

LONG ISLAND / EDUCATION

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# Mobile sports betting has surged among Long Island's youth. Schools and colleges are fighting back.



Stony Brook University is one of seven academic institutions that have partnered with the state and the New York Council on Problem Gambling to screen students for gambling issues and provide other resources.

By Lorena Mongelli

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The Nassau native was not yet of legal drinking age when online sports betting caused him to burn through paychecks and whittle away his entire savings account.

What started as an occasional activity spiraled out of control, marked by a compulsion to win back losses, he recalled. At one point, he said he owed a friend \$3,000.

"I felt like I was in a corner that nobody could help me out of," said the sports enthusiast, who requested anonymity because he feared repercussions from his new employer. "It's a scary feeling. You can just open your phone and then you either can win a lot of money or lose a lot of money."

He said he started betting at 18 — a precarious time, as young people under 25 are at increased risk of developing gambling problems compared with older adults, whose brains are fully mature. Mental health professionals and industry experts say this factor, combined with the 24/7 accessibility of mobile sports wagering apps, has made gambling addiction among Long Island's younger generations a harmful and growing trend.

## WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

- **Health professionals and industry experts** are seeing more young people developing gambling problems, some still in their teenage years.
- **Experts said young people are at increased risk** of developing gambling disorders.
- **Education officials** have started to recognize and address the issue.

In response, at least one school district on Long Island has started educating graduating seniors about the dangers of gambling. Area universities are also taking proactive steps to provide outreach to students and some local education advocates are pushing gaming platforms to strengthen their safety checks, particularly for minors.

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On the state level, Gov. Kathy Hochul recently unveiled a proposal to expand age verification requirements for gaming platforms and to strengthen privacy settings. The legal age to bet online is 18 for fantasy sports and 21 for sports wagering. Online casinos are not legal in New York.

While many gamblers are over 18, experts say they are also seeing underage players developing problematic betting habits.

The recovering gambler from Nassau said it took two tries and four years to finally kick the habit. Now 23, he is a year free of the compulsion. He credited his local Gamblers Anonymous and his parents for helping him stop.

"Now, I'm a completely different person," he said. "I'm present at family events. I'm present with my girlfriend, I started a new job, I have my own apartment. The difference between almost a year ago to now is insane."

## More Gen Z patients

In 2018, [federal restrictions on sports betting](#) were lifted by the U.S. Supreme Court. New York State in 2022 legalized online betting, which includes mobile sportsbooks and fantasy sports.

Since then, online wagering has surged in popularity. Online bettors in New York wagered a [record-breaking \\$26 billion in 2025](#), more than any other state.

But the increased appeal has come at a cost.

Local mental health professionals said their treatment offices are seeing more Gen Z patients struggling with gambling. Gambling recovery organizations on the Island said they are also fielding more calls from people seeking help.

A spokesman for Gamblers Anonymous Long Island said the increase began around the time online betting was legalized. Last month, the local branch received double the number of calls compared with November, with people as young as 18 seeking help.

Jeffrey Reynolds, chief executive of the Family and Children's Association of Long Island, said two local Gambling Support and Wellness Centers he opened in early 2024 are increasingly treating more people aged 15 to 24.

"It's a huge issue that's accelerated over time," he said. "Usually they're [young people] dragged there by their parents, they're not necessarily coming of their own accord. These young people are doing everything in their power to hide their habits from their parents, which might include making financial decisions or borrowing money on the street."



The Family and Children's Association of Long Island opened this gambling resource center in Hicksville in 2024. Credit: [Newsday/Alejandra Villa Loarca](#)

The local branch of the New York Council on Problem Gambling has gotten more calls from worried parents and organizations, said Carine Morrison, the group's Long Island team leader.

"We have been communicating with family members and loved ones about young adults and some of the gambling harms that they've been made aware of," Morrison said in a recent interview. "We've gotten several calls from parents who were completely unaware that anything was happening until they checked their child's bank account while they're away for college because it just didn't add up."

People may start out playing for fun, but factors like psychological and societal pressures may push others into a unhealthy zone. Morrison and others said the desire to win money is a big draw, with some mistakenly believing they can parlay their knowledge of sports into a profitable venture.

[A 2023 National Collegiate Athletic Association survey](#) of more than 3,500 people aged 18 to 22 found that a majority of high-risk gamblers believed they could earn more by gambling frequently, with 70% of these "risky gamblers" believing playing more would lead to more winnings.

[A report from the Harris Poll](#), released this past fall, also found that a majority of those polled between the ages of 13 to 28 consider online betting a legitimate way to make money.

And as online betting becomes more mainstream, Morrison said some young people who have difficulty making friends may gravitate toward gambling as a way to meet others.

"It's another way that they're using it to be in a community, to be connected," Morrison said.

## Outreach and education in schools

Jessica Martin, interim director of the Center for Behavioral Health Promotion and Applied Research at University of Albany's School of Education, said last spring the university conducted a health and well-being survey that polled more than 1,200 students on campus as part of a federally-funded research initiative.

The survey, she said, revealed a significant jump in gambling activity among students compared with the year prior.

Martin said 67.7% reported engaging "in some type of gambling behavior" compared with a survey in fall 2024, when 47.16% reported they did.

Martin, a licensed psychologist, said surveys also showed that on average, "about 26% of our students meet the criteria for moderate to high risk gambling."

## Warning signs of underage gambling

Missing classes or whole school days with no explanation.

Dropping grades and/or schoolwork is not being completed on time.

Less interest in extracurricular activities in recent weeks or months.

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The university is collecting data on gambling from seven academic institutions, including Stony Brook University, that have partnered with the state and the New York Council on Problem Gambling to screen students for gambling issues and provide other resources.

At Stony Brook, students are discussing gambling as more than just an older person's problem, said Kerri Mahoney, director of the university's Center for Prevention and Outreach. She said the university has held campus events that aim to address the dark side of gambling.

"We really talk to students about warning signs that we might be seeing, because it could be a mental health concern connected to problem gambling," Mahoney said.

Some of the red flags include becoming more isolated from friends, owing people money and lying to cover up the issue.

Problem gambling, which often comes with financial issues, also carries an increased risk of suicide, experts and studies have found. It is also linked to depression.

Similar to alcohol and drug addictions, health professionals said gambling disorders activate the brain's dopamine-releasing reward system, leading to tolerance over time.

Young people are more vulnerable to developing gambling disorders, in part, because the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the area tasked with impulse control, planning and decision-making, does not fully develop until the mid-20s.

"The reward pathways in that age group are in overdrive ... . This population has big emotions. They make quick, sometimes impulsive decisions. They're chasing rewards, they're also chasing losses," Martin said.



Jessica Martin of the University of Albany has been studying online gambling behaviors among young people. Credit: Jessica Martin

Mary O'Meara, superintendent of Plainview-Old Bethpage schools, said district officials have "grave concerns" about teen online gambling.

"The school is proactively engaged in educating students. We have done a lot of community awareness about the impact of social media and cellphone use, and we bring it to the parents' attention," O'Meara said in a phone interview.

A health education program for 12th graders now includes discussions on gambling. Joseph Braico, the district's director of physical education, health, athletics and recreation, said lessons include arming students with knowledge about gambling addiction, including warning signs.

"Lessons are designed to prioritize prevention by promoting responsible decision-making and early recognition of risk behaviors," Braico said.

## **Calls for increased restrictions**

Some experts said that the gaming companies require more guardrails.

Parent-Teacher Association Nassau region director Shari Beck said app makers and gaming companies need to be held accountable.

"We are lobbying in Albany and also in D.C. to make sure there are restrictions to prevent underage minors from accessing these things, but it's much harder to keep a kid out of an app than it is to prevent them walking into a casino," Beck said.

Others took aim at the culture that normalizes the activity, from celebrities and sports analysts who promote it, to the gaming company's aggressive marketing tactics.

Steve Chassman, executive director of the Long Island Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, said people indiscriminately receive texts from gaming platforms on big game days. "It's not even like you have to go on these websites — these gambling houses, technological platforms, are outreaching to elicit gamblers."

The Responsible Online Gaming Association, which represents many of the industry's major operators, did not return calls for comment. A review of two major gaming websites allowed in the state showed that users are required to provide a Social Security number or driver's license to set up an account.

Alex De Marco, founder of GamFin, which partners with New York and other states to provide financial counseling to people dealing with gambling issues, said gaming platforms encourage a habit that promises to reap big gains that are unlikely to materialize.

“Overall, the odds are against you, and eventually, it turns into a losing proposition overall. And that is where things go off the rails,” De Marco said.

Long Islanders struggling with gambling addiction can contact the following resources:

- New York State’s HOPEline at 877-8- HOPENY (877-846-7369) or text HOPENY (467369)
- Gamblers Anonymous at 855-2CALL-GA (855-222-5542).



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Lorena Mongelli has been reporting for Newsday since 2021. Prior to that, she covered breaking news at the New York Post.

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