

GENERATION HEALTH

Legalized Online Gambling Sparks Increase In Younger People Seeking Help

By **Alison Cross** January 25, 2022

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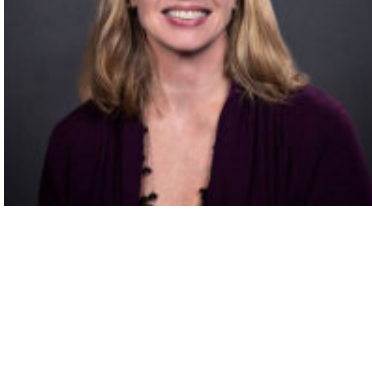
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The number of Connecticut residents seeking help for gambling addiction is growing larger and younger, according to problem gambling experts and mental health providers, who say they are fielding an influx of new patients following the state's legalization of some forms of online gambling.

Professionals say that the widespread accessibility of gambling has exacerbated addiction since online and mobile sports betting and virtual casinos opened in October. The largest increase? Young men participating in sports betting.



“If you asked me six months ago, the normal person who you think is a problem gambler would have been that little old lady at the slot machine. Now, it’s a 20-something-year-old man who’s doing sports betting online.”

— Diana Goode, executive director

Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling

According to a 2015 study of online gambling in college students published in the [Journal of Gambling Studies](#), 23% of college students gamble weekly or more, and between 3% and 14% develop a gambling problem. The study found that gambling is associated with poor academic performance, heavy alcohol consumption, illicit drug use, nicotine use and suicide attempts.

The Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling (CCPG) runs the state's problem gambling helpline [888-789-7777]. Goode said that calls to the hotline have increased drastically within the last three months, since the state legalized online casino gambling, online sports betting, online poker, and other gambling-related activities. The minimum age to participate is 21.

“Our helpline calls have pretty much quadrupled since the legalization of online gambling,” said Goode. “We anticipated that six months from now that people would really have a problem, and that’s not what actually happened. Right now, people really have a problem.”

Hashtag #gambling

Connecticut is one of 20 states that have legalized mobile gaming and/or sports betting. Since the state launched its approved forms of online gambling in late October, residents have wagered more than \$2.14 billion in virtual [casino games](#) and [online sportsbooks](#) via FanDuel, DraftKings and SugarHouse, according to new data released by the state Department of Consumer Protection.

On the popular social media app TikTok, sports betting and gambling videos have exploded. Over 719 million users have viewed videos with the hashtag #sportsbettingtiktok. Cumulative views for videos with the hashtag #gambling sit at 1.4 billion.

In 2021, a Wall Street Journal investigation into TikTok found that the app's algorithms could push users toward content on substance abuse, eating disorders and suicide. The Connecticut Health I-Team did its own small-scale test to see if TikTok's personalized algorithm would guide sports enthusiasts toward sports betting content — and it did.

After creating a new profile and following 15 accounts specific to sports leagues, official teams and players, C-HIT began viewing TikTok's recommended videos on the “For You” page. The account watched sports or gambling-related content in full and swiftly scrolled past unrelated videos.

Within 40 minutes on the app, C-HIT encountered its first gambling video from the account @sportsbettingtiktok. By the end of the three-day experiment, 177 of the 1,000 videos recommended for the C-HIT account included gambling content, and another 41 involved fantasy football or game predictions.

What started as a small handful of betting videos for every 100 TikTok's quickly grew exponentially. More than 53% of the final 200 videos contained gambling or gray-area content. By the end, the recommended videos had transformed from game-day highlights to clips of high-stakes poker hands, flashy slot machine pulls, and dizzying roulette wheel spins.

Videos offered advice on how to accumulate thousands in winnings and how to “chase” losses: [In one TikTok](#), a down-on-his-luck bettor told his more than 300,000 followers, “The only way you lose in sports betting is if you quit.”

‘Hidden Addiction’

Earle Sanford, a licensed professional counselor and manager of [Problem Gambling Services](#), which is operated under the umbrella of the state Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and provides free therapy and support to problem gamblers, said that the expansion of mobile sports betting is concerning. He said that for some, what starts as a fun pastime can turn into a devastating problem.

“We’ve had a couple [people] who just wanted to go on for entertainment, and in four days, they were \$6,000 in debt. There’s been a definite increase [in problem gambling] with the new sports gambling platform. The target population seems to be young males, at this point, between the ages of 19 and 29 who are sports enthusiasts who are very competitive.”

— Earle Sanford

According to the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#), 1% of the adult population in the U.S. has a severe gambling problem. An additional 2-3% have mild or moderate gambling problems. The [National Center for Responsible Gaming](#) estimates that problem gambling rates are higher for adolescents and young adults, affecting up to 9% of that age group.

Sanford said that this “hidden addiction” can affect anyone, regardless of age, race, gender or socioeconomic standing. The youngest client in his program is 19, the oldest is 82.

According to the [National Survey on Gambling Attitudes and Gambling Experiences](#), 51% of Connecticut respondents said that “moral weakness” is likely to cause gambling problems. In the same poll, 79% said that “not having enough willpower” is a contributing factor.

Sanford said that gambling addiction goes much deeper than that.

“People in the general public don’t understand or appreciate what a serious problem this really is,” said Sanford. “It is real, very real. Very serious, very devastating, and very sad.”

Sanford said that gambling addiction mirrors the chemical reactions in the brain that fuel drug and alcohol abuse.

“Once that dopamine high has been activated, people who gamble want to have that high again. Some of my clients tell me there’s no greater high than a gambling high,” said Sanford. “With people who are addicted, they reach this high, and then suddenly, they lose and they go into what we call withdrawal. And therefore, to get that high again, they go back to gambling, and that pattern is repeated and, oftentimes, it ends up with devastating results.”

Sanford said that while he and his colleagues are neither for nor against gambling, the new online gambling legislation can be disheartening.

“It’s very difficult being in a position of trying to help people,” Sanford said. “I guess my feeling is, I wish the state would find other ways to make money.

Quite frankly, I see it increasing and getting worse as we go forward.”

Treatment, Not Prevention

When the General Assembly legalized online gambling, the legislation required the state's two casinos to provide \$500,000 annually for the prevention and treatment of problem gambling. The CT Lottery, which runs its online gambling through SugarHouse, must pay \$1 million.

Goode said that while the legislation has provided additional funding for treatment, the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling, with an annual budget of \$750,000, is not seeing any substantial increase in funds.

“Because we haven’t gotten a lot of additional funding, we can’t publicize that hotline, we can barely hire additional staff for that helpline, and that really is the concern for us. With the new legislation, there’s an additional \$1.2 million toward treatment. We’ve only gotten an additional \$65,000 for prevention,” said Goode.

Goode said she believes Connecticut’s gambling [self-exclusion policy](#) fails to accommodate those who might only want to self-exclude from one form of gambling. She said that many people who would like to self-exclude from online gaming cannot do so without also excluding themselves from brick-and-mortar casinos and lottery ticket purchases.

Goode said that she wants people to understand that CCPG’s services are also intended to help people before they develop a serious problem, as well as helping those who might be suffering through the gambling habits of a family member or loved one.

Goode said that the majority of people gamble without developing a problem. The CCPG suggests keeping responsible habits, such as establishing spending limits, setting time limits and taking breaks while gambling. Help is available by visiting CCPG.org, calling (888) 789-7777 or texting “CTGAMB” to 53342.

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