

Leveraging Recovery Community Voices to Identify Systemic Gambling Recovery Challenges

Principle Investigator:

Devin J. Mills, PhD

Assistant Professor
Texas Tech University



TEXAS TECH
UNIVERSITY.

Graduate Research Assistant:

Travis J. Spencer, MS

Couple, Marriage, and Family
Therapy Doctoral Student
Texas Tech University

Collaborating Partner:

MA Council on Gaming and Health

Represented by Phil Kopel



The Massachusetts Council
ON GAMING AND HEALTH
We Understand the Problem. We Can Help.

Conflict of Interest and Research Statements

I (**Dr. Mills**) have consulted with the gambling industry on evaluating the effectiveness of responsible gambling initiatives and I have served as an expert witness on gambling-related features in video games.

This work has resulted in some amazing learning and research opportunities

Across research, consultancy, and expert testimony, I maintain:

1. Gambling and video gaming are recreational activities.
2. Problematic engagement in gambling and/or video gaming arises from individual, social, and environmental factors.

My research aims to:

Identify these contributing individual, social, and environmental factors to interrupt harmful engagement cycles that affect players moderately (~1 in 3) and severely (~1 in 10), even without meeting clinical thresholds.



Presentation Objectives

- 1 - Identify key themes of the impact of legalized gambling on addiction recovery communities.
- 2 - Recognize the need for macro-systemic changes to be made to better support recovery communities.
- 3 - Recognize the need for tools assessing personal growth as an indicator of recovery progress.

Current Gambling Landscape

General Knowledge

- Gambling is a recreational activity
- 20-25% of adults, gambling contributes to psychological, social, or financial harms
- 2-6% of adults develop a Gambling Disorder (GD)

Nationally

- 2018 – Overturning the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act
- Recovery specific to **GD remains ill-defined and poorly operationalized**
- Dearth of research on **how gambling legalization is specifically affecting recovery communities**

Massachusetts (MA)

- MA legalized full-scale casinos in 2011 and sports betting in 2023
- Research funded by MA Gambling Commission (MGC) has found increases in gambling participation and gambling harms, but not an increase in GD

Aims of the Study

Aim 4 - Impact of Legalized Gambling on Recovery Communities

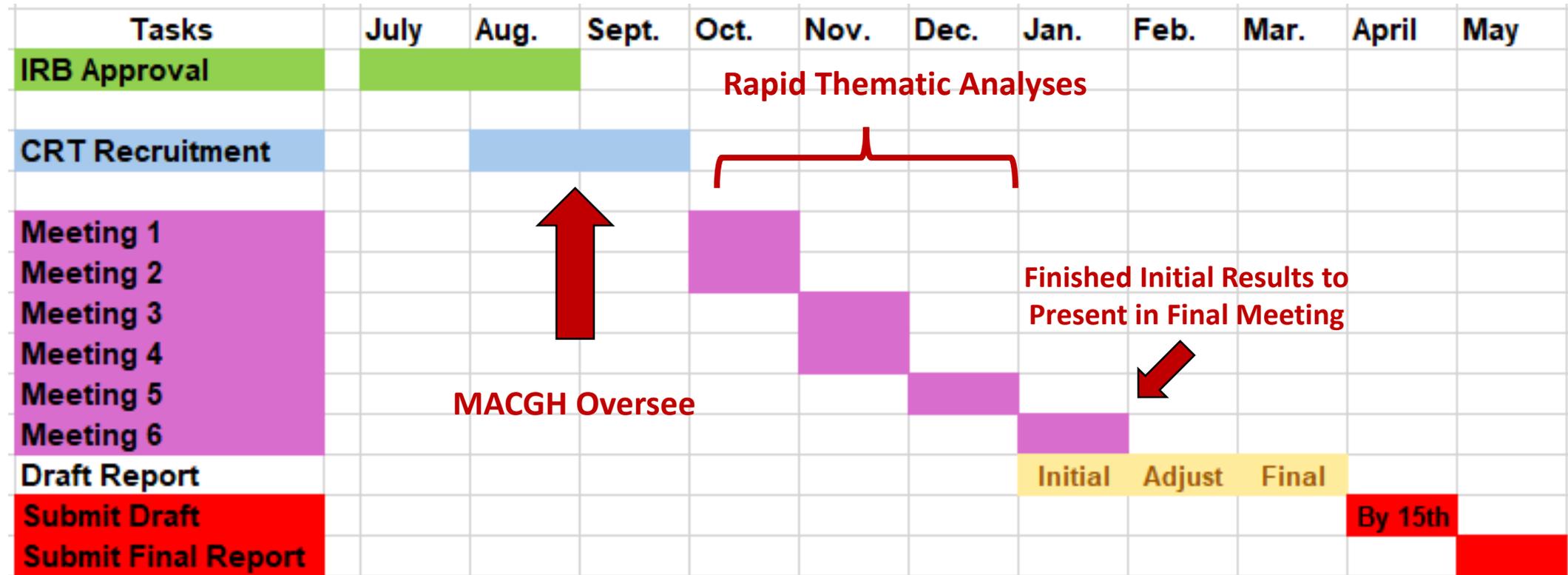
Aim 1 - Understanding Recovery

Aim 2 - Assessment Metrics for Recovery Progress

Aim 3 - Risk Factors and Support Systems



Methodology: CBPR and Rapid Thematic Analysis



Meeting Topics



CRT Recruitment and Retention

- 4 participants with Gambling Disorder primarily
- 4 participants with Substance Use Disorder primarily
- 4 participants with Both GD and SUD as equal
- 5 participants that are mental health professionals/recovery specialists
- 3 dropped, 14 final CRT members
- **91.7%** attendance across the 6 focus groups!
- All participants anonymously indicated they would be interested in participating in further aspects of this study

Results

Definition of Gambling

Gambling is an activity that involves **risking something of value, often money, on the chance of winning something of greater value.** For many, gambling is an entertaining social and recreational activity that represents connection to cultural norms and spiritual practices, a way of making money, an expression of hope, and an emotional rush. **Most can enjoy gambling without experiencing much harm.** However, it also supports a broader industry that often exploits weaknesses of vulnerable populations. Thus, **the line between casual gambling and gambling addiction is often blurred,** making it difficult to distinguish between harmless participation and compulsive gambling behavior. [Average CRT Approval: 94.8%, Min 72%]

“Responsible Gambling?”

“I just think it needs to be acknowledged that stigmatizing the person by, you know, telling them that they are being responsible or irresponsible, especially when they are, you know, receiving some type of treatment, doesn't help much when they are already dealing with, like we said last time, all the stress, all the negative impact of gambling and the financial relationships and everything that happens to the person...I feel like speaking that way might even be harmful for the people who gamble and have a problem with gambling, so I feel like we always have to, maybe keep an open mind to how the games and the way they're advertised and the way they are aggressively pushed towards people in general could also be defined as responsible or irresponsible. But I don't know that that's the point really. When we try to understand if something is harmful... we should just try to acknowledge the effect of that harm instead of trying to define it based on the person's qualities.” [Average CRT Approval: 93%, Min: 61%]

Gambling Problems

When it becomes a problem

- Obsession, planning your life around gambling.
- Isolation from loved ones
- Dishonesty
- Reckless disregard for consequences
- Continuing after experiencing relational, financial, and/or emotional harm.
- Desperately trying to make up losses
- Compromising values and limits

Harms caused

- Financial, emotional, and social loss
- Turning to criminal activity
- Neglecting household, work, and social responsibilities
- Mental and physical health problems
- Indulging in other compulsive behaviors
- Relationship problems

Community Definition of Recovery From Gambling Disorder

Recovery from gambling addiction/disorder is a strong commitment to redefine one's relationship with gambling in an ongoing effort, unique to everyone, to heal from the harms that gambling has caused while fostering holistic life improvement. This process involves (1) setting and working toward personalized recovery goals through honest and consistent self-reflection and social feedback, (2) *gaining self-awareness of underlying factors that lead to triggers and urges to gamble*, (3) developing healthier coping processes *and tools* to manage cravings and triggers, (4) actively participating in *social support systems that encourage desired recovery efforts*, and (5) replacing old patterns by engaging in new meaningful and fulfilling activities.

Gambling Recovery Differences & Similarities

Differences

- No physical dependency
- Easier to hide
- May be concealed until experiencing extreme consequences
- Less stigma and perceived as less serious than substance addiction
- Less resources available to support recovery efforts

Similarities

- Nearly identical psychological process.
- Cycle of compulsion, craving, reward, and reinforcement.
- Dopamine plays a vital role in the addictive cycle.
- Community and social support is vital to the recovery process.

How Should Recovery Be Measured?

Measurement of recovery from gambling addiction is difficult to capture due to the numerous pathways of recovery. However, perspectives that emphasize gradual holistic growth and the ability to build a fulfilling life without gambling are beneficial. Recovery should be seen as a day-by-day commitment, where small, meaningful steps reflect an ongoing dedication to change. Success is reflected in a person's ability to cultivate supportive relationships, increase access to recovery resources, adopt healthier behaviors, improve self-esteem and self-awareness, and make honest, value-driven choices rather than simply stopping the behavior. True recovery lies in the sustained commitment to improve one's life holistically, not just in managing or suppressing gambling urges.

Abstinence Debate

For Abstinence Requirement

“I also think that that we need to have something about abstinence. That having had sufficient time, abstaining from gambling, to be able to understand what recovery is all about. Because without abstinence, you can't recover... I know from my own experience and from counseling others that there is nobody who can be a mentor to somebody who is just starting their recovery that can go out and gamble. Now, you know, again, this is just my opinion, but I think that you really have to look at it in terms of that... 'cause I don't think you can go into recovery until you're able to understand what it's like not to gamble.”

Against Abstinence Requirement

“Sometimes people, they can't be abstinent in the beginning. I think harm reduction is probably beneficial to a lot of people, I mean me personally, I believe in abstinence, but you have to meet people where they are and sometimes abstinence is not gonna work for them in the moment.”

Abstinence Conclusion

In gambling addiction recovery, abstinence can be an important goal, but it is not a universal requirement for everyone. Some individuals may choose to pursue abstinence as a clear boundary to avoid the risks of gambling, while others may focus on harm reduction, a perspective that helps meet people where they are in their journey. Harm reduction allows individuals to set personal limits and gradually reduce their engagement in gambling without the all-or-nothing pressure of abstinence, which can be especially useful in early recovery. [Average CRT Approval: 91.3%, **Min: 16%**]

Self-exclusion—voluntarily banning oneself from gambling venues or online platforms—can be a valuable recovery tool for those who need external boundaries to support their commitment to change. It provides an extra layer of accountability and can reduce the temptation to relapse. For some, self-exclusion is an effective way to create space for healing and personal growth, allowing them to rebuild their lives with fewer risks. Whether through abstinence, harm reduction, or self-exclusion, the goal is to help individuals regain control and pursue a healthier, more balanced life. [Average CRT Approval: 98.3%, Min: 80%]

Factors that Support or Undermine Recovery Efforts

Factors that May Support Recovery	Rating Total	Factors that May Undermine Recovery	Rating Total
1. Willingness to change	60	1. Lack of accountability	57
2. Awareness of triggers and stressors	58	2. Returning to other addictive substances/behaviors	56
3. Building a supportive recovery community and asking for help	55	3. Desperate rumination about winning	56
4. Understanding and remembering your why	55	4. Instability and unwellness	55
5. Connection with others	54	5. Acceptance of gambling	52
6. Changing associations to likeminded supports	54	6. Prevalence of gambling	51
7. Changing activities and lifestyle	54	7. Constant advertising of incentives	50
8. Available and accessible services	52	8. Cultural, societal, and social norms around gambling	49
9. Being mindful of actions	51	9. Experts contributing to advertising	48
10. Stable housing	49	10. Having money	
11. Abstinence focus	47	11. People who are not supportive	45
12. Education of addiction	46	12. Friends and family traditions/rituals	45
13. Changing environments	45	13. Getting help from gamblers with different recovery goals	43
14. Establishing recovery reminders	44	14. People who do not understand	40
15. Stable employment	44		37
16. Family involvement in the recovery process	41		
	<i>Added</i>		<i>Added</i>
17. <i>Addressing underlying mental health issues or stressors with professionals</i>	X	15. <i>Having extra time</i>	
18. <i>Harm reduction focus</i>	X	16. <i>Unmanaged bipolar disorder or other mental health issues that affect impulse control</i>	X
19. <i>Finding a recovery mentor/sponsor</i>	X		X

Defining a Recovery Community

Recovery from gambling addiction is a deeply personal journey, yet connection with a recovery community often plays an important role in fostering lasting success. Though it is not mandatory for gambling recovery, a recovery community serves as an environment that offers opportunities to support and serve others, which often reinforces and sustains personal recovery efforts. Choosing to face recovery alone, while possible, often relies heavily on “white knuckling,” the idea that one changes through “willpower.” However, this approach can often be ineffective and lead to greater isolation. Additionally, it is necessary to approach recovery communities with discernment. Not all groups or individuals within these spaces are healthy or constructive. Toxic dynamics or unhealthy relationships can hinder progress and may even exacerbate existing challenges. [Average CRT Approval: 98.3%, Min: 80%]

Defining a Recovery Community

GD Recovery Community

- Network of individuals and support systems
- Dedicated to fostering long-term and holistic recovery
- Shared experiences, shared commitment, and mutual support
- Those with a genuine desire to support those affected by addiction
- Provides resources for stability so the individual can focus on recovery
- Safe space for connection, encouragement, personal growth, and renewed purpose

Differences from Other Recovery Communities

- Manage unique triggers
- Gambling is more acceptable and accessible
- Dysfunction is less validated and possibly more misunderstood.
- Fewer established recovery communities and resources
- Less comprehensive research into recovery processes
- Different perspectives on harm reduction strategies

Importance of a Recovery Community

Recovery from gambling addiction is a deeply personal journey, yet connection with a recovery community often plays an important role in fostering lasting success. Though it is not mandatory for gambling recovery, a recovery community serves as an environment that offers opportunities to support and serve others, which often reinforces and sustains personal recovery efforts. Choosing to face recovery alone, while possible, often relies heavily on “white knuckling,” the idea that one changes through “willpower.” However, this approach can often be ineffective and lead to greater isolation. Additionally, it is necessary to approach recovery communities with discernment. Not all groups or individuals within these spaces are healthy or constructive. Toxic dynamics or unhealthy relationships can hinder progress and may even exacerbate existing challenges. [Average CRT Approval: 98.3%, Min: 80%]

Recommendations to Increase Community Support in MA

Themes of Community Support	Rating Total
1. Increased education about gambling harms	36
2. Treating gambling as an addiction.	35
3. Increased awareness and access to recovery resources for individuals of diverse cultures.	35
4. Improved health care and treatment coverage and availability for those suffering from gambling addiction.	34
5. Better screening policies and practices for gambling problems.	33
6. Further regulating gambling advertising.	33
7. Better trained professionals that offer treatment to those suffering from gambling addiction.	33
8. Commercials that foster awareness of gambling harms.	32
9. Clinicians assess more often for gambling problems.	30
10. Transparency from gaming organizations.	30
11. Requiring gaming providers to contribute significant funding to recovery resources.	30
12. Offering gambling free environments with sports and other gambling saturated entertainment.	29
13. Accountability to gamers on how much they are spending.	29
14. Companies and organizations taking a stance against gambling harms.	29
15. Establishing better language for problem gaming and gambling.	28
16. Holding the gambling community accountable.	28
17. Increased education on responsible financial practices.	28

Effects of Gambling Legalization in MA

Legalized gambling in Massachusetts has significantly impacted gambling recovery communities. It has heightened cultural attention and increased gambling normalization, while disproportionately affecting the finances of emerging adults and college students, often leading to exploitation of these and other vulnerable groups. The increase in virtual access has widened the generational gap among recovery seekers, with younger individuals gravitating toward online meetings for support. Increased focus on betting as entertainment, coupled with pervasive gambling content in sports, has led to a surge in gambling-related issues, including addiction substitution and new problem types, but without a corresponding increase in treatment options. The normalization of gambling makes seeking support more challenging for some, yet recovery pathways are diversifying to meet the rising demand. [Average CRT Approval: 98.3%, Min: 80%]

Gambling Legalization in MA cont.

Positives Impacts

- Increased awareness of gambling problems
- Community benefits from redistributed earnings
- Safer gambling environments
- Increased opportunities for social connection
- Employment opportunities
- Increased funding for treatment (though insufficient for rising needs)
- “However, these positives are outweighed by negative consequences of gambling legalization. Better regulations should have been in place from the start, as reversing legalization is not feasible.”

Warning to Recovery Communities

- Increases accessibility
- Introduces new triggers
- Requiring enhanced training in healthy financial practices
- Improved methods to assess emerging gambling problems.
- Legalization does not eliminate harm, and insurance coverage gaps for gambling disorder treatment may limit care.
- Addressing these challenges is critical to supporting those at risk.

Safer for Players?

While a major aim of legalizing gambling was to make it safer, the recovery community's experience suggests otherwise. While regulations can enhance safety in some areas, such as fraud prevention, the increased accessibility has led to more gambling harms. For players in recovery, legalization can pose additional challenges by normalizing gambling and increasing exposure, making it harder to maintain abstinence. Safety, therefore, is multifaceted – improved in some respects but worsened overall. [Average CRT Approval: 97.6%, Min: 80%]

Limitations

- The usual for qualitative research
- Limited depth on individual topics due to broad study scope
- Potential lack of thematic saturation across all areas
- Incomplete representation from current problem gamblers
- Need for inclusion of both gamblers and family members in future research



Thinking Beyond Year 1

Year 1 Sets the Foundation for Further Research

Year 2: *Develop and Pilot Quantitative Instruments*

Themes derived from Year 1 will inform the development of self-report measures of recovery, recovery progress, level of exposure to risk and support factors, and overall impact of gambling.

Year 3: *Launch Quantitative Instrument with Online Samples*

Launch online survey to a representative sample of MA adults affected by gambling problems.

Questions?

Thank you!