



Teen Boys Are Gambling. A Lot.

The tidal wave of legal sports betting has easily infiltrated schools and swept up boys. There's still time for commonsense guardrails and effective education.

By ISAAC ROSE-BERMAN



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Since 2018, when the Supreme Court overturned the law that had confined sports betting to Nevada, gambling is far more visible and accessible. Most troubling, it has created a new cohort of at-risk gamblers: teenage boys.

BEN IS A 17-YEAR-OLD high school senior who's experimented with all the classic vices. He's drunk alcohol a few times—"I like the confidence boost but don't like feeling out of control"—and twice tried marijuana, which he says only made him paranoid. He vapes on occasion, mostly because "some flavors are pretty good." But sports betting? Ben's a daily user.

His gambling habit started when he was 14, playing Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, a first-person shooter video game that pits terrorists against counter-terrorists. While the game is free, players can purchase "skins"—limited-edition cosmetic coverings for guns—which can go for thousands of dollars on the official marketplace. They can also spend \$2.50 to open "cases," which trigger a slot machine with different skin options. Ben never cared for cases, until he saw a video of a kid who paid \$2.50 and won a \$3,000 skin.

“That was definitely an eye-opening moment,” he told me. “I was like, wow you can actually make money playing these games.”

Despite that realization, he never got too far over his head. Using his dad’s credit card, he’d spend at most \$10 or \$20 a week. Importantly, it wasn’t a big part of his life: He’d open a couple cases while playing with his friends, then forget about them until they logged in the next day. When he won a skin worth \$150, he rushed to sell it and cash out. “I knew if the money stayed in my account, I’d spend it all.”

Ben’s foray into sports betting began last year, when a classmate told him about Fliff, a “social sports-book” app where users can bet on everything from the Yankees winning to LeBron James scoring 30 points without needing to verify their age. In a 2024 interview, CEO Matt Ricci described the app as an “introductory tool” for people—mainly young men—curious about sports gambling. Having seen tons of ads featuring celebrities and athletes promoting betting—Ben’s favorites are those with comedian Kevin Hart—he decided to give it a shot.

After a month of wagering with Fliff’s virtual coins, Ben got bored. He signed up for the real-money version, gave an older cousin \$50 to submit his ID, and began gambling “for real.” He now splits his betting between Fliff and DraftKings, using the same cousin’s account. Asked what sports he bet on, Ben listed them.

“Even hockey! And I don’t even like hockey!”

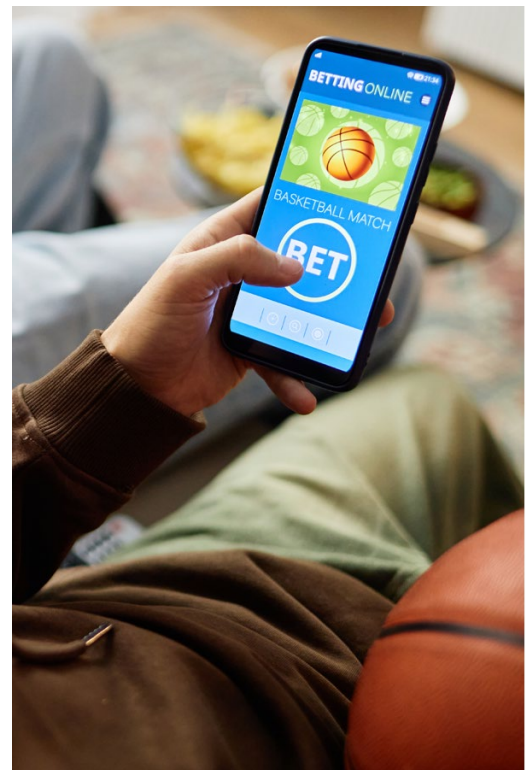
When we spoke, Ben told me he checked the odds every day. He showed me six active bets for the upcoming Sunday’s slate of NFL games. One was a \$2 parlay (a wager that combines multiple bets), which stood to pay out more than \$1,000. His logic justifying all that gambling was as simple as it was immemorial: “I’m feeling lucky.”

A Sure Bet

Since sports betting has swept the country, schools have been caught flat-footed. Most states require instruction on the dangers of drugs and alcohol but say almost nothing about gambling. Some students are even betting during class. A senior at a Manhattan high school recently told me how he and his friends craft parlays while pretending to work on their laptops.

In 2018, the Supreme Court overturned the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act, or PASPA, which prohibited sports betting outside Nevada. Thirty-nine states have since legalized the activity, with most proponents highlighting the boost to tax revenue, as states take a portion of user losses—as high as 51 percent in New York—and to personal liberty.

Advocates of expanded gambling have also emphasized consumer protection. Now more Americans are free to



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transition from using black market, underground sites to legal, regulated ones that are accountable to state gaming commissions and, they argue, more concerned with player safety. As NBA commissioner Adam Silver wrote in a landmark 2014 *New York Times* op-ed that reversed the league's longstanding opposition to legalization, "[S]ports betting is [already] widespread. . . . [It] should be brought out of the underground and into the sunlight where it can be appropriately monitored and regulated."

One of those highly touted regulations was safeguards to prevent kids from betting. The casino industry's largest lobbying group, the American Gaming Association, has assured policymakers for over a decade that protecting youth is a priority. As the association's president testified to Congress in 2013, "Regulated online gambling will provide law enforcement agencies with a willing partner for cracking down on underage gambling. . . . We can use technology to put effective protections in place."

To a degree, this has occurred. Regulated sites such as DraftKings and FanDuel, where the majority of Americans are gambling, require new users to submit their social security numbers and IDs to become verified, and the names on deposit accounts must match the names on user accounts. Underage gamblers like Ben are not able to use a fake name and birthday and start betting like they can on most unregulated gambling websites.

A Loophole in the Teen Market

Yet despite these rules, gambling has clearly reached teen boys. Reliable data remain limited, but a recent Common Sense Media report gives one of the clearest pictures yet. In a nationally representative survey of more than 1,000 boys aged 11 to 17, 36 percent reported gambling or participating in gambling-related activities in the past year, rising to 49 percent among 17-year-olds. Teachers, addiction counselors, hotline operators, and teens themselves all say the same thing: Boys are gambling. A lot.

Harm from betting isn't only financial. Students who gamble are giving up time and attention that should be devoted to friends and schoolwork, exacerbating a trend of skyrocketing smartphone and social media use that already has teenagers staring at their screens for hours a day. The same Common Sense Media report found that 27 percent of boys who gamble report negative effects such as stress or conflict with parents; among boys who gamble at least monthly, the share rises to one-third.

Industry advocates either deny these findings, argue higher rates of gambling are due to increased awareness and reporting, or shift blame to unregulated operators like Fliff that take bets from minors. Asked about underage users on their platform, a DraftKings spokesperson told *Rolling Stone*, "Any use of our platform by minors violates both our Terms of Use and the law, and we actively monitor to detect and report this prohibited activity."

Of course, gambling companies are not responsible for the choices of older friends and family members to aid and abet the gambling habits of minors by giving them their login information. But they are responsible for generating so much of the demand in the first place.

Ad spend for sportsbooks has surged from \$25 million in 2017, the year before the Supreme Court overturned PASPA, to \$1.4 billion in 2022. The Kevin Hart spots Ben can recite from memory are for DraftKings. The betting odds Charles Barkley touts on ESPN are from FanDuel. The companies that are



Celebrity promotions of sportsbooks in television and web advertisements, like comedian Kevin Hart’s memorable spots for DraftKings, leave an impression on boys that make bets seem easy and winning a sure thing.

blanketing the airwaves; sponsoring every league, team, and podcast; marketing gambling as easy, fun, and *normal*—they aren’t shady illegal bookmakers. They’re publicly traded, state-sanctioned behemoths.

And the next frontier is already here. Prediction markets like Kalshi let users as young as 18 wager nationwide on everything from sports outcomes to Taylor Swift album sales, treating those wagers as financial “trades” overseen by federal commodities regulators rather than as bets governed by state gambling laws. Their marketing follows suit, with legions of paid social media influencers pitching the platforms not as gambling but as savvy investing—a way to turn fandom and hunches into quick cash.

Pulling Back from the Brink

So, what now?

The first step should be to curtail marketing and impose stricter rules on the ways operators are allowed to promote their product. A 13-year-old should be able to watch his favorite sports team without feeling like the game is just a vehicle for betting content. Regulators should restrict campaigns featuring athletes and celebrities, as the UK has done. Marketing rules should reach social media, too. Influencers and affiliates pitching bets and “trades” as easy money should have to disclose every sponsorship, and operators should answer when they don’t. Regulators should consider bans on advertising that frame constant betting as something to be indulged anytime and anywhere. All ads should include disclaimers stating how low the odds of

winning really are and how sportsbooks limit or ban users with any real chance of coming out ahead.

Education is also crucial, yet the policy landscape is thin. Only Virginia has passed a statewide mandate; efforts in Michigan, Maryland, New Jersey and West Virginia have all stalled. Voluntary curricula from the Massachusetts Council on Gaming and Health and Next Gen Personal Finance are already available, and the American Institute for Boys and Men, where I am a fellow, is developing additional resources for parents and teachers.

Efforts to educate teens on gambling should take a cue from what we know teaching them about the perils of drugs, alcohol, and sex: Simply advocating abstinence doesn't work. Decades of evidence reveal that telling teens to "just say no" fails to reduce engagement and leaves them without the tools they need when they encounter these enticements in the real world. Pretending gambling isn't a problem merely cedes the conversation to social media influencers, celebrity skills, and older acquaintances with legal betting accounts.

Gambling education should cover two basic subjects: health and math. The first is teaching students to recognize what compulsive use looks like in themselves and their friends, why adolescent brains are especially susceptible to it, and where to go for help. The second is teaching about probability, expected value, and the hard arithmetic of why a parlay that feels like a good bet is almost always a terrible one.

When I speak at high schools, half my time becomes a Q&A session with boys running their betting theories past me. They want to know whether LeBron going over his point total in eight of the last 10 games means he's likely to go over again tonight (it doesn't), whether doubling down after a loss will eventually even out (it won't), or whether an Instagram tout's "can't lose play of the day" actually can't lose (it can). These are ideas no one has ever pushed back on in front of them.

Age safeguards on regulated sites can also be improved. Just as Citi Bike will soon require age verification before riding, gambling apps can do more than check identity at signup and hope for the best. New York Governor Kathy Hochul has pushed regulators to explore stronger safeguards against underage access. Here, as with social media, technology has outrun the rules. Some fixes will work better than others, and some will raise difficult privacy questions. But the longer policymakers wait, the more entrenched the problem becomes.

The industry's favorite scapegoat—illegal and unregulated operators—deserves more scrutiny as well. While cracking down on offshore gambling often devolves into a game of whack-a-mole, targeted cease-and-desists from state regulators have proven effective and should continue. States should pursue fines and legal action against U.S.-based grey-market operators like Fliff that circumvent state laws, even when those operators hire the president's son to shield themselves from oversight. They should also go after gambling in children's video games, a concept so normalized that the CEO of Roblox—a gaming platform whose users include half of all American kids under the age of 16—has openly supported adding more of it.

More impartial research is essential. The federal government spends billions studying the effects of drugs and alcohol but nothing on gambling. States chip in a small percentage of revenue at best. That leaves the field to industry-funded work, which rarely yields findings that could inform meaningful regulation. While philanthropy has begun to fill the void—last year Arnold Ventures announced the largest-ever independent research initiative on sports betting—it can't do it alone.

Finally, the most important thing states can do to protect kids from gambling is prevent the legalization and spread of online casino games, which are far more dangerous than sports betting. In the seven states with legal online casinos, user losses are roughly four times as large as those from sports betting. Slots, which account for more than 75 percent of online casino revenue, are engineered to ensnare users and have far higher rates of addiction, particularly for underage users.

Ben has seen those higher stakes and increased harms play out firsthand. A majority of his friends who played video games purchased skins and cases, and most got out unscathed. Those who didn't were the ones who found themselves in the makeshift within-game casinos that allow kids to convert their skins to coins and play roulette, slots, and other enticing, brightly colored games. When pressed on why he thought those kids got hooked, he told me, "There's gambling, and then there's GAMBLING."

Online gambling is here to stay. The question is whether we treat underage access as a design failure or let the industry write it off as the cost of doing business. Physical casinos check IDs at the entrance. Online, the door is always open, and gambling companies spend billions waving everyone in. Until that changes, kids like Ben will keep walking through. **E**



Isaac Rose-Berman is a fellow at American Institute for Boys and Men focused on gambling research and policy. AIBM partnered with Arnold Ventures on this research.

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