

Testimony in Support of Senate Bill 310

Education – Youth Suicide Prevention School Program – Revisions
Before the Education, Energy, and the Environment Committee: February 12, 2025

The Public Health Law Clinic submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 310 to increase awareness and reduce the risk of gambling addiction and related suicide among Marylanders. Currently, the Youth Suicide Prevention Program (“the Program”), Md. Code Ann., Educ. § 7-504 (2024), permits schools to plan, fund, and implement educational programs to increase student awareness about youth suicide. SB 310 amends the Program to include classroom instruction on the relationship between gambling and youth suicide. Because gambling addiction is a public health crisis that often develops at a young age and is associated with a heightened risk of suicide, SB 310 is necessary to increase awareness about this issue to ultimately prevent the harms of gambling for the youth of today and the adults of tomorrow.¹

Educating students about the relationship between gambling and youth suicide is critical to reducing the prevalence and harm of gambling addiction because gambling is often overlooked as a risky behavior, especially among youth. **Gambling has the highest suicide rate out of all addictions, with approximately 1 in 2 gamblers experiencing suicidal ideation and 1 in 5 individuals in treatment for gambling disorder attempting suicide at least once.**² This trend extends to youth, as research indicates adolescents struggling with problem gambling are at an increased risk for suicide ideation and attempts.³ Problem gambling at any age increases the risk of suicide because gambling often leads to psychological stress from financial pressures and shame that can disrupt family and peer relationships, worsen school or work performance, and lead to substance use, depression, and criminal or delinquent behavior. Despite these dangers, the seriousness of gambling is often overlooked, especially among youth, who tend to underestimate or dismiss the consequences of this activity.⁴ Therefore, SB 310 is necessary to increase awareness about the relationship between gambling and youth suicide.

¹ Virve Marionneau & Janne Nikkinen, *Gambling-Related Suicides and Suicidality: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Evidence*, 13 FRONTIERS IN PSYCHIATRY 1, 4–7 (2022); Ardeshir S. Rahman et al., *The Relationship Between Age of Gambling Onset and Adolescent Problematic Gambling Severity*, 46 J. PSYCHIATRIC RSCH. 675, 677 (2012).

² Lakshmi Vijayakumar & Vinayak Vijayakumar, *Online Gambling and Suicide: Gambling with Lives*, 65 INDIAN J. PSYCHIATRY 3, 3 (2023); Nancy M. Petry & Brian D. Kiluk, *Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts in Treatment-Seeking Pathological Gamblers*, 190 J. NERVOUS & MENTAL DISEASE 462, 463 (2002).

³ Heather Wardle et al., *Changes in Severity of Problem Gambling and Subsequent Suicide Attempts: A Longitudinal Survey of Young Adults in Great Britain, 2018–20*, 8 LANCET PUB. HEALTH 217, 223 (2023); Lia Nower et al., *Suicidality and Depression Among Youth Gamblers: A Preliminary Examination of Three Studies*, 4 INT’L GAMBLING STUD. 69, 76–77 (2004).

⁴ Lia Nower et al., *Suicidality and Depression Among Youth Gamblers: A Preliminary Examination of Three Studies*, 4 INT’L GAMBLING STUD. 70, 70 (2004).

Now more than ever, educating students about the risks of gambling is crucial. Gambling is the most normalized and accessible it has ever been in Maryland due to its legalized status, the growing number of casinos and gambling advertisements, and the recent legalization of sports betting.⁵ This normalization and accessibility are reflected by the fact that **between 16.9% and 18.1% of Maryland high school students reported gambling in 2022,**⁶ despite the legal age restriction being 21. This data is especially concerning because **adolescents are approximately four times more likely to develop a gambling addiction than adults,**⁷ while also being less likely to seek treatment.⁸ As Maryland youth continue to partake in this activity, it is vital to educate them on the risks to increase awareness and prevent problem gambling and its consequences.

Education has proven to be an effective tool to increase youth awareness of gambling risks. In 2014, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene/Behavioral Health Administration implemented the Maryland Smart Choices Gambling Prevention Program, a four-session gambling prevention program for middle and high schools in Baltimore City. Pre-and-post assessments indicated the program significantly increased students' knowledge of gambling and its associated risks.⁹ Similarly, a systematic review of gambling prevention programs for adolescents and young adults demonstrated that such programs effectively improve knowledge of gambling risks and reduce the frequency and severity of gambling among participants.¹⁰ Accordingly, SB 310 should be adopted to educate Maryland adolescents about gambling and prevent the severe consequences of problem gambling.

Conclusion

Maryland adolescents continue to gamble despite its potentially fatal consequences. Because education has proven to be an effective intervention, the incorporation of classroom instruction on the relationship between gambling and youth suicide under the Youth Suicide Prevention Program would increase awareness and prevent the harms of problem gambling among Marylanders. For these reasons, we request a favorable report on Senate Bill 310.

⁵ AMERICAN CASINO GUIDEBOOK, *Maryland Casinos*, <https://www.americancasinoguidebook.com/casinos-by-state/maryland-casinos.html> (last visited Feb. 8, 2025); YOGONET GAMING NEWS, *Maryland: Cordish Eyeing New Expansion of Live! Casino & Hotel, the Third Property Opened* (Feb. 8, 2025), <https://www.yogonet.com/international/news/2023/02/10/66068-maryland-cordish-eyeing-new-expansion-of-live-casino-hotel-the-third-since-property-opened>; HYGEA HEALTHCARE, *The Rise of Sports Betting: Maryland's Growth, Mental Health Effects, and Recovery Solutions* (Jan. 8, 2025), <https://www.hygea.health/blog/025/january/the-rise-of-sports-betting-marylands-growth-ment/>; CA. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, *Impacted Youth*, <https://calpg.org/problem-gambling-info/impacted-youth> (last visited Feb. 9, 2025).

⁶ MD. DEPT. HEALTH, 2022 YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY RESULTS 106 (2022).

⁷ NAT'L RSCH. COUNCIL COMM. ON THE SOC. & ECON. IMPACT OF PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING, PATHOLOGICAL GAMBLING: A CRITICAL REVIEW 3, 114 (1999); CA. COUNCIL ON PROBLEM GAMBLING, *Impacted Youth*, <https://calpg.org/problem-gambling-info/impacted-youth> (last visited Feb. 9, 2025).

⁸ Mary K. Wilber & Marc N. Potenza, *Adolescent Gambling*, 3 PSYCHIATRY 40, 41, 46 (2006).

⁹ Brittany R. Parham et al., *Enhancing the Relevance and Effectiveness of a Youth Gambling Prevention Program for Urban, Minority Youth: A Pilot Study of Maryland Smart Choices*, 35 J. GAMBLING STUD. 1249, 1258-63 (2019).

¹⁰ Alicia Moreal-Bartolomé et al., *Preventative Gambling Programs for Adolescents and Youth Adults: A Systematic Review*, 20 INT'L J. ENV'T RESCH. PUB. HEALTH 4691, 4718 (2023).

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Public Health Law Clinic at the University of Maryland Carey School of Law and not by the School of Law, the University of Maryland, Baltimore, or the University of Maryland System.