



Maryland generates revenue from a percentage of the money remaining after prizes and promos for sports bets have been paid out. (AP Photo/Wayne Parry)

MD eyes new gambling frontier, but critics say state must reckon with sports betting harm

[Jack Hogan](#) // December 30, 2024 //

It can take just one win to kickstart a gambling habit.

Will Hinman's came as a college student in the early '90s, when he and his girlfriend at the time caught a New York Giants game. A buddy had connected Hinman with a bookie, and raising the stakes was sure to make the outing more interesting for the lifelong Cowboys fan.

Hinman says his relatively modest wins that night were the start of a decades-long career as an avid gambler. A game wasn't worth watching if there wasn't money on it.

He began with small amounts and maintained the practice for decades before struggles with alcoholism, major life transitions and mental health issues opened the door to far riskier behavior, eventually leading to addiction, debt, divorce and rock bottom.

The circumstances contributing to a gambling addiction are complex, but the shift from questionable habit to devastating, prolonged addiction can occur during just one unhinged night at the casino or one evening chasing losses on a mobile sports betting app.

“It only takes crossing that invisible line one time,” Hinman said.

Thirty years after Hinman’s first wins, people have exponentially more opportunities to cross the line, particularly when wagering on sports. In the five years since the Supreme Court gave states the authority to legalize it, sports betting has [become a \\$10 billion industry](#) that is completely enmeshed in American professional athletics.

But while the industry has grown and sports betting has become increasingly accessible and addictive with the advent of mobile and online wagering, investments in resources for people suffering from a gambling problem have seriously lagged.

As Maryland legislators weigh whether to legalize online casino gambling as one of several solutions to fill a growing deficit in the budget, advocates and researchers say the state must first understand the extent to which legalized sports betting has exacerbated problem gambling.

The cycle of help

Now 53 and in recovery, Hinman helps people struggling with a gambling problem navigate the resources available to them.

As a peer recovery specialist at the Maryland Center of Excellence on Problem Gambling, he fields calls and messages from those seeking help for trouble with gambling at casinos, on the lottery or on sports, whether for themselves or for a loved one.

The state established the Center of Excellence about a decade ago to help those with a gambling disorder. It’s part of the University of Maryland School of Medicine and funded by the Maryland Department of Health.

It was a representative from the Center of Excellence, which provides no-cost treatment to anyone who wants it and is connected to a network of more than 100 outpatient providers and one-on-one counseling and in-patient facilities, who convinced Hinman to begin attending gamblers anonymous meetings.

Hinman has worked at the center for about six years. Since mobile sports betting became legal in Maryland in 2022, he’s seen a major spike in calls from young men, as young as 15,

who've developed a gambling problem, and from parents who have a child hooked on sports betting.

Those who call for help may be suffering from complex issues like mental health disorders, grief, post-traumatic stress disorder or stress, all of which can seriously increase their likelihood of having a gambling problem, Hinman said.

Once the losses start piling up, bettors often see one way out of the financial hole: more bets. Chasing losses in this way locks people into a vicious cycle, in which some turn to credit cards and cash advances to find the winning streak that will pull them out of debt.

"We always have that big number in the back of our heads that we want to reach," he said. "All it's going to do is prolong agony, even if you do win."

An undefined problem

The prevalence of problem gambling in Maryland remains unclear.

Last General Assembly session, a bill to increase funding for problem gambling resources included a requirement that the health department determine the rate of problem and pathological gambling in the state, but it didn't pass.

A [2023 legislative report showed](#) that roughly 405,000 people in Maryland, or 8.6% of all adult residents in the state, had experienced a gambling disorder in their life as of 2020. The national mean was between 4% and 5%.

From 2020 to 2022, roughly 2% of the total number of people believed to have had a gambling problem during their life sought help from the state's resources.

But researchers collected that data before the start of mobile sports betting, which many expected to worsen problem gambling, especially among young people, said Mary Drexler, who is the program director for the Center of Excellence.

The center's researchers completed a study on problem gambling in 2024, but data analysis is ongoing and the results aren't expected until May or June, after the 2025 legislative session has ended.

Drexler and advocates for problem gambling resources have also called for more money to handle the increasing volume of people seeking help.

They've said that more funding would help expand a network of providers who make up the state's no-cost treatment services and boost marketing to counter the gambling industry's multibillion-dollar advertising blitz.

Legislators decided that a portion of the state's revenue would go to a problem gambling fund as part of the legalization of slot machines and table games at the state's six casinos, but they didn't set up a similar funding stream for sports betting.

Instead, they directed money from expired prizes to the problem gambling fund. But mobile apps, through which most people place their bets, automatically pay out winners.

The money line

The state takes in 15% of the revenue remaining after prizes and promotional wagers have been paid out.

In the first month of in-person betting operations, five facilities generated about \$469,000 for the state.

Last month, 11 mobile platforms and 12 retail locations brought in nearly \$11.8 million, [the largest monthly total](#) so far.

The state's portion of the revenue is set aside for the Blueprint for Maryland's Future, an ambitious, expensive plan to boost education systems and student performance statewide by starting childhood education at an earlier age, increasing pay for teachers and bolstering career and technical education opportunities.

But proposals to divert a percentage of the state's revenue to help fight problem gambling have met a lack of consensus in the legislature, at least in part because legislators don't want to divert any money from the Blueprint plan.

The roughly 10-year education plan, which drives up education spending by \$3.8 billion every year, lacks a permanent funding stream and is forecasted to be a major driver of multibillion-dollar operating budget deficits in the coming years.

Legislators are expected to bring back a bill to direct sports betting revenue to problem gambling resources, though they'll likely avoid tapping the money meant for education.

The legislature's recent consideration of online and mobile casino gambling, or iGaming, has made it all the more important that the state has up-to-date data about the effects of mobile betting and revenue for providing help to those who need it, Drexler said.

The next frontier

The House of Delegates [voted last session to legalize iGaming](#), but the measure stalled in the Senate, where members had concerns about the new market hurting casinos and increasing the incidence of problem gambling.

House Ways and Means Committee Chair Vanessa Atterbeary has said that she plans to reintroduce her iGaming bill, contending that the state cannot afford to pass up on the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue that the market could generate.

Proponents say that mobile gambling provides more opportunities for companies to monitor betting behavior and intervene when needed. They also say that it would allow the state to capitalize on revenue already being generated in illicit markets run by unregulated operators.

“Some of the concerns in the Senate stem from just, to be honest, misinformation and a lack of education on iGaming,” Atterbeary said in a recent video [interview with the website gambling.com](#).

Internet gaming could eventually bring in more than [\\$900 million annually in tax revenue](#), according to a legislative report, though the state wouldn’t begin seeing money for several years after passing legislation.

Heading into the session, Senate President Bill Ferguson has said that “everything is on the table” as legislators prepare to discuss ways to plug a growing hole in the budget that’s [expected to reach nearly \\$3 billion](#) next fiscal year.

Voters will have the final say in the matter. If the legislature were to vote for iGaming in the 2025 session, it would be on the ballot in the 2026 gubernatorial election cycle.

Pressure to enact iGaming may continue to build if it doesn’t pass in 2025, as the state’s deficit is projected to grow significantly in each of the coming years.

“When it comes to education, we need to seek funding for that, and for me, that’s what iGaming would do,” Atterbeary said in the gambling.com interview. “We need to legalize it.”