

# Adolescent Gambling and Mental Health



## Executive Summary

The legal gambling age varies between states (either 18 or 21 years old) and differs with the type of gambling. Despite the fact that adolescent gambling is an illegal activity, research indicates that the increased availability of legal gambling has led to an increase in the prevalence of adolescent gambling and subsequent gambling problems among young people including psychosocial, behavioral, and financial issues. In recent years, numerous states have started to legalize internet gambling (or iGaming) in addition to sports betting and mobile sports betting. During the 2022 Missouri Legislative Session, nine bills were filed related to sports betting and wagering (HBs [1666](#), [2144](#), [2502](#), [2556](#), [2752](#); SBs [643](#), [764](#), [1046](#), [1061](#)).

## Highlights

- Nationwide, it is estimated that 1–2% of adults have a gambling problem. This number is higher in adolescents, ranging from 6–9%.
- Evidence suggests that iGaming tends to be used by those who are younger and/or are less frequent visitors of casinos.
- Like adults, excessive forms of adolescent gambling can result in poor academic performance, intrafamilial conflict, difficult peer relationships, social exclusion, and mental health issues including increased suicidal ideation and attempts, drug and alcohol use, and delinquency/criminal problems.
- Sports betting is legal in 32 states and Washington, D.C. The majority of states set the legal age to participate in sports betting at 21 years old, with the exception of 4 states that set their legal age to 18 years old.

## Limitations

- It is difficult to estimate the number of individuals with a gambling disorder because many individuals do not recognize they may have a gambling issue and may inaccurately report their gambling behaviors.
- There is no publicly available data investigating the prevalence of gambling disorders among adults and adolescents in states with sports betting legislation (including mobile sports betting) compared to states where sports betting is not permitted.

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## Research Background

### Legality of Gambling

There are many forms of legal gambling (e.g., lottery, sports betting, casinos games and slot machines, charity bingo, and pull-tabs or “scratch-offs”).<sup>1</sup> The legal gambling age varies between states (18 or 21 years old) and fluctuates with the type of gambling. However,

adolescent gambling is an illegal activity with some state exceptions (e.g., a gifted “scratch-off” or lottery ticket).

Internet gambling (or iGaming) has been illegal in most states until recently due partly to the COVID-19 pandemic and in an attempt to expand the consumer-base for casinos. As with other forms of gambling, the legal iGaming age varies between states and requires an individual to verify their identity. iGaming encompasses mobile sports betting, purchasing lottery tickets online, and traditional casino games played over the internet.<sup>2</sup> Evidence suggests that those who are more likely to use iGaming tend to be younger and/or are not frequent visitors of casinos.<sup>3</sup>

### **Gambling Behavior and Mental Health Outcomes**

Gambling behavior falls on a continuum that ranges from non-gambling, recreational/non-problematic gambling, at-risk gambling, and problem/disordered gambling.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that adolescent gambling is an illegal activity, research indicates that the increased availability of legal virtual gambling (e.g., iGaming and mobile sports betting) has led to an increase in the prevalence of adolescent gambling and gambling problems among adolescents that track into adulthood.<sup>5</sup> Survey responses of 6,563 Ohio students between grades seven and twelve found that those aged 16–19 years old that regularly engage in sports betting are at a higher risk for developing a gambling disorder compared to younger adolescents. However, younger adolescents (13–15 years old) make greater risk-maximizing choices.<sup>6</sup>

Nationwide, it is estimated that 1–2% of adults have a gambling problem, and this number is higher in adolescents (10–19 years old), ranging from 6–9%.<sup>6</sup> However, it is difficult to estimate the number of individuals with a gambling disorder because many individuals do not recognize they may have a gambling issue. The prevalence of gambling disorders is generated from self-report data and can have inherent variability; individuals may inaccurately report their gambling behaviors.

Like adults, excessive forms of adolescent gambling can result in psychosocial and behavioral issues and economic and legal hardships such as poor academic performance, intrafamilial conflict, difficult peer relationships, social exclusion, and mental health issues including increased suicidal ideation and attempts, drug and alcohol use, and delinquent and criminal problems.<sup>4,7</sup>

### **State Legislation: Sports Betting**

In 2018, the Supreme Court ended the federal prohibition on sports betting ([The Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act](#)). Since then, sports betting has become legal in 32 states (including AR, KS, IA, IL, TN) and Washington, D.C.<sup>8</sup> Intrastate mobile sports betting has been authorized in 19 states (including IL, IA, TN), and Washington D.C.<sup>8</sup> Mississippi, Montana, and Washington only allow bets from a mobile phone to be placed while on casino premises.<sup>9</sup> To

legally participate in sports betting, most states require individuals to be at least 21 years old, although 4 states (MT, NH, RI, and WA) require individuals to be at least 18 years old.

Gambling has the potential to boost state revenue, particularly for states that have authorized mobile sports betting. In New Jersey, sports betting accrued \$43 million in tax revenue, and mobile betting accounted for roughly 95% of the total amount wagered in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Research has found that mobile betting has the potential to increase disordered or problematic gambling behavior. The rate of gambling problems among sports bettors is twice the rate than among gamblers in general, and this rate is even higher when sports gambling is conducted online.<sup>11</sup> However, there are no publicly available data investigating the prevalence of gambling disorders among adults and adolescents in states with sports betting legislation (including mobile sports betting) compared to states where sports betting is not permitted.

In Missouri, sports betting is not authorized. During the 2022 Missouri Legislative Session, nine bills (HBs [1666](#), [2144](#), [2502](#), [2556](#), [2752](#); SBs [643](#), [764](#), [1046](#), [1061](#)) were filed pertaining to sports wagering and betting. However, none of those bills were passed during the legislative period.

## References

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