

Issue At A Glance:

Youth Gambling in the Digital Age

Online gambling, sports betting, and video game mechanics have made gambling more accessible to adolescents, who are especially vulnerable due to impulsivity, peer influence, and targeted marketing. As gambling becomes more normalized, concerns grow over its mental health, social, and financial consequences. This brief examines youth gambling risks, policy gaps, and the need for stronger regulations.

Introduction

Gambling has become a more socially acceptable and accessible behavior, particularly in digital spaces, where the rise of online gambling, fantasy sports, loot boxes, and sports betting has expanded the scope of these activities.¹

Adolescents, as well as those in their late teens and early twenties, are particularly vulnerable to gambling due to ongoing brain development, limited emotional regulation, peer influence, and heightened impulsivity.² These factors make young people more likely to engage in risky behaviors like gambling, which is further exacerbated by advertising, influencer endorsements, and video game mechanics that mimic gambling, such as loot boxes. While many forms of gambling remain legally restricted to adults, these practices are reaching younger audiences at an alarming rate.³

This brief explores how these gambling-adjacent behaviors exploit vulnerable youth and advocates for stricter regulations to prevent predatory practices in digital gaming and advertising.

Key Statistics

- **17.9%** of adolescents worldwide reported gambling in the past year, with rates as high as **33.7%** in North America.⁴
- **10%** of young men in the U.S. show problem gambling behavior—over **three times** the rate of the general population.⁵
- Loot box purchases among youth range from **20%** to **33.9%**, introducing them to gambling behaviors.⁶

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The Rise of Youth Gambling

Gambling disorder (GD) is a non-substance addiction marked by persistent betting behavior despite negative consequences.⁷ Adolescents are at higher risk, with problem gambling rates two to four times higher than adults.⁸ Lifetime participation in gambling among youth ranges from 42.1% to 89.9%, with problem gambling rates between 0.2% and 12.3%.^{9,10} In the U.S., problem gambling among high school students doubled from 4.2% in 2018 to 8.3% in 2022.¹¹ In the UK, youth problem gambling doubled in just one year from 0.7% in 2023 to 1.5%, affecting 85,000 children.¹²

Online gambling, though less common than offline, is expanding rapidly due to relaxed regulations and increased digital promotion.^{7,13} Twitch, a major livestreaming platform, took steps to ban some gambling content but continues to allow sports betting and poker. Despite restrictions, gambling sponsorships remain common.^{14,15} Sports betting is also rising among youth, fueled by advertisements and the legalization of online sports gambling. Loot boxes in video games further contribute to gambling exposure. These digital features provide randomized virtual rewards, mimicking gambling mechanics.¹⁶ Studies show that adolescents with problem gambling symptoms tend to spend more on loot boxes, reinforcing concerns that these mechanics act as a gateway to real-money gambling.¹⁷

Gambling disorder in adolescents leads to significant academic problems, impaired social and family relationships, and mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, ADHD, substance use, suicidality, as well as low self-discipline.^{1,18,19} Financial consequences are also significant—the 2025 Student Gambling Survey found 49% of students reported gambling in the past year, with 17% using student loan money. Male student gamblers spent an average of £33.54 per week—nearly equal to their grocery budget.²⁰

Policy and Regulation Changes

The rapid expansion of online gambling has increased concerns about underage exposure. The 2018 Supreme Court decision lifting the federal ban on sports betting led to widespread legalization, but security measures to prevent adolescent access remain insufficient.²¹ Some states have responded by advocating for a uniform gambling age of 21 and regulating fantasy sports as gambling. However, consumer protection laws remain inconsistent across states, and gambling-related advertising continues to target young audiences.¹² The National Council on Problem Gambling has called for stronger national legislation to mitigate gambling-related harm among youth.²¹



Addressing Youth Gambling

Risk Factors

Adolescent gambling disorder (GD) is influenced by various factors, including protective elements such as socioeconomic status, parental supervision, and parental awareness of sibling gambling problems.^{22,23} Risk factors for GD include male gender, older age, minority status, low family connectedness, exposure to gambling through friends or parents, and participation in online gambling.¹⁰ Online gambling poses unique dangers, with research suggesting it is more addictive and up to eight times more likely to cause problem gambling than offline gambling.⁷ Among online gambling activities, slot machines carry the highest addiction risk.²⁴

Advertising also plays a significant role in adolescents' gambling behaviors. Studies show that young gamblers tend to recall gambling ads more vividly and often misinterpret them as promoting guaranteed winnings, increasing their likelihood of gambling.^{4,25}

Treatment Options

Most adolescents with gambling disorder (GD) do not seek formal treatment, yet the disorder can affect their development and persist into adulthood. Treatment options include pharmacological approaches (e.g., opioid receptor antagonists and monoaminergic drugs) and psychosocial interventions (e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy, motivational strategies and self-help groups). However, most treatments have not been specifically tested for youth, and no medications are approved for youth-related GD.⁸

Prevention Strategies

Prevention programs for youth gambling aim to raise awareness of risk factors and are implemented in schools to delay or prevent gambling. Research suggests these programs can lower gambling frequency and correct cognitive distortions.²⁶

Public health initiatives, including self-exclusion programs, also play a role in harm reduction. These programs allow individuals to ban themselves from gambling platforms for a set period to help prevent compulsive gambling behaviors. In the UK, the number of participants under the age of 25 in self-exclusion programs increased by 31% in 2024.²⁰

Future prevention efforts should emphasize coping skills and provide education for parents, teachers, and mental health professionals to support youth in avoiding gambling disorder.²⁷

Future Directions

Future research should focus on developing culturally and developmentally informed assessment tools for GD in youth.²⁸ Longitudinal studies are needed to examine relationships between GD and factors such as mental health, socioeconomic status, and life events.²² More research is also needed on effective treatments for adolescents, along with evaluations of gambling prevention programs and advertising impact. Expanding clinical services for youth GD, particularly in underserved areas, is critical.^{12,20,26}

Regulatory efforts should prioritize stronger gambling ad restrictions, enhanced age verification, and gaming industry accountability in addressing loot boxes and gambling-like mechanics.^{4,12,17}

Conclusion

Youth gambling is not just an individual issue. It is a growing public health concern that demands urgent action. The normalization of gambling through social media, esports, and online platforms has exposed an entire generation to high-risk gambling behaviors. While awareness is growing, policymakers, educators, and industry leaders must act now.

The consequences of youth gambling extend beyond financial losses. Gambling addiction has been linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide risk among young people. It disrupts education, damages family relationships, and creates long-term financial instability. Despite these risks, many adolescents struggling with gambling addiction go unnoticed and receive little to no support.

The time for action is now. Without meaningful reforms, youth gambling will continue to rise, creating a crisis that could have been prevented.



Did you know?

Loot boxes are present in over 58% of top-grossing video games, exposing millions of minors to gambling-like mechanics.²⁹

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