

COLLEGE STUDENTS AND GAMBLING

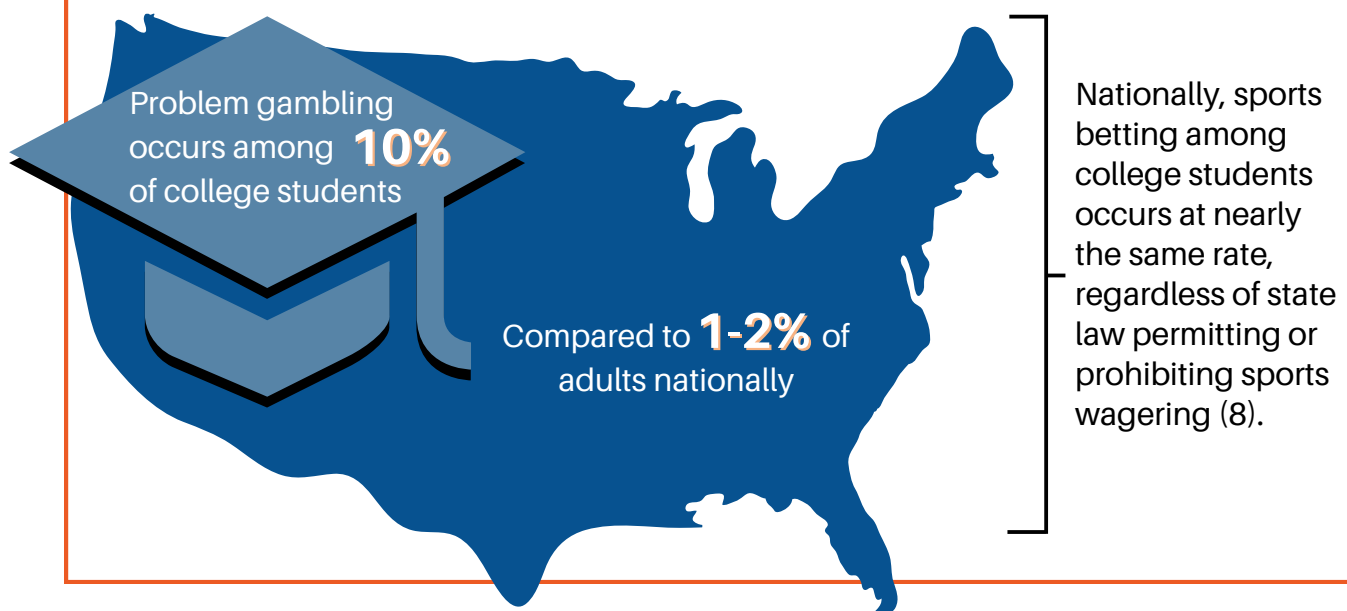
College students have been a population of interest for some time among researchers exploring risky behaviors, including gambling (1). Gambling is a prevalent activity among college students, with some studies suggesting that up to 75-80% of students engaged in some form of gambling over the past year (1). While for most students, gambling remains a harmless pastime, a subset experiences problematic behaviors with a range of consequences.

One meta-analysis, a type of research that combines data from multiple studies, revealed that the prevalence of problem gambling among college students exceeds 10%, starkly contrasting with the 1-2% prevalence rate observed in the general adult U.S. population (2, 3). Despite these high rates, fewer than a quarter of colleges and universities have established formal gambling policies (4). This brief aims to explore the prevalence, risk factors, and prevention strategies related to problem gambling among college students.

PROBLEM GAMBLING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

What does gambling look like for college students?

- Problem gambling among college students occurs in various forms. Historically, lottery was the most common (5).
- More recently, sports wagering, including daily fantasy sports betting, has increased among young adults and college students (6). Internet-based gambling, such as mobile sports wagering, is associated with greater risks for gambling-related problems (7).
 - 67% of on-campus students engage in sports betting, for which mobile is the preferred method (8).



GENDER AND RACIAL DIFFERENCES

Gender Differences

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that male college students are more likely to engage in problematic levels of gambling compared to their female peers (9, 10); this pattern is observed in the general adult population, as well. Possible explanations for this primary gender difference include that:

- Males may exhibit higher intrinsic motivation for gambling, such as exhibiting stronger competitive drives, leading to more time spent gambling (11).
- Male college students are more likely to hold gambling fallacies, such as feeling a sense of control over gambling outcomes (i.e., 'illusion of control') or that they can increase their odds with luck or perseverance, which are related to gambling problems (12).

Racial Differences

Research on racial differences in problem gambling generally has demonstrated that Black and Hispanic individuals gamble at a higher frequency and experience more clinical problems from gambling compared to White individuals (13).

Studies examining racial differences specifically in college students have been unclear and sparse. One study found no difference in problem gambling symptoms or severity between white and nonwhite peers, but a greater likelihood to have played the lottery among nonwhite students (14).

One study found no differences in gambling frequency, spending, or problems among White, Black, and Hispanic students. Interestingly, while Asian students reported gambling less frequently than these other groups, they represented the largest percentage that met the criteria for a gambling disorder. Relatedly, they reported losing more money, experiencing more problems, and a greater family history of problem gambling than the other groups (15).

There is a need for more research to examine the role of cultural and identity intersectionality in gambling behaviors so that appropriate prevention and intervention strategies can be developed based on these unique factors.

STUDENT ATHLETES AND GAMBLING

Some studies show that gambling rates among college student-athletes are comparable to those of the general student population (16), while others report lower prevalence rates among NCAA student-athletes (17). Still, student-athletes appear to have high rates of problem gambling behavior, even more so among athletes on higher-profile sports teams like football or basketball (17).

- Athletes with the highest risk of problem gambling were male, participated in high-revenue sports, had at least one parent with a history of gambling problems, and had higher rates of gambling frequency (17).
- Student-athletes expecting financial gain from sports wagering are more likely to experience gambling problems, regardless of gender (18).



The risk of disclosing gambling behavior due to potential NCAA repercussions and the expectations of financial gain contribute to gambling issues among athletes while preventing help-seeking.

It is recommended that athletic departments and leaders receive training on the risks of gambling, warning signs, and intervention strategies (19).

COLLEGIATE ATHLETE HARASSMENT IS A GAMBLING-RELATED PROBLEM

College athletes, particularly women, are subjected to significant abuse from individuals invested in their athletic performance for gambling-related reasons. In one study (20):

12%

Of abuse was directly related to sports betting. However, many accounts of sexism, racism, and other types of abuse were linked to sports wagering behaviors.

80%

Of abuse was directed toward March Madness college athletes. Of this group, women received three times as many threats than male counterparts.

As the sports betting industry has grown, so has athlete harassment and abuse.

With this new research that documents abuse, the NCAA and colleges are prioritizing student-athlete safety. This is critical, as sports wagering continues to grow nationally.

RISK & PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Risk and protective factors influencing problem gambling among college students include:



Self-Determination

The degree of self-determination or sense of personal control among college students appears to have some influence on gambling behaviors. Specifically, students who tend to be driven by external rewards are found to gamble more frequently and experience more gambling-related consequences (21).



Social Influences

Students' perceptions of their family and peers' thoughts about gambling influence their gambling behavior. For female college students, gambling discouragement from parents and peers tended to result in less gambling. For males, the opposite was observed (11). This may be a mechanism for college-aged men to resist protective influences of family and friends to assert independence and control.



Mental Health & Substance Use

As with the general population, students who use gambling to enhance their mood or to cope with psychological distress tend to increase the severity of gambling-related problems (22). Use of substances also increase risk of problem gambling, particularly alcohol (23), tobacco, cannabis, cocaine, and other opiates (24, 25).



Other Protective Factors

Generally, having negative expectations about gambling, less emotional distress, high resiliency, and strong social support protect against problem gambling among college students (23).

PROBLEM GAMBLING WARNING SIGNS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS (2, 5, 23)

Worsening
academic
performance

Social isolation

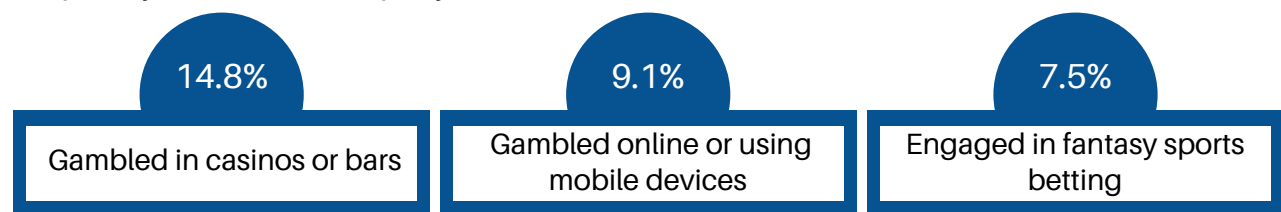
Difficulty
controlling
impulses

Increased risky
sexual and
substance use
behaviors

GAMBLING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS IN OREGON

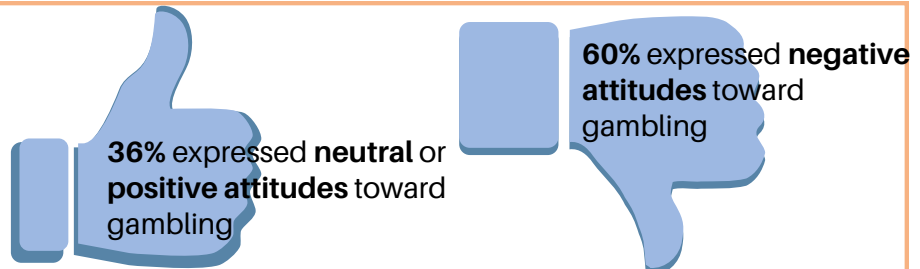
In 2023, a study was conducted with students from Portland State University to understand exposure, attitudes, services, and specific behaviors related to gambling among Oregon college students (26). Survey data was collected from 694 students in the spring of 2023, who were largely female, white, and an average age of 28.6 years old. Although a number of sexual orientations were represented, the majority identified as straight, bisexual, or queer. The majority of students were not collegiate athletes; only five respondents reported experience with college athletics.

Gambling frequency: College students were asked where they gamble. At the frequency of “a few times per year or more”:

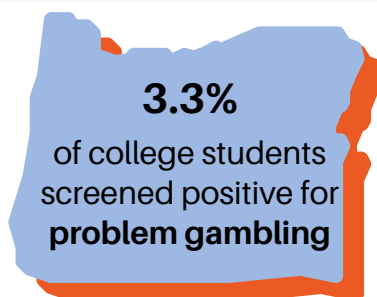


Attitudes toward gambling:

Most students expressed holding negative attitudes toward gambling.



*4% were undecided, which highlights the dynamic and nuanced nature of gambling attitudes



3.3%
of college students
screened positive for
problem gambling

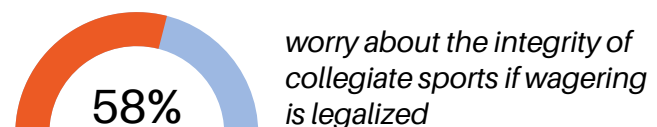
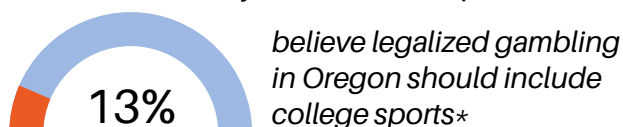
- 6.6% screened at a moderate risk
- 14.5% screened at a low risk

Gambling is not widely discussed.



Only **3.3%** of students **received information** about the risks of gambling from their university.

Most respondents shared concerns about gambling, particularly around the legalization of collegiate sports betting. However, some students shared their support for the legalization and expressed less concern about college student gambling, with the caveat that resources should be readily available and promoted.



*Note: Collegiate sports betting is not legal in Oregon, except in Oregon Indian Gaming Casinos.

PREVENTION & INTERVENTIONS

Campus-Based Strategies

Effective prevention and intervention strategies for college campuses include:

- **Education & Training:** Faculty, staff, and students should receive training on gambling and problem gambling. Gambling screening questions should be included in health surveys. The development of comprehensive programming and resources, such as the Gambling Action Team (GAT) at the University of Alabama, can enhance student awareness (27).
- **University Policies:** Establishing formal gambling policies within universities and providing gambling screening at counseling centers can aid in early identification and intervention. Integration with local addiction agencies ensures appropriate referrals and treatment (23).
- **Strengths-Based Approaches:** Employing strengths-based and mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be effective in building ego-resiliency and increasing social support, mitigating gambling problems (28).

Strategies for Student-Athletes

For student-athletes, focusing on **time management** and **self-control** may prove more effective than addressing gambling expectancies alone. This approach helps manage both the risks associated with gambling and the unique pressures faced by athletes (18).

Education Matters

Gambling education plays a crucial role in prevention. By integrating gambling awareness programs into existing health curricula or organizing stand-alone initiatives, colleges can empower students to make informed decisions by understanding the risks involved. Peer education programs, in which students are trained to help their peers, can also be effective in fostering a supportive community environment.

Treatment Needs to be Accessible

Targeted interventions are crucial for aiding students who are already experiencing gambling-related problems. Counseling services, including individual and group therapies, should be readily available and easily accessible to students. Collaboration with external organizations specializing in gambling addiction can provide additional resources and support for students in need.

SUMMARY

Problem gambling among college students continues to be a concern. College students have unique risk factors that strengthen as the gambling landscape evolves. The creation of robust policies that clearly define acceptable behaviors and outline the consequences of gambling-related infractions may be helpful in addition to establishing support systems and referral processes for students exhibiting signs of problem gambling. At the same time, there is a real concern about underreporting and help-seeking for existing gambling problems, particularly among college athletes, related to feared repercussions.

Moreover, promoting overall well-being through mental health resources, stress management workshops, and recreational activities can help mitigate the factors that often contribute to problem gambling. Creating a campus culture that values healthy, balanced lifestyles can reduce the appeal of gambling as a coping mechanism. By taking these steps, colleges can create a safer and more supportive environment for their students, helping to prevent problem gambling and ensure that those who struggle receive the help they need.

Key Findings

- Many college students, including student-athletes, engage in gambling behavior. A greater percentage of college students exhibit problem gambling behaviors than the general adult population, making it a key concern.
- Gambling as a student may impact academic performance, sleep, financial security, and participation in athletics for college athletes. Additionally, student gambling may be related to, or exacerbate, psychological distress.
- Perceptions and expectations of gambling, family history of gambling, mental health symptoms, and substance usage appear to be important risk factors for the development of gambling problems.
- Addressing gambling in university policies, counseling centers, and athletic departments may be critical in prevention and intervention efforts.
- Strengths-based and mindfulness-based cognitive-behavioral treatment approaches that target resiliency, social support, time management, and self-control may be the most effective in reducing impairment associated with gambling.

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