

# The Hidden Harms of Single-Event Sports Betting in Ontario

Johanna Lewis | September 2024

## Key Points

- Single-event sports betting was legalized in Canada in 2021. One of the arguments for legalization was that it would move the gambling already taking place underground into the safer light of a regulated market, with responsible-gambling safeguards and other player protections.
- Yet there is good reason to question whether Ontario's new sports-betting regime prioritizes player safety.
- Legalizing single-game sports betting didn't just make it possible for fans to bet a few dollars on whether the Leafs would beat the Senators on any given night and then sit back to watch the game. It also opened the door for any game to turn a smartphone into a two-hour slot machine.
- Sports betting now has many of the features that are associated with a higher risk of problem gambling:
  - Ability to bet quickly, continuously, and at short intervals;
  - Effectively unlimited access (online), and ability to gamble while alone, drunk, or high;
  - Structural characteristics that encourage cognitive distortions and loss chasing; and
  - Ability to circumvent responsible-gambling tools.
- Compared to traditional sports bettors, in-play bettors skew younger, are more likely to be male, and are more likely to consume alcohol while betting.
- According to one study, viewers in Ontario are exposed to 2.8 gambling references *every minute* while they watch live sports broadcasts.
- The number of iGO active player accounts, and the amount wagered on betting, is increasing rapidly.
- The average spending per player account in Ontario is currently \$283/month (amount gambled, minus any winnings), which is 3.2 percent of the average monthly household income.
- Experts have identified that gambling above 1 percent of income exposes players to a much higher risk of harm to finances, relationships, and psychological and physical health.
- Ontario should take the following steps to strengthen protections for sports bettors:
  - Ban advertisements for sports betting;
  - Ban in-game bets;
  - Make responsible-gambling messages more effective;
  - Provide a centralized platform for players to limit their gambling; and
  - Require gambling corporations to contribute to problem-gambling prevention and treatment at a rate proportionate to their spending on marketing.

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