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Teen Sports Betting: A Growing Concern in Schools

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Nearly 400 underage users in two states were caught in the past year on sports gambling websites, according to filings with regulators in Massachusetts and Connecticut.

“It’s an extraordinary undercount,” said [Harry Levant](#), director of gambling policy at Northeastern University’s [Public Health Advocacy Institute](#).

In Connecticut, the companies reported catching nearly 200 users 20 or under. The records did not specify the age of every youth, but there were at least 47 bettors 18 or younger.

Among them: a 13-year-old and a 14-year-old who placed wagers on DraftKings. The company also caught an 8-year-old playing its casino game. Another DraftKings customer, the records show, was an 18-year-old who logged on while at school.

Massachusetts regulators released far fewer details but reported 171 instances of underage users accessing sports betting sites. State officials would not provide specifics in those cases, citing ongoing investigations. They did provide more details in 16 cases of underage use, but redacted the ages of those involved. The Globe obtained the information through public records requests in both states, where users must be 21 to legally place online bets.

In interviews, teens said ads featuring their favorite sports heroes have stoked interest in wagering on sports.

“You see all these celebrities that are promoting it and it’s just becoming increasingly more normalized,” said Connor Huynh, who will be a senior at Lexington High and has witnessed other students access gambling sites at school.

At Fenway High, Angel Benitez even tried to document the use among classmates. For a humanities project last spring, [Benitez and his friends surveyed their classmates](#) about wagering on sports and whether their friends outside of school were also betting.

They spoke to 90 teens and found that 82 of them – more than 90 percent – were gambling on sports.

“I was like, whoa. I didn’t know that many people at our school were gambling,” said Benitez, who graduated and this fall is attending Northeastern University. “Not only is it at our school, but kids our age everywhere are gambling.”



Angel Benitez, recent graduate of Fenway High School, is concerned about the growing popularity of online sports betting among teens. Suzanne Kreiter/Globe Staff

That does not surprise Jennifer Knight-Levine, cofounder of the [SAFE Coalition](#), a nonprofit that supports young people facing mental health and substance abuse challenges.

“Youth gambling on online platforms in school is absolutely happening across the Commonwealth,” Knight-Levine said.

The risk is dire: Gambling disorders can impact children as young as 10, [according to the state’s Department of Public Health](#). Teens who gamble are more likely to use drugs, and gambling is linked to the highest rate of suicide, the state said.

“We know that young people are gambling and sports betting in particular, at pretty high rates,” said [state Senator John Keenan](#), a Quincy Democrat. “We know that they can gain access to the platforms relatively easily, even though they’re not supposed to.”

Sports betting companies say they take underage gambling seriously. In response to questions, DraftKings, FanDuel, and Fanatics each described measures they take to prevent young people from betting on their sites. The companies say they verify the identities of their users by requiring a bettor’s name, birth date, Social Security number, and address.

And in some cases, gambling websites say, they require some [users to upload copies of themselves holding documents](#) such as a driver’s license or a passport.

“Fanatics’ commitment to responsible gaming and consumer protection is a top priority,” said spokesperson Kevin Hennessy. “We dedicate significant time and resources to ensure we are thoughtful and current in our advertising practices.”

FanDuel offers a “[Trusted Voices](#)” website with information to help guide conversations with teens about underage gambling.

“Wagering by minors on our platform is strictly prohibited — it violates our terms of use and is expressly barred by regulation,” said Stephen Miraglia, a DraftKings spokesperson.

But unlike a casino, where a gambler can be stopped and asked for an ID, there’s nothing preventing an adult from letting an underage fan use their device or credentials, according to [Jonathan Noel](#), director of Johnson & Wales University’s Master of Public Health program in Rhode Island.

“Yes, there’s technically age restrictions and age-gating technologies,” Noel said. “But you can get around them if you really want to.”

A young person can ask a parent or older friend to set up the gambling account, explained Levant of Northeastern. They can then fund their bets by buying sports betting gift cards — DraftKings is among the companies that offer them — which can be bought at convenience stores, Levant said.

The cards come with a warning that buyers “must be 21+ to purchase and use.” However, a 20-year-old Globe employee was able to purchase a [DraftKings gift card](#) from a retailer in Cambridge this week without being asked to show identification.

Having a gift card isn't enough to gamble. Holders of those cards would still need access to an account to bet, which would involve going through the age verification process. And, if a young person uses an adult's personal information, they can set up a DraftKings account in just a few minutes without being challenged to prove who they are. Once a [gift card is active](#), they can deposit money, and begin placing bets.

The problem isn't the size of the wagers, Levant said, it's that teens want to bet in the first place.

"The money is the equivalent of a needle to an injecting heroin user," Levant said. "When you're losing, there's more and more action to chase."

The Supreme Court opened the doors to sports betting in 2018 when it struck down a federal prohibition. Massachusetts allowed in-person sports betting to start in January 2023, with online operators following months later.

Online sports betting has become big business. In its first year in Massachusetts, bettors placed \$4.7 billion worth of online wagers and were paid out \$4.25 billion in prizes, according to the [UMass Donahue Institute](#). The state also took its cut, collecting about \$91 million in tax revenue.

In a statement, a spokesperson for the [Massachusetts Gaming Commission](#) expressed concern about underage gambling, and said the state has imposed stringent regulations. The commission has planned a study this year to look at children betting on sports.

Government-sanctioned sports gambling has been opposed by advocates like [Les Bernal](#), the national director of [Stop Predatory Gambling](#), who objects to the companies' marketing techniques.

"You're taking a known, highly addictive product," Bernal said, "and relentlessly promoting it to young people."

Advertising for DraftKings and FanDuel is dominated by celebrities and star athletes in commercials broadcast during games.

"You can't watch any sporting event without dozens of ads coming on with [Tom Brady](#), [David Ortiz](#), [LeBron James](#), you name it," said David Nangle, a former state representative from Lowell convicted in 2021 of using campaign funds to cover his gambling addiction.

Nangle is now executive director of [SIGMA — Stop iGaming in Massachusetts](#), and

works with the Massachusetts Council on Gaming and Health to help support gambling addiction services.

Many people remain unaware how pervasive online betting has become for young people, according to [Kyle Faust](#), director of the digital addiction and gambling treatment program at Massachusetts General Hospital and an instructor at Harvard Medical School.

“A lot of parents don’t realize what their children or adolescents are doing online until it’s too late, once they start getting charged for these unexpected [fees],” Faust said.

That’s what happened last fall to a parent of a 14-year-old Connecticut girl who bet on FanDuel, according to the company’s report to the state. The parent alerted the company the teen had used their tablet to add money to FanDuel to place bets.

“My child made an absurd amount of deposits,” the parent said. “They were not made with my knowledge.” FanDuel closed the account.

In another case, a 14-year-old boy was encouraged by peers to gamble.

“Apparently his friends told him [it’s] good to bet and win and here we are,” the parent told company investigators.

The Connecticut reports reveal how underage users circumvent age restrictions. Some children have access to the device the parents use to gamble. In other cases, adults tied their accounts to a joint bank account shared with their child.

In at least one instance, a parent helped their child gamble. A FanDuel user was caught by the company’s fraud detection team after using the 17-year-old boy’s cash app with their account.

“He put money into the account,” the parent said, “for me to place a bet for him.”

Globe correspondent Ariela Lopez contributed to this report.

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