

Massachusetts population survey shows no increase in problem gambling following introduction of casinos

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The prevalence of problem and at-risk gambling has not significantly changed since casinos were introduced in Massachusetts beginning in

2015, according to the first statewide population survey that compares gambling behavior and attitudes before and after the opening of three casinos in the commonwealth.

That key finding, from the groundbreaking Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts (SEIGMA) research team at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, does not come as a surprise to longtime gambling behavior expert Rachel Volberg, SEIGMA's principal investigator, even though the gambling literature suggested an increase in [problem gambling](#) could be expected. Volberg presented the findings, which compare data from the baseline pre-casino [survey](#) in 2013-2014 and the follow-up survey in 2021-2022, to the Massachusetts Gaming Commission on Wednesday, April 3.

Volberg notes the pre-casino survey found a high level of overall participation (73.1%) in different types of gambling among Massachusetts residents, including 21.5% who traveled to resorts in Connecticut and other states with a casino industry. In 2021, 60.2% of residents surveyed said they had participated in gambling in the past year; the researchers' analysis suggests the decline was in part due to the lingering effects of COVID-19 restrictions.

"We hypothesized that because of the clear exposure to casinos in Connecticut, we might not see the increase in problem gambling that often happens in the wake of the introduction of a new form of gambling," says Volberg, a research professor of epidemiology in the School of Public Health and Health Sciences. "And it was nice to see our hypothesis confirmed."

Volberg also attributed the steady rate of problem gamblers (2% in 2013 and 1.4% in 2021) and at-risk gamblers (8.4% in 2013 and 8.5% in 2021) to Massachusetts's robust problem gambling prevention programs—GameSense, PlayMyWay and voluntary self-exclusion.

"These programs are best practice internationally," says Volberg, additionally noting legislative measures to prevent problem gambling.

Problem gamblers are defined as those who experience significant impaired control over their gambling and negative consequences as a result. At-risk gamblers are those whose behaviors place them at greater risk of experiencing a gambling problem, such as persistently betting more than planned, spending more time gambling than intended and borrowing money to gamble.

Jordan Maynard, interim chair of the Massachusetts Gaming Commission, says the commission "is committed to funding important research related to the impacts of gambling in the commonwealth. Through the information collected from studies like this, commissioners, staff and stakeholders have the opportunity to continue developing evidence-based policies and regulations to ensure the gaming industry in the commonwealth prioritizes consumer protections and responsible gaming."

One objective of the 2011 Expanded Gaming Act was to generate revenue by keeping Massachusetts gamblers in-state by opening casinos. That seems to have happened. Out-of-state [casino](#) patronage dropped from 21.5% in 2013 to 10.2% in 2021.

"It did come through pretty clearly that there has been a substantial recapture of people who were going to Connecticut who decided to gamble at Massachusetts casinos instead," Volberg says.

One area of concern was revealed by the latest survey: the proportion of gambling expenditures that came from at-risk gamblers increased from 51% in 2013 to 68% in 2021. "These aren't problem gamblers," she says, "but the financial losses are still an impact on them and their families and their communities."

That increase suggests that the target for minimizing and mitigating gambling harm needs to shift to identify potential gamblers in need earlier, Volberg says.

To conduct the 2021 survey, the SEIGMA team questioned 6,293 adults, aged 18 and over, who had the option of completing the survey online, on paper or by telephone. The representative sample included targets for Asians, Hispanics, Blacks and adults aged 18–29, groups that are less likely to participate in surveys.

Other survey highlights:

- 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%).
- 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.

More information: [Gambling and Problem Gambling in](#)

[Massachusetts: Results of a Follow-up Population Survey \(2023\)](#)

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

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