and enhances the use of the data to create behavioral, social, services, or policy change.

Researcher-Community Partnership

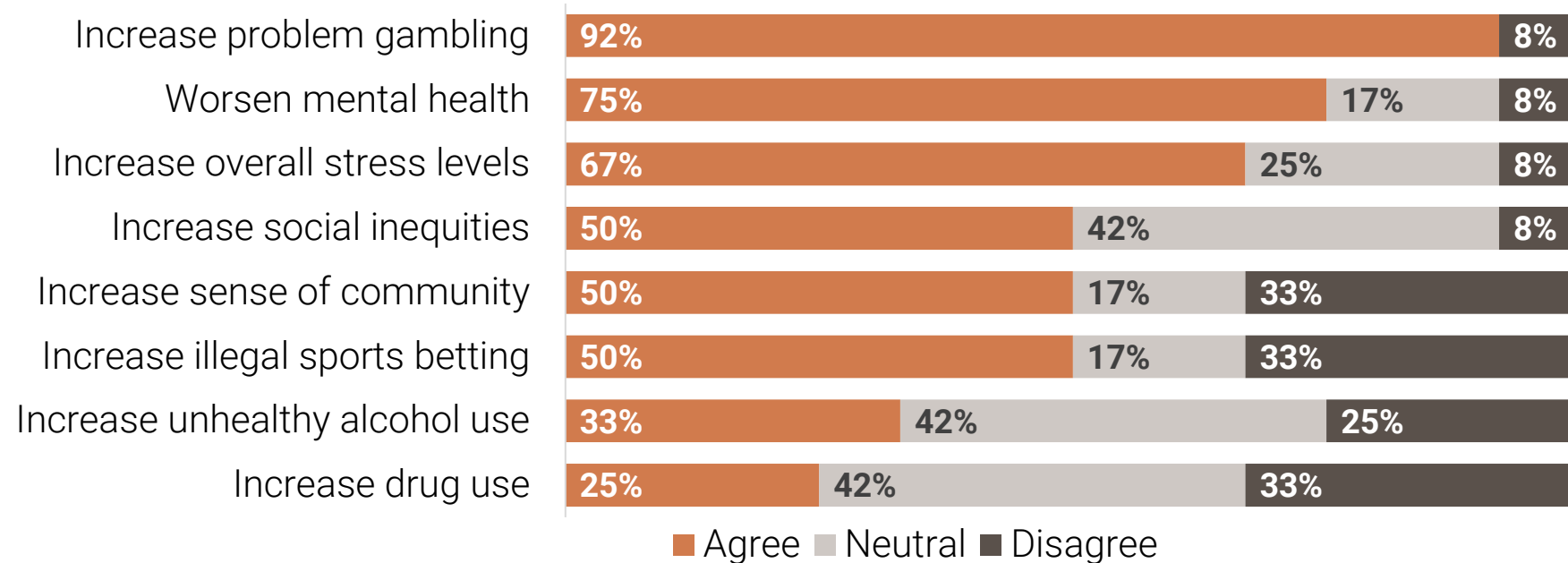


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Source: Adapted from the Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework and based on principles adapted from various frameworks for community-engaged research

CAB members are young adults and/or individuals engaged with the topic area in Massachusetts. They bring mixed perspectives, experiences, and attitudes about sports betting.

CAB Perspectives and Attitudes on Sports Betting (n=13)*



*Data collected via a survey to 13 CAB members on their agreement with statements about how the legalization of sports betting in Massachusetts affects young adults.

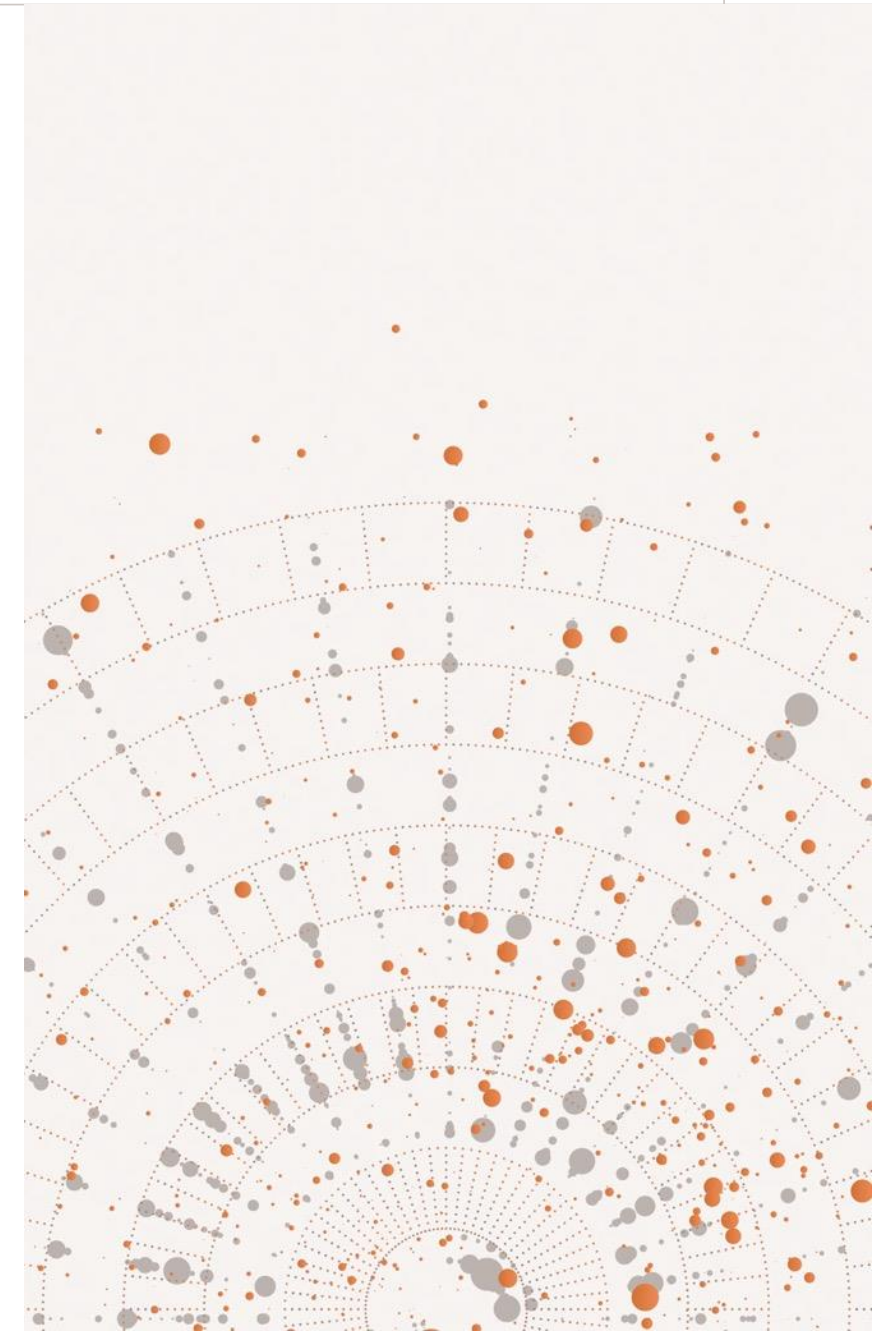
Interviews with key informants and community-led interviews young adults.

Formative Key Informant Interviews

- Engaged sports betting vendors and subject matter experts
- Provided context on young adult sports betting in Massachusetts

Young Adult Semi-Structured Interviews

- Provided an in-depth and contextualized understanding of the social, economic, and public health impacts of legalized sports betting among young adults in Massachusetts
- 39 participants: 19 recruited via the CAB and social media outreach and 20 via a market research company
- Eligibility: Age 18 to 25 and live or study in MA



Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths

- Offers an in-depth and contextualized understanding of the impacts of the legalization of sports betting on young adults in Massachusetts
- Provides broader perspectives and deeper understanding about the implications, patterns, unintended consequences, and how they interact with the community

Limitations

- The perspectives on the legalization of sports betting in Massachusetts would not necessarily generalize to other contexts or at different moments in time nor are they representative of the general population of young adults
- There may be unique resources, community features, or local policies that influence the impacts of legalization of sports betting on young adults.

Preliminary Findings

Study Participants

Key informant interviews included 13 vendors and subject matter experts.

Interviewees

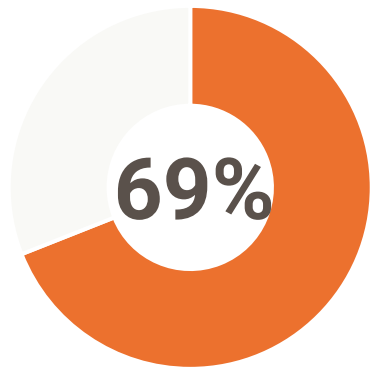
- 8 MA-licensed sports betting vendor (online and/or in-person) staff
- 5 subject matter experts (e.g., researchers, staff at organizations with a gambling focus, young adult serving clinicians, etc.)

Mix of local and national expertise

- 5 were Massachusetts-specific, meaning the focus of their work was concentrated in Massachusetts
- 8 remaining operate within a national or international perspective

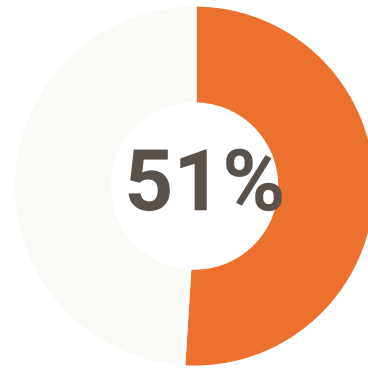


Community interviews included 39 young adults.



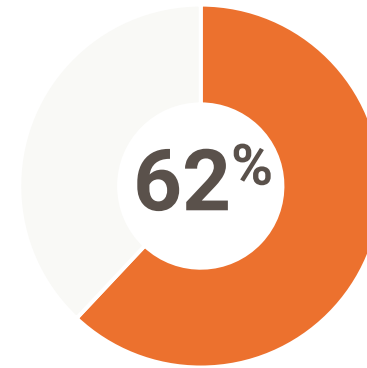
Bet on sports

- 31% do not bet on sports



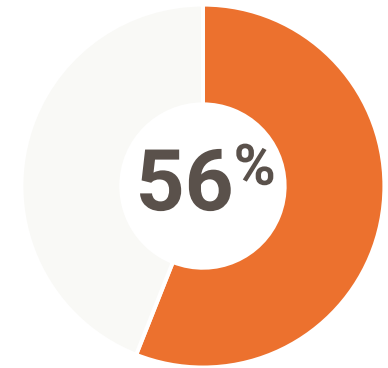
Are ages 21-25

- 49% are ages 18-20



Identify as White

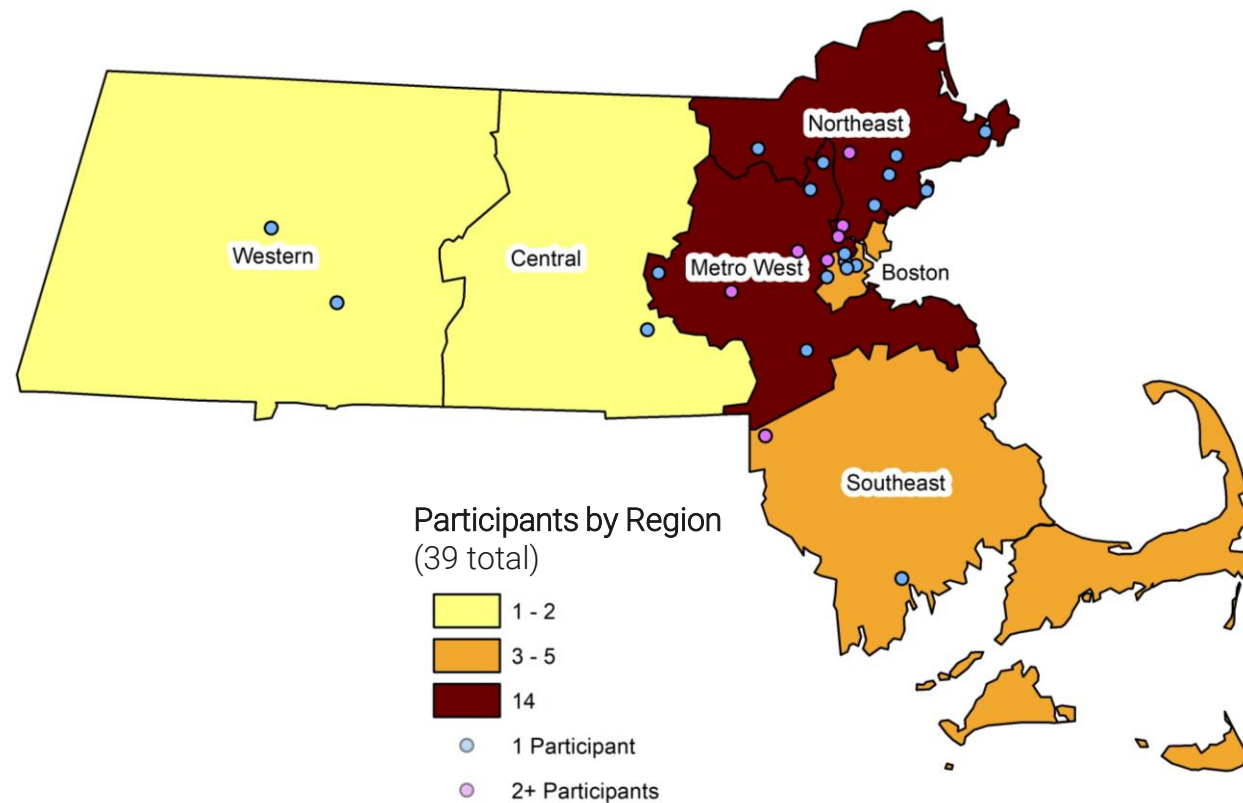
- 18% as Asian
- 8% as Black or African American
- 8% as Hispanic/ Latino
- 5% as 2+ races



Identify as female

- 41% identify as male
- 3% prefer not to answer

The 39 young adult participants live throughout the state of Massachusetts.



22 cities represented, including:

Boston	North Attleboro
Burlington	North Reading
Cambridge	Northborough
Chelmsford	Peabody
Danvers	Saugus
Framingham	Somerville
Gloucester	South Hadley
Grafton	Walpole
Medford	Waltham
New Bedford	Williamsburg
Newton	Wilmington

The content presented in this slide deck are preliminary findings based on an analysis of the 13 key informant interviews and 39 interviews with young adults

When describing findings based on the interviews with 39 young adults, we specify that those views are from young adults and use the following descriptive language to provide a sense of the approximate number of young adult participants with the relevant perspectives and themes in our findings:

Descriptor	Approximate Number of Participants	Approximate Percentage of Participants
Few	<6	0-15%
Several	7-12	18%-33%
Some	14-24	36%-62%
Many	25-34	65%-88%
Most	35+	89% - 100%

Young Adult Views on Sports Betting and Betting Behaviors

Young adult views on sports betting were **mixed**; many held both positive and negative viewpoints depending on the circumstances.

Sports betting is okay in moderation

- Bolsters social connectedness
- Increases engagement with sporting events
- Can generate income

Sports betting is harmful in excess

- Promotes addiction
- Can lead to mental health challenges
- Can cause financial loss

A few were neutral



“It's sinking a lot more money into a black hole than they would normally be...that being said, it definitely does offer...some interesting entertainment and social interactions, especially around watch parties for sports games.”

Most young adults engage in sports betting infrequently, wagering less than \$10. A few engage more frequently and wager large amounts.

Most engage in sports betting casually

- From “every few months” to once a year
- Standard bets range from \$0.50 - \$10
- Only during championship games (e.g., Superbowl, March Madness)
- Engagement is motivated by friends, family



“Right now, it's slowed down, but once March Madness starts...the bigger events, around those times, you tend to bet more.”

Some bet more frequently during specific seasons

- More consist during NFL and NBA seasons
- They do not increase the amount they bet

A few bet at least once per week and wager more than \$50

- From every day to at least once per week
- Standard bets range from \$50 - \$100

The majority of young adults who bet on sports use online platforms and bet on a range of sports, but most primarily bet on football and basketball.

Primarily through online/mobile platforms and peer-to-peer

- Most frequently DraftKings, FanDuel, BetMGM, and PrizePicks
- Choose apps based on promotions, usability
- A few use “informal” bets with friends
- Some use bookies

Young adults bet on a range of sports

- Mainly football and basketball
 - Other sports include baseball, hockey, MMA, UFC, soccer, tennis, golf, and Formula 1
- Betting behavior varies by season and event (e.g., Olympics, World Cup)



“Recently, DraftKings and FanDuel have made [sports betting] a lot more easily accessible. At big sports games...people will have their phones open and will be watching their parlays...and keeping track of that during the game.”

Young adults also engage in other gambling-related or gateway activities.

Prior to sports betting, young adults were engaging in online poker

Other popular activities include fantasy sports

- Fantasy football growing due to lower barriers to entry and less regulation.

Less Frequent



More Frequent

“We go to Casino on special occasions, if it's someone's birthday... we don't go... on a regular basis.”

“If it's my birthday, I do a scratch ticket, or if somebody gifts me a scratch ticket for a special occasion, I'll do it... I've gone to the casino...but nothing on a regular basis.”



“All my guy friends pretty much take part in fantasy football and then gambling pretty often. We have Encore, which is the closest casino, and so they go there maybe once every two weeks. I think gambling is a big thing. Even on random nights, we'll play poker and put in some money.”

Many participants believe that sports betting attracts individuals who identify as male, young adults, college students, and college athletes.

Perceptions that:

- Individuals who identify as male are “more into sports”
- Targeted ads resonate most closely with young adults
- Sports betting more prevalent on campus, among college athletes

Young adults were sports betting prior to its legalization

- 18-to-20-year-olds are sports betting despite age restrictions
- Loopholes when it is not legal or underage:
 - Traveling to other states where sports betting is legal
 - Using parents’ names, fake IDs, or VPNs
 - Offshore website or bookies

Among our young adult study participants:*

- **100%** of male-identifying (n=16/16) participants reported they have previously bet on sports, compared to **50%** (n=11/22) of female-identifying participants[#]
- **68%** of underage (18-20) young adult participants noted they have previously bet on sports

* From Eligibility Screener; [#]1 individual responded “prefer not to answer” in the screener question about their gender

Advertisements

Sports betting advertising is targeting young adults primarily through social media platforms, mobile apps, podcasts, and streaming services.

Commonly reported advertisement mediums include:

- TV ads, especially while watching sports
- Social media (e.g., Instagram, X, TikTok, YouTube)
- Non-sports betting apps
- Subway ads (“redline”) and billboards
- Podcasts
- “Online promotion” (e.g., memes)
- Bars that show sports



“If you're watching any game on ESPN, I could be watching the NBA, there's just FanDuel things, promotions on the bottom, or it's even Sunday Night Football on NBC, they have on the sides, their picks for the day on sponsored by DraftKings.”

Both male and female participants suggested ads target young adults, “sports enthusiasts,” and men.

Ads target young people and men

- Men are “majority... who watch sports”
- Ads are “masculine,” “bolder colors,” and “darker, black-green vibe”
- People in ads are usually young men
- Ads use celebrities and influencers to promote sports betting
- Vendor street teams go to major sporting events, festivals, colleges to encourage people to sign up in person
- KII participants split on whether communications focus on young adults as an audience



“I think it tends to be more masculine appearing, the advertisements, with bolder colors and visuals and stuff... Also, I never really see any ads for betting on women's sports.”

Campus “culture” and word of mouth facilitate betting on college campuses.

Direct ads on campus are not prevalent but word of mouth and peers make betting part of campus culture

- Direct advertising on campuses is not prevalent
- Word of mouth between friends or peers is prevalent
- Exposure is higher at college/since starting college
- “Prevalent on online platforms that exist within college campus culture”
- One student from a D-1 school talked about athletic events sponsored by sports betting companies



“You're bound... to have at least one friend that gambles... because a lot of times these kids or college students, they only talk about how much they've won and not how much they've lost. So, you only hear the good parts of it and that hooks you in, and you want to gamble, too. I think in college students, it's mainly word of mouth and seeing your friends also gamble.”

“Free money” and bonus bets promotions and incorporating gambling into watching sports has “normalized” gambling, apps make it “easy to gamble.”

Promotions encourage first-time users to create accounts

- These promotions feel like lower stake bets that target “vulnerable” people
- Some apps (e.g., Fliff) give you a free dollar a day (in “coins”)
 - People under 21 using it as entry to gambling

Sports betting on phone apps makes it easier to gamble

Algorithms and viral posts also promote sports betting

- More advertising when game days are coming
- Viral posts that are undisclosed “gambling ads” (e.g., Stake)



“I don't know if you're familiar with bonus bets but it's not your money. You can [bet] it on only things that they want you to put it on so it's almost just like, ‘Hey, we'll give you this \$200, but you're probably not going to actually get \$200. You're just going to make an account with us.’”

Impacts

Legalization of sports betting may increase awareness about, access to, and participation in sports betting, including among young adults.

Increases awareness

- There was awareness prior to legalization, but legalization has increased awareness due to advertisements and word of mouth
- Young adults have mixed levels of awareness of age restrictions; among those who were not aware are a mix of bettors and non-bettors

Increases access and participation

- More young people, athletes, young men engaging in sports betting
- Phone apps/online betting increase the accessibility and frequency of sports betting
- Normalizes sports betting because people are exposed to and talking about it more



“I personally wouldn't have even thought to [bet on sports] if it wasn't legalized in Mass... But, because it's easily accessible on my phone and someone who's already done it before showed me how to use it, I felt more comfortable doing it.”

Positive impacts:

Legalization of sports betting increases engagement with sports, social interaction, state revenue, and regulation of the market.

Increases sports engagement and brings people together

- Having a stake in the outcome increases engagement
- Promotes “bonding” and “connecting” over watching sports

Provides state with revenue to reinvest in the local economy

Steers people away from the sports betting “black market” due to regulation and protections through legal avenues

Technology facilitates evaluation of gambling habits

Normalization reduces stigma, provides opportunities for conversations around responsible gambling



“I never had an interest in sports until I started betting on sports... but if you have money in it, you're going to be paying attention to the game, you're going to be a lot more interested... I tend to pay attention more. My friends tend to pay attention more.”

Negative impacts: Normalization of sports betting results in young adults wasting money and increases the risk of problem gambling.

Young adults believe they are “wasting money,” but not to financial ruin

- “Easier” to accrue debt: electronic payment options mean many use lines of credit
- Instant and constant nature of online betting allows for rapid and high-volume bet placement
 - Frequency and speed of online betting may appeal to the underdeveloped pre-frontal cortex of young adults, which manages impulse control functions
- Money loss can increase disappointment, anger, frustration, stress

Young adults recognize the risk for problem gambling but believe they and their friends gamble responsibly

- Some have family or friends who have experienced problem gambling, financial loss, and/or loss of relationships
- Relative newness of online betting means limited infrastructure exists to detect problem betting or “younger” bettors
- Normalization of sports betting can increase risk of problem gambling

Mitigation of Harms

Awareness among young adults of programs mitigating potential harms of sports betting are limited to hot lines and disclaimers.



Some young adults split were aware of available resources or programs, while some were not aware

- Reported awareness is limited to disclaimers and helplines, and some questioned their effectiveness

Most young adults believe that responsibility for mitigating harms lie with multiple entities

- Government and vendors were commonly cited as key entities, followed by communities, colleges, and individuals



“Start at the source with the sports betting platforms. I think, while it is beneficial for them to have more customers and to have people get really excited and place larger bets, I think that is kind of irresponsible, and there's a need for them to promote safety and mindfulness when you're sports betting.”

Participants recommended that vendor initiatives and changes to sports betting policies and regulations could protect people from sports betting harms. More specific participant recommendations include:

Vendor initiatives

- Apps/vendors should include disclaimers, warnings, and other features that limit losses and provide resources
- Online betting platforms' offer potential to investigate and document how young adults engage with apps to help develop tailored and responsive responsible gaming initiatives

Policies and regulations

- Regulations and protections oversight beyond betting vendors themselves are needed
 - Lack of federal regulations and/or oversight defaults to state policy, which is variable
- Some young adults recommended banning sports betting overall, banning online sports betting, and/or increasing age requirements



“[Sports betting apps] should have some notification if and when you are down on a lot of money, I'd say it has to set some limit... I see a lot of sports betting apps that will limit you if you've won a lot, which is part of their model, but there has to be something on the other end where it's limiting you because of how much you're losing. I feel like that's fair.”

Participants recommended that responsible gaming initiatives targeted at young adults could be implemented to shift sports betting conversations towards help-seeking and harms of gambling.

Increase number and promotion of resources to support sports bettors and people experiencing problem gambling

- Resources should be available everywhere, including on sports betting apps, college campuses, and government websites

Launch public educational initiatives to increase awareness and education around sports betting and how to gamble responsibly

- Initiatives could include public educational announcements (PSAs), similar to anti-smoking campaigns
- Increase education and awareness around financial literacy, sports betting, and potential risks and negative effects

Responsible gaming initiatives through Prevention, Education, Treatment, Enforcement, Research

Restrict or regulate vendor ads on sports betting

Discussion

Young adults are engaging in sports betting and it is becoming increasingly normalized. More interventions are needed to address potential harms.

Concerns about the frequency of betting, speed of plays, types of bets, bet sizes

- Access is 24/7 on online platforms
- Anything that can be measured or monitored about performance can be monetized

Sports betting is fast-paced and ever-evolving, making it difficult to evaluate

- But technology/online platforms can potentially provide rich sources of data for evaluation and to design interventions

Young adults do not seem to view sports betting as gambling

- Need for sports betting-specific resources
- Strengthen/identify its connection to gambling

Advertising is prevalent, and seems to focus on males and young adults

- Policies/regulations needed around ads

Initiatives should focus on Prevention, Education, Treatment, Enforcement, and Research

Next Steps: Study Activities

- **Continued CAB and community engagement, including participatory analysis of additional data collection findings**
- **Data collection**
 - In-depth interviews with adult mentors
 - Focus groups with young adults ages 18 to 25. Potential options (pending CAB feedback) include focus groups with: young adults who frequently engage in sports betting; college athletes who frequently engage in sports betting; underage sports bettors (ages 18 to 20)
- **Deliverables**
 - Final report summarizing findings across years and including recommendations
 - Updated plain-language snapshot of findings
 - Updated PowerPoint Presentation

Acknowledgments

Project Team

NORC

- Petry Ubri, MSPH
- Jared Sawyer, MPH

Previously at NORC

- Jenna Sirkin, PhD,
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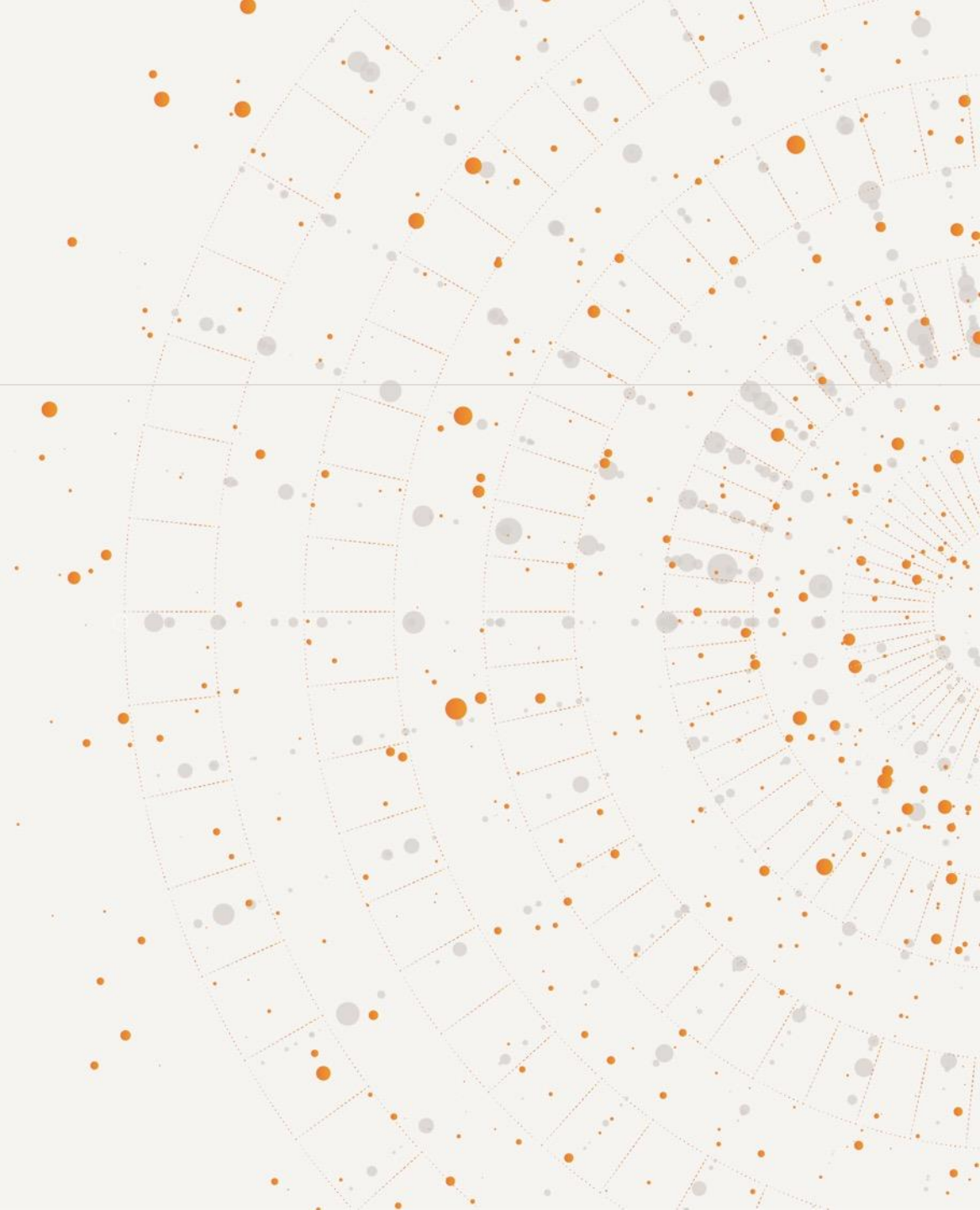
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Questions?



Thank you.

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