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Gateway gambling

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Associated Press/Photo by Julie Jacobson

Gamblers in the Silver State no longer need to visit a Las Vegas casino to blow their dough. Nevada has opened the nation's first legal gambling website that deals in real money, UltimatePoker.com. The site's April 30 launch was a milestone for internet gambling in the United States, and similar sites are expected to launch in New Jersey and Delaware later this year.

Online gambling has been illegal in the United States because of a 2006 federal law. In 2011 federal agents shut down five major gambling websites, but later that year the Justice Department decided the websites were legal as long as they operated within state borders. Ultimate Poker stays square by only serving residents and visitors in Nevada: It requires players to register their cell phone and Social Security numbers so the website can determine their location and age (they must be 21 years old).

Station Casinos, a Las Vegas gambling group, launched UltimatePoker.com in hopes of luring new customers who might not want to visit one of its 16 casinos.

That's just the problem. "The government has opened a Las Vegas casino in every home, office, dorm room, and smart phone in the state, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," Les Bernal, the national director of Stop Predatory Gambling, told me by email. "Instead of working to expand the middle class through opportunity and efforts to improve social mobility, government is steering millions of citizens into deeper debt and more dysfunction."

Bernal said Nevada's poker website was part of a larger lobbying effort to bring gambling to Facebook, as has already happened in the United Kingdom. (In the United States, Facebook gambling apps currently deal in game credits, not money.) Facebook's first U.K. gambling app, Bingo Friendly, caused an outcry last year for using advertisements with cartoonish, cuddly creatures that could have appealed to children.

Could Facebook serve as a gateway to gambling for teens willing to lie about their age? We may find out soon. Zynga, creator of the popular Facebook game "FarmVille," is planning to launch its own cash-stakes game in Nevada.