

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



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SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS
OF GAMBLING IN MASSACHUSETTS

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH SCIENCES

Executive Summary

Background

In November, 2011, an [Act Establishing Expanded Gaming in the Commonwealth](#) was passed by the Legislature and signed by Governor Deval Patrick (Chapter 194 of the Acts of 2011). This legislation permitted casinos and slot parlors to be introduced in Massachusetts under the regulatory auspices of the Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC). Section 71 of the Expanded Gaming Act requires the 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.

The main purpose of the present 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 the Follow-up General Population Survey (FGPS) are directly comparable to survey data collected in Massachusetts in 2013 and 2014, before any of the casinos had opened. 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.

The question of when to field the FGPS required balancing opposing considerations. These included concerns about the ability to attribute changes in attitudes and behaviors specifically to the introduction of casinos given the passage of time, the likely impact of COVID-19 on gambling behavior given casino closures and capacity restrictions in 2020 and 2021, and the pending legalization of sports betting in Massachusetts which made it desirable to carry out the survey sooner rather than later. The final decision on when to field the survey was made with input from the MGC and members of the MGC's Research Review Committee.

Methods

The SEIGMA 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 Asians, Hispanics, Blacks, and adults aged 18-29, groups that are less likely to participate in surveys than other groups in the population. The survey launched in September 2021 and concluded in April 2022, had a weighted response rate of 27.5% and achieved a final sample size of 6,293 respondents. This report presents a comprehensive compilation of descriptive results from the survey. Comparisons described as 'higher' or 'lower' are based on statistical tests of significance. This report does not include deeper explorations of the data; the SEIGMA research team will conduct in-depth analyses in the future and release findings as they become available.

Key Findings

Attitudes about Gambling in Massachusetts

There is a range of opinion among Massachusetts adults concerning the legalization, availability, and impact of gambling in the Commonwealth.

- The majority of Massachusetts adults (67.5%) believed that some forms of gambling should be legal and some should be illegal, with only a minority reporting that all forms should be legal (22.6%) or all forms should be illegal (9.9%).
- The majority of Massachusetts adults (67.5%) believed that the availability of gambling in Massachusetts was too high, with 20.6% reporting that it was not available enough, and 11.8% reporting that the current availability was fine. It is notable that this attitude prevailed prior to the legalization of sports betting in the Commonwealth.
- Massachusetts adults had mixed opinions about the impact of casinos in the state, with almost equal numbers of people believing the casinos had been harmful (25.1%) or beneficial (29.1%).
- The most positive impacts of casinos in Massachusetts were viewed as employment (36.7%) followed by retaining money that was leaving Massachusetts (17.3%) and increased government revenue (14.3%).
- The most negative impacts of casinos in Massachusetts were viewed as increased gambling addiction (45.1%) followed by increased traffic congestion (18.8%) and increased crime (10.7%).

Gambling in Massachusetts

We define 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. Overall, 60.2% of Massachusetts adults reported participating in one or more of these gambling activities in the past year. This compares to 73.1% in 2013.

- A total of 39.8% of the population did not gamble in the past year, whereas 33.5% gambled 1-11 times in the past year, 14.6% gambled monthly, and 12.1% gambled weekly.
- Past-year gambling participation among Massachusetts adults was lower in 2021 compared to 2013 for all gambling activities except daily lottery games and online gambling. The steepest declines were for raffles, private wagering, and bingo. Our analyses suggest that part of this decline was due to the lingering effects of COVID-19 restrictions.
- One-sixth (15.7%) of Massachusetts adults reported visiting casinos to gamble in 2021. Of these, about one-third only gambled at Massachusetts casinos, about one-quarter only gambled at out-of-state casinos (mostly Connecticut and Rhode Island) and the remainder gambled at casinos both in Massachusetts and out-of-state.
- 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.
- Past-year gamblers in Massachusetts were most likely to say that winning money was the main reason they gambled, followed by excitement and/or entertainment, to socialize with family or friends, and to support worthy causes.
- Self-reported gambling expenditures are an important measure of gambling participation although such reports tend to be unreliable when compared to known gambling revenues. 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, we 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.
- Based on these percentages, we estimate that between 54,389 and 114,217 Massachusetts adults were problem gamblers in 2021. An additional 402,481 to 533,015 Massachusetts adults were at-risk gamblers.
- 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.
- 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 annual household income under \$50,000
- Problem gamblers accounted for approximately 20% of total gambling expenditure in Massachusetts in 2021.

Comparing Recreational, At-Risk, and Problem Gamblers in Massachusetts

There were notable differences between recreational, at-risk, and problem gamblers in Massachusetts in 2021. At-risk and problem gamblers in Massachusetts were more likely than recreational gamblers to be:

- Male
- Non-White
- Have a high school diploma or less
- Unemployed

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
- Using tobacco

Awareness of Problem Gambling Services in Massachusetts

Awareness of problem gambling prevention initiatives in Massachusetts was quite low in 2021. About two in 10 Massachusetts adults (20.9%) were aware of media campaigns to prevent problem gambling and 9.2% were aware of programs to prevent problem gambling offered in schools, workplaces, or in the community. By way of comparison, awareness of media campaigns to prevent problem gambling in 2013 was 41.0% and awareness of non-media prevention programs was 13.1%.

Changes Since 2013 and Future Directions

There have been changes in gambling attitudes and gambling behavior in Massachusetts since the baseline survey was carried out in 2013. More specifically:

- Significantly more people now believe that some types of gambling should be legal and some should be illegal (an increase from 55.2% to 67.5%), with corresponding decreases in the percentage of people who believe all types should be illegal or all types should be legal.
- Considerably more people now believe that gambling is too widely available (increase from 15.6% to 67.5%).
- Considerably more people now believe that the benefits of casinos are about equal to the harms (increase from 18.9% to 45.8%), with corresponding decreases in the percentage of people who believe that casinos are predominantly harmful or beneficial.
- 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 in 2015 (Plainridge Park Casino), 2018 (MGM Springfield), and 2019 (Encore Boston Harbor). 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.
- There has been no significant change in the rate of problem gambling from 2013 (2.0%) to 2021 (1.4%), which is again notable considering the introduction of three casinos.

In our comparison of recreational, at-risk, and problem gamblers in Massachusetts in 2021, we noted that at-risk and problem gamblers in 2021 were more likely to gamble for excitement or entertainment and less likely to gamble to win money compared to 2013. Other important changes from 2013 are that at-risk gamblers accounted for a much larger proportion of total gambling expenditures in 2021 and that there are no longer significant differences in rates of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems between recreational gamblers and at-risk and problem gamblers. We also noted changes between 2013 and 2021 in tobacco, alcohol, and drug use of different groups of gamblers with less tobacco use and alcohol bingeing but more drug use among recreational gamblers and less alcohol bingeing among problem gamblers. Finally, we identified a substantial reduction in awareness of problem gambling prevention media and non-media campaigns between 2013 and 2021.

The data presented in this report tell us a great deal about gambling attitudes, behavior, problems, and prevention awareness in Massachusetts in 2021. These data will continue to enrich our understanding of gambling and problem gambling in Massachusetts through additional analyses and research activities. Additionally, all of these data will be made public over time to enable other researchers and stakeholders to conduct their own analyses and add to the body of knowledge about gambling in Massachusetts.