

MGC Research Snapshot

The Impact of Legalized Gambling on Recovery Communities: A Community-Based Participatory Research Study June 2025

What you need to know

This community-engaged research study explored the effects of legalized gambling on recovery communities. Key findings included a community-led definition of gambling recovery, a recommendation to stop using the term "responsible gaming" as it is harmful and stigmatizing, an identification of gaps in support and validation, and an initial recognition that legalized gambling is impacting the recovery process. Findings further highlight the need for recovery community voices to be included in discussions surrounding gambling policy. While existing resources for problem gambling provide an important foundation, they are not sufficient to address the growing scale and complexity of gambling-related harms—particularly in the rapidly expanding landscape following PASPA's repeal. Going forward, greater intentional and coordinated efforts are needed to expand access, improve visibility, and ensure that care systems are adequately resourced, culturally responsive, and prepared to meet rising demand.

What is this research about?

The 2018 Supreme Court decision overturning the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA) led to a rapid expansion of legalized sports betting and gambling. This shift raised growing concern about its impact on vulnerable communities, particularly those in recovery from gambling and substance use disorders. With funding from the Massachusetts Gaming Commission, researchers from Texas Tech University (TTU) partnered with the Massachusetts Council on Gaming and Health (MACGH), individuals with a history of addiction, and mental health professionals to explore several key questions: how recovery—both generally and in the context of gambling disorder—is defined; what indicators of recovery progress can be targeted through intervention programs; which factors support or undermine recovery; and how legalized gambling impacts recovery communities.

What did the researchers do?

Using a community-based participatory research approach, fourteen individuals with a history of addiction and/or expertise in mental health formed a Community Research Team (CRT) and partnered with researchers from TTU and MACGH. Together, the team

conducted six 90-minute focus groups to explore recovery experiences and perceptions of legalized gambling. Researchers analyzed the qualitative data and identified key themes, with ongoing input from CRT members to ensure findings reflected both lived and professional perspectives.

What did the researchers find?

Key findings included:

- **Stop Using "Responsible Gaming:"** The term "responsible gaming" is harmful and stigmatizing. There is a need to develop an alternative term that is ideally informed by a future CBPR study focused on harm reduction from players' own perspectives.
- **Gambling Recovery Defined:** The CRT successfully developed a recovery definition that focuses on personal commitment toward recovery and overall growth and healing from the harms of gambling disorder. The definition also emphasizes setting personalized recovery goals, actively engaging in a positive support network, and engaging in meaningful activities beyond gambling. It is expected that this definition will serve as the foundation for a future recovery measure.



- **Validation and Support Gaps:** Individuals in recovery from gambling disorder often feel invalidated in their experiences and struggle to identify supportive resources. It is recommended that resources be increased to address problem gambling and greater awareness campaigns be launched to de-stigmatize gambling disorder.
- **Legalized Gambling is Impacting Recovery Process:** Legalized gambling has increased risks for recovery communities, highlighting the urgent need for education, access to care, and culturally responsive, well-resourced support systems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings highlight the need for recovery community voices to be included in discussions surrounding gambling policy. Future efforts should emphasize responsive regulation, targeted interventions, and inclusive, well-resourced supports for those in recovery.

Recommendations for future research include continuing to explore the impact of legalized gambling on the recovery process; such research could inform future interventions and policy efforts aimed at protecting recovery communities in an increasingly gambling-saturated environment.

About the researchers

The TTU research team included two doctoral students—Travis Spencer (Couples, Marriage and Family Therapy) and Michelle Strong (Addictive Disorders and Recovery Studies)—and Dr. Devin Mills, Associate Professor in the Department of Community, Family and Addiction Sciences. They thank the 14 members of the CRT who contributed their voices and expertise for this study. For more information, contact Dr. Mills at devin.mills@ttu.edu.

Citation

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Key Words

Recovery; Community Engaged Research

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