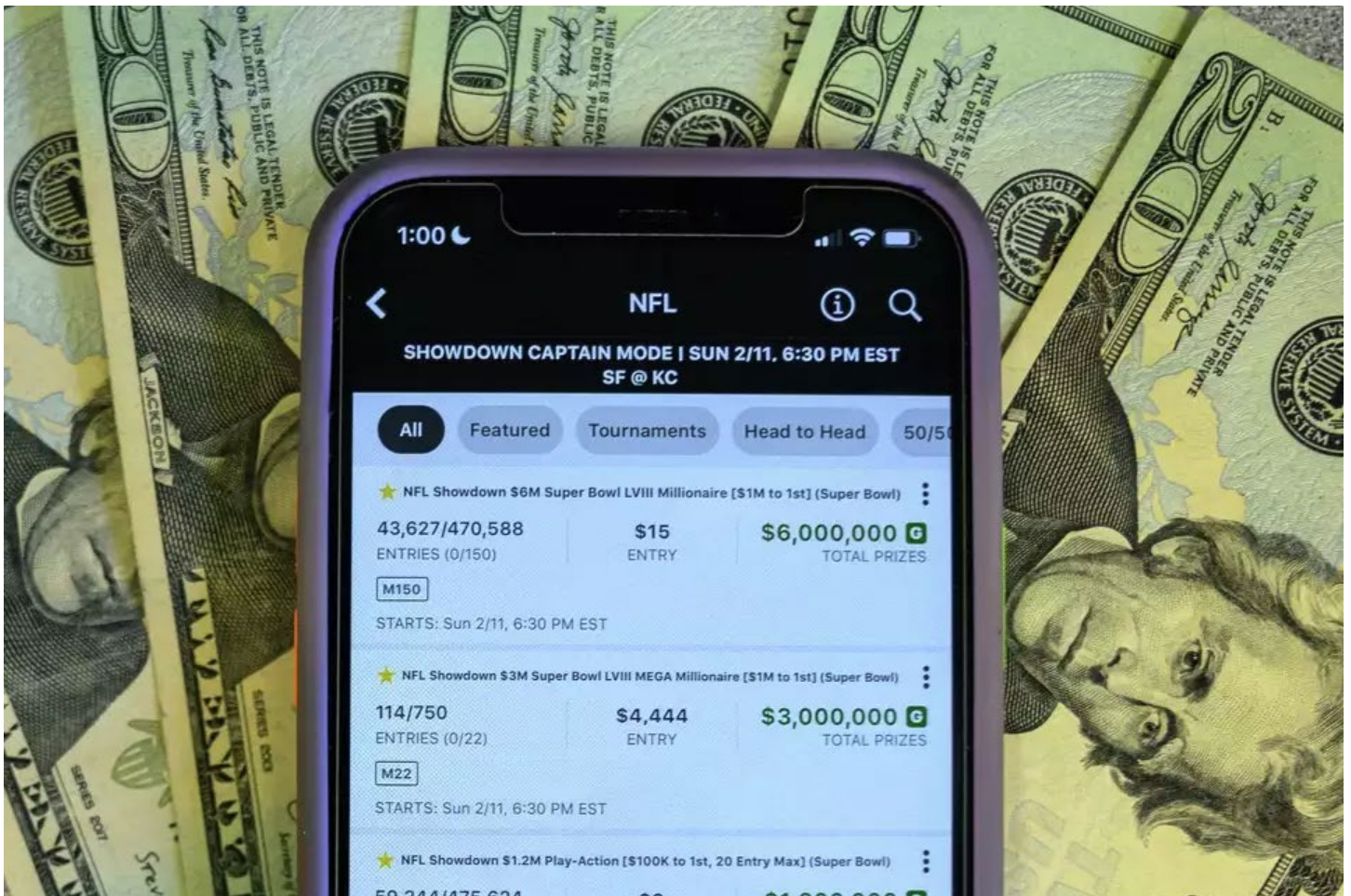


Gambling Addiction Quietly Taking a Toll as Betting Apps Gain Popularity

Clinicians say social stigma around gambling addiction prevents people from taking advantage of New York's treatment resources.

By Lucy Hodgman, Staff Writer
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The DraftKings sports gambling app is an immensely popular platform for sports wagering.

Jim Franco/Times Union

ALBANY — January will mark three years since mobile sports betting was legalized in New York. And while the market has already [generated billions of dollars in wagers](#), it continues to pique concerns about gambling addiction.

New York has a wide network of outpatient resources available to those seeking treatment for compulsive gambling, which a commission of experts recently [declared is a global public health threat](#). But problem gambling clinicians fear that those resources are going underused.

“There’s more methods of gambling, yet I’m getting less and less phone calls,” said Susan Browne, a gambling treatment counselor at Helio Health in Syracuse. “I think there will come a time that the floodgates open, but at this point, it just appears that folks are not seeking the help that’s available.”

New York clinicians who reported a similar trend attributed it to the social stigma that still surrounds problem gambling. Known as a “hidden addiction,” gambling addiction rarely has visible signs, despite the impact it can have on a person’s physical and mental health. As a result, problem gamblers might not seek treatment until their addiction has reached a crisis point.

Browne said the growth of mobile sports betting has intensified the problem. New York legalized online wagering in 2022, becoming one of 30 states to do so. Now, Browne said her younger clients tell her, “I don’t gamble, I bet on sports” — creating a false distinction between the kind of gambling that takes place at a casino and the kind that happens on mobile apps like DraftKings and FanDuel.

“We brought gambling onto an apparatus that they knew how to control, and it was a perfect marriage,” said Jim Maney, executive director of the New York Council on Problem Gambling. “Being on a phone app is no different from being on Instagram or Snapchat or TikTok. Now you’re on a gambling app. It’s all the same thing.”

The digitalization of gambling “changed it completely” in recent years, Maney said, making it a normalized part of sports fandom as it became more accessible. Young people are now more likely to place bets. And in New York, some “fantasy” sports apps also were able to [exploit a loophole](#) in state law that allowed them to offer parlay-style wagering to users under the legal betting age of 21, contending that the apps constitute games of skill rather than chance.

But as gambling has exploded in popularity, Maney has also yet to see a commensurate increase in people receiving addiction treatment. That’s not because people aren’t experiencing gambling addiction, he said, but because the stigma keeps them from seeking help.

Since there are usually very few outward signs of gambling addiction, it can be hard for people to know if those close to them are struggling. As a result, problem gamblers rarely seek treatment until they are out of money or in debt — something that Maney said can be “very, very shameful to admit.” He added that problem gamblers might borrow from friends, max out credit cards or mortgage their homes before they’re willing to see a therapist.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I could say, ‘You put five dollars down, I will give you one thousand dollars if you come into treatment to get help,’” Maney said. “That’s what would happen. We would have so many people wanting to talk about gambling.”

Laura Combs, executive director of New Choices Recovery Center in Schenectady, said she’s hopeful that gambling addiction will eventually be taken as seriously as addiction to alcohol or drugs. Treatment resources are important, she said, but they should be offered alongside public outreach about gambling’s risks.

Combs said that education about the risks should start early — she cautioned against parents and grandparents buying scratch-off tickets as gifts for children, for example. Once the “magical thinking” that a person can beat the gambling odds is ingrained, she added, it can be hard to shake, and those who experience a big win early on may be more vulnerable to becoming addicted.

She compared gambling to alcohol, noting that it took years of public awareness efforts for people to understand alcohol was an addictive substance.

“People would really suffer,” Combs said. “They would think, ‘I don’t understand; I go out and everybody else goes out too, but I’m not getting to work.’ They would feel that there was something unique or wrong or bad about them, versus recognizing that anybody who drinks enough or uses enough of a substance over time is going to develop a problem.”

Combs praised New York's investment in treatment for problem gambling, pointing to the wide network of resources available through the Office of Addiction Services and Supports. But she said she'd like to see more education about gambling addiction, as well as further regulation of gambling platforms' advertising.

In October, [gambling researcher Heather Wardle told the Times Union](#) that the digitalization of gambling enabled it to become popular before governments were prepared to provide adequate regulation or addiction treatment. That disparity is especially felt in states that have legalized mobile sports betting, she said, where advertisements for gambling apps and websites have become omnipresent.

Under New York law, all advertisements for wagering platforms are required to include warnings about problem gambling, as well as a hotline number for those struggling with addiction. Gov. Kathy Hochul [signed a bill extending that requirement](#) to mobile sports betting ads this fall.

U.S. Rep. Paul Tonko [has sought to establish himself as a leader](#) on gambling legislation nationally. The Amsterdam Democrat recently introduced the SAFE Bet Act, an abbreviation for the Supporting Affordability and Fairness with Every Bet Act. The legislation would ban sportsbook advertising during live sporting events, limit the number of deposits betting operations can accept from a customer in a 24-hour period, and require "affordability checks" on customers before accepting large wagers.