

Sheldon Jacobson: Colleges are embracing sports gambling. Are they setting themselves up for liability?

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FULL TEXT

The Super Bowl, one of the largest sporting events of the year, is here. March Madness, another big national sporting event, is just a few weeks away. They are also two of the largest sports betting events.

Sports betting is spreading like wildfire. More states are legalizing it, with companies such as FanDuel, DraftKings and Caesars widely available online for making wagers on professional and college sports. Colleges have embraced the opportunity through partnerships with these companies, making it easier for students to engage. Every game, every half, every score is an opportunity to place a bet.

Yet for some, the glamour of possibly winning gets lost in the shadow of remorse when financial losses add up and become overwhelming.

Problem gambling is an addiction, as defined by the National Council on Problem Gambling. Companies that facilitate gambling make money in direct proportion to the number and size of bets made. These companies are big winners when more people engage in gambling.

If there is a lesson to be learned from the proliferation, it is that as sports gambling becomes more easily available, the companies that facilitate the gambling may be held financially liable for the sowing of addiction, especially on college campuses.

A useful parallel is how drug manufacturers have been held accountable for the opioid crisis. As addictive opioids were overprescribed for pain relief, a growing number of people became addicts. Nearly 1 million opioid-related drug overdoses and deaths have been reported since 1999, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC recently changed the prescribing recommendations for opioids, providing a spectrum of alternatives for managing pain.

Manufacturers have agreed to settlements worth billions of dollars for their role, forcing some into bankruptcy. Pharmacies got caught in the crossfire and ended up being sued for dispensing the opioids. These companies faced an unenviable, no-win situation: If they filled opioid prescriptions, they were concerned about being sued for negligence, and if they did not fill those prescriptions, they could be sued based on the accusation of intervening in medical practice.

As people are exposed to and engage in sports gambling, a percentage of them eventually become addicts. The extent of this addiction in the population remains to be seen.

There are at least 10 million gambling addicts in the United States, according to the North American Foundation for Gambling Addiction Help. As sports betting becomes more ubiquitous and easily accessible —especially among college-age adults —this number is likely to grow.

Sports gambling for many is a form of entertainment. Such people place the occasional bet on a game involving teams that they support and cheer for.

Gambling addicts lack such natural restraint. No societal benefits accrue when a person places a bet, except possibly the tax revenue generated. And when gambling addicts cannot stop placing bets, losing money they can ill afford to lose, the societal consequences begin to grow.

If communities can sue pharmacies for legally dispensing opioids, can they also sue sports gambling companies for the costs of treating gambling addicts?

Should sports gambling be stopped? Much like opioids, which are a controlled substance, gambling should be treated as a controlled activity. With untethered gambling freedom, a generation of addicts is being nurtured on college campuses.

Sadly, colleges are willingly participating, by partnering with and taking money from sports betting companies. Such short-term gains may include long-term liabilities.

Making something legal does not make it acceptable. At some point, the genesis of sports gambling addiction will be uncovered. Then the landscape of sports gambling will need to be visited and revised, and with 20-20 hindsight, the risks being undertaken today will be exposed.

If you or someone you know has a gambling problem, help is available by calling 1-800-GAMBLER or texting ILGAMB to 833234. Visit e.helpineil.org/areyoureallywinning for more information about problem gambling.

Sheldon Jacobson is a professor in computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a data scientist and operations researcher, he applies his expertise in data-driven, risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy.

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DETAILS

Psychology indexing term:	Subject: Gambling Drug addiction
Subject:	Drug overdose; Gambling; Drug addiction; Colleges & universities; Pharmacy; College campuses; Narcotics
Publication title:	Chicago Tribune (Online); Chicago
Publication year:	2023
Publication date:	Feb 10, 2023
Section:	Opinion - Commentary
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Chicago
Country of publication:	United States, Chicago
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Opinions
ProQuest document ID:	2774977643

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/sheldon-jacobson-colleges-are-embracing-sports/docview/2774977643/se-2?accountid=14553>

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Last updated: 2023-02-10

Database: Chicago Tribune

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