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Does Maryland have a sports betting problem? | EDITORIAL

By [Baltimore Sun Editorial Board](#)

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Sports wagering has become a [big multibillion-dollar business](#) across the United States. Since the U.S. Supreme Court opened the door to legalized sports gambling in 2018, at least 38 states have adopted some form of it, including Maryland, where 16.8% of adults placed at least one wager on an athletic event last year, according to one survey. For most players, betting on the Super Bowl or a horse race or perhaps something more exotic is no big deal: It's just money spent on entertainment. State-sponsored lotteries and casinos are available to serve the public's gambling needs, too. But at what point does it all come at too great a social cost? Could we be experiencing an intolerable rise of ["problem gambling"](#) — when it becomes an uncontrollable disorder that disrupts lives and bankrupts families.

The short answer? Incidents of compulsive gambling are clearly on the increase, and the question at hand is, should we be doing more to guard against this danger? And there's another closely related question that should give pause: Has the state become so dependent on gaming revenue that the folks in Annapolis, Gov. Wes Moore and members of the Maryland General Assembly, are too reluctant to take steps that might somehow restrict this lucrative activity at a time when the state needs all the tax revenue it can get?

First, the worrisome new data. The University of Maryland School of Medicine's [most recent survey](#) by the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling found 5.7% of Maryland adults met criteria for "disordered" gambling. The percentages were higher for men (8.9%) with over half of them African American. And it ran the gamut of ages from 56 to 64 years old (7.7%) to 18 to 24 (6.9%). Yet here might be the most troubling result: [Their numbers are growing](#). More than 11% of adults participated in online sports gambling last year compared with 3% in 2022. And 13% of the problem gamblers reported seeking help at some point compared to 7.5% two years earlier.

But sports gambling also comes with a big payoff — tens of millions of dollars in new tax revenue for the state, with most of it going to upgrade schools through the Blueprint for Maryland's Future plan. Between Fiscal Year 2024 and 2025, the state's sports gambling revenue increased nearly 50% from about \$60 million to nearly \$89 million last year based on nearly \$1 billion in added wagering. And it's also fair to point out that Maryland has already [taken some steps](#) to address problem gambling — operating a helpline (1-800-GAMBLER), a voluntary exclusion program and support for various nonprofits that support problem gamblers and their families.

But is that enough? The survey results suggest that it might not be. And since there are few federal regulations on the subject, it's up to states to set limits or better educate the public or provide services when needed. The numbers strongly suggest that the subject deserves to be revisited — perhaps with an independent blue-ribbon commission to determine best practices and how Maryland might guard against a further uptick in problem gambling. Again, that's not to diminish what has already been done, but the [sports wagering landscape is changing quickly](#) with online availability, exotic forms of wagering and inviting sales pitches. A second look is clearly in order.

Private operators of state-sponsored casinos and others in the industry may resist. They'll point out that efforts to curb legal gambling may drive people to the illegal kind. That may well be true, but it's just as unreasonable to expect individuals with a disorder to always be able to self-regulate. Some limits need to be set — just as they are for alcohol and marijuana dispensaries.

The Maryland survey did offer one bit of good news. Most problem gamblers are aware of the toll-free gambling help line and about two-thirds of respondents say they've received information on how to gamble responsibly through TV and radio ads, billboards, flyers, online messages and the like. That's a start. But we're betting that we can do more to protect those who could be adversely impacted by problem gambling.