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Mass. Attorney General launches initiative to combat illegal youth sports gambling

[Serres, Chris.](#) [Boston Globe \(Online\)](#); **Boston**. 28 Mar 2024.

Abstract

None available.

Full Text

Amid growing alarm over the spread of illegal youth sports betting, the Massachusetts attorney general's office is preparing to launch a statewide initiative to educate students across the state about the perils of gambling and its risks to public health.

The initiative, unveiled at the TD Garden on Thursday, involves the rollout of an educational curriculum that will teach students from grade school to college about the addictive nature of gambling, including how quickly and easily dabbling in sports betting can lead to disaster. The curriculum will be developed with input from a new coalition that includes New England's major professional sports teams, the NCAA and the state Gaming Commission.

The announcement follows a yearlong explosion in online sports betting and comes amid growing fears over a looming boom in gambling addiction. Massachusetts bettors have wagered more than \$5 billion on sports betting platforms since mobile sports operators went live on March 10, 2023. It is illegal for anyone under 21 in Massachusetts to wager online. Yet increasingly, as the Globe has documented, tech-savvy adolescents are circumventing regulatory safeguards and gaining access to the new digital platforms, stoking worries that the gambling industry may be sowing the seeds of a future addiction crisis.

"Sports gaming is everywhere. It is accessible, and because it is so accessible, it poses a serious public health risk, particularly for young people," said Attorney

General Andrea Campbell at the announcement. “We need to make sure that [sports betting]... does not ensnare young people into a cycle of problem gambling, law breaking or addiction.”

Yet the initiative quickly drew skepticism from some gambling researchers and addiction treatment specialists for not addressing one of the most controversial aspects of the sports betting boom: The relentless barrage of sports betting advertisements that blanket the airwaves and downtown Boston billboards, garbage cans, public transit stops and stadiums, including the TD Garden, where state officials unveiled the initiative. The ads feature some of Boston's most prominent professional athletes, including former Red Sox slugger David Ortiz and ex-Patriots legends Tom Brady and Rob Gronkowski.

“If the state Attorney General is serious about addressing the major harm being inflicted upon young people in Massachusetts, it starts with restricting gambling advertising and marketing to protect young people, just like we do for other known dangerous and addictive products,” said Les Bernal, executive director of the group Stop Predatory Gambling, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit. “Marlboro doesn't advertise on the Green Monster or behind home plate at Fenway Park like gambling interests do.”

School administrators, mental health counselors, and Gamblers Anonymous meeting groups from across the state report seeing an influx of young people — some as young as 13 — seeking help for gambling problems. Many kids are using their parents' or older friends' accounts to make rapid-fire bets tied to hundreds of specific events within a game. These wagers, known as “prop bets,” can be placed on everything from how many points University of Iowa basketball phenom Caitlin Clark will score in a NCAA tournament game, to the number of shots on goal the Boston Bruins will take in its next matchup.

The rapid-play format of the online sports betting platforms and their easy access through mobile phone apps make them highly addictive, say gambling researchers and therapists, and especially harmful to young people, whose brains are still developing.

“Just because online sports betting isn't a chemical doesn't mean it's any less dangerous,” said Cara Ferguson, prevention coordinator at High Point Treatment Center, which provides gambling-addiction counseling for youth at its outpatient clinics in Brockton and Plymouth. “We're seeing an increase in youth who have never gambled before and are now getting swept up in it ... and their losses are accumulating much more rapidly than in the past.”

The attorney general's office said the new coalition will develop an education, training and health curriculum targeted at people ages 12 to 20, though they are still working on the content of the curriculum and how it will be rolled out.

The Supreme Court in 2018 paved the way for the expansion of sports wagering when it struck down a federal law that effectively banned the activity in most states. Seeing a new source of tax revenue, Massachusetts and 37 other states quickly moved to legalize sports gambling. State gaming commissions regulate how the betting platforms operate but generally give them wide latitude over what they say in advertisements and where they can place them.

In Massachusetts, state law prohibits sports betting operators from targeting their advertising at those under 21, or running ads in media outlets or events where a quarter of the audience is "reasonably expected" to be younger than 21. State law also prohibits sports betting companies from depicting students or schools in their marketing materials, among other regulations.

Yet advocates for problem gamblers say such rules are loosely interpreted and lightly enforced, with state gaming commissions largely relying on the public to report any advertising violations.

The prevalence of underage gambling in Massachusetts is largely unknown because youths have not been included in state-funded surveys. However, over the past decade, behavioral health surveys administered by the state have consistently shown that 40 to 50 percent of Massachusetts students engage in some form of gambling, such as playing the lottery or participating in fantasy sports.

The SAFE Coalition, is a social services agency that provides mental health and substance use counseling for youth in west-central Massachusetts. Starting last fall, the organization began seeing an influx of children who are struggling in school because they are betting on their phones. In response, the organization has added questions about gambling to its intake process, said Jennifer Knight-Levine, chief executive and co-founder of the nonprofit

Knight-Levine said she has noticed a trend: Many of the children who admit to betting regularly on sports do not view the activity as gambling, even when significant sums of money are involved.

"Sports betting has become so normalized that it's viewed as harmless play, like video games," Knight-Levine said. "A teenager will think of someone who is gambling as an old person in a casino or a smoky room, while sports betting is

largely viewed as fun, exciting and socially acceptable.”

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