# Massachusetts Department of Public Health

## DPH

# 2024 STAKEHOLDER LISTENING SESSIONS REPORT

Massachusetts Department of Public Health
Office of Problem Gambling Services

**mass.gov/opgs**

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# Executive Summary

In 2024, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Office of Problem Gambling Services (OPGS) engaged community members through a series of listening sessions to engage community members in discussions about the evolving challenges and opportunities related to problem gambling in Massachusetts. These sessions provided a structured space for participants to share their experiences, insights, perspectives, and feedback on a specific topic. OPGS conducts two types of listening sessions each year to foster ongoing community engagement. Stakeholder Listening Sessions invite those with a vested interest in problem gambling and related issues, while Community Listening Sessions focus on individuals who may be affected by problem gambling in a variety of ways.

These sessions brought together diverse voices, creating a rich, qualitative snapshot of how gambling trends and digital innovations are reshaping local realities. The analysis drew on OPGS's Data to Action framework, a public health approach designed to bridge the gap between data collection, community engagement, and action-oriented policy development.

The 2024 Listening Session Report highlights the following key takeaways, organized by each core component of the OPGS Data to Action Framework:

» **Monitoring and Surveillance:** Participants expressed concern over youth exposure to gambling, noting increased access through online platforms, mobile devices, and everyday environments like school lunchrooms. There is a perceived overlap between gambling behaviors and substance use among youth, emphasizing the need for more detailed, targeted data collection.

» **Contextualizing Data:** The listening sessions reinforce how communities normalize gambling. Many participants noted that early exposure often begins at home, through activities like purchasing scratch tickets, and is further reinforced by cultural practices and community celebrations. Additionally, integrating gambling-like features in digital gaming, such as microtransactions and loot boxes, adds a modern dimension to these longstanding practices.

» **Comprehensive and Responsive Services:** Within the listening sessions, stakeholders called for holistic programs and services to respond to problem gambling among youth. Participants expressed support for initiatives that

engage youth as cultural liaisons and emphasize family involvement, recognizing that effective strategies must address the broader social and economic factors that influence behaviors.

» **Evaluation and Quality Improvement:** Participants highlighted the importance of developing robust evaluation mechanisms to fully capture community needs, such as combining quantitative and qualitative data. They also highlighted the importance of collecting disaggregated data to better inform and refine strategies.

» **Community Engagement and Feedback:** Ongoing, meaningful community engagement is crucial. Initiatives like PhotoVoice, a participatory research method that uses photography to capture lived experiences, demonstrate how prevention messages become more relatable and impactful when community members actively contribute to the conversation. Sustained feedback from community engagements is essential to keeping programs relevant and responsive over time.

This report presents community perspectives on the harms associated with problem gambling, underscoring the importance of ongoing community engagement and a coordinated, equitable response to the expansion of gambling opportunities that safeguards the well-being of all Massachusetts residents. The following summary highlights the key recommendations from the 2024 Listening Sessions Report.

» **Broaden and Diversify Data Collection:** Systematically track emerging youth gambling behaviors, including online sports betting, sports wagering, loot boxes, and social-media games. Disaggregate data by age, race, ethnicity, gender, income, and geography to inform targeted interventions.

» **Leverage Technology and Analytics:** Use social media monitoring and predictive analytics to identify youth gambling risks in real time while protecting privacy.

» **Integrate Cultural and Economic Considerations:** Work with community members to create culturally tailored prevention campaigns that include financial literacy content to address economic factors that drive youth toward gambling.

» **Enhance Prevention and Education Efforts:** Integrate educational modules into school and community programs that clearly distinguish casual gaming from problematic gambling activities like fantasy sports and microtransactions. Train youth ambassadors to lead peer education on gambling risks.

» **Strengthen Family and Community Involvement:** Provide parents and caregivers with multilingual toolkits and training, and partner with faith-based and cultural organizations to deliver accessible, family-centered outreach.

» **Promote Ongoing Evaluation and Collaborative Partnerships:** Continue evaluating pro- grams and services to support ongoing improvement, and maintain long-term partnerships with schools, nonprofits, and cultural groups to adapt to changing trends.

# Introduction

This report presents findings from the 2024 Stakeholder Listening Sessions (SLSs) and Com- munity Listening Sessions (CLSs) conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Office of Problem Gambling Services (OPGS). OPGS contracted JSI Research & Training Institute, Inc. (JSI), a Boston-based public health consulting firm, to plan, implement, evaluate, and report on these sessions.

# Background

## Understanding the Gambling Landscape in Massachusetts

In November 2011, the Governor of Massachusetts signed the Expanded Gaming Act into law. The Expanded Gaming Act (G.L. c23k) allowed for three destination resort-style casinos to be located across the state. In 2023, state legislature passed An Act to Regulate Sports Wagering (Bill H.5164), which legalized sports wagering and further increased opportunities for gambling within the Commonwealth. Both Acts allocate a percentage of tax on gross gaming revenues to a Public Health Trust Fund, created to address the impacts of expanded gambling opportunities in the state, described further below.

The Expanded Gaming Act of 2011 and the Massachusetts Sports Wagering Act of 2022 allo- cate significant resources to a Public Health Trust Fund to mitigate the harms associated with gambling. The Public Health Trust Fund is overseen by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services. OPGS leads the public health response to gambling by focusing on data and surveillance, prevention, treatment, and recovery support services, while the Massachusetts Gaming Commission conducts research and responsible gaming activities.

# Massachusetts Department of Public Health & Office of Problem Gambling Services

The MDPH's mission is "an equitable and just public health system that supports optimal well-being for all people in Massachusetts, centering those with systemically and culturally op- pressed identities.[1]"

OPGS was established in 2016 to lead the public health response to the expansion of gambling in the Commonwealth. Since then, OPGS has ensured a comprehensive and integrated public health approach to problem gambling by using data to inform initiatives, engage communities, and ensure cultural intelligence and humility. The work of MDPH and OPGS centers on leading with data and community voice, promoting health and racial equity, and striving to eradicate health disparities. The collective effort by MDPH and OPGS to lead a values-driven public health response is unprecedented in the field of problem gambling, setting a new standard for addressing emerging challenges with equity and community at the forefront.

## Data to Action Framework

The OPGS Data to Action (D2A) Framework, developed in 2023, is a public health approach designed to bridge the gap between data collection, community engagement, and action- oriented policy development. This framework recognizes that problem gambling is not merely an issue of individual behavior but one deeply influenced by structural, social, and economic factors. Unlike traditional approaches that focus solely on personal responsibility, the framework integrates monitoring and surveillance, contextualizing data, developing responsive services, evaluating impact, and fostering engagement to create an ongoing cycle of learning and improvement.

The framework provides a structured yet adaptable approach to addressing problem gambling. It ensures that programs are data-informed, community-driven, and continuously evaluated for effectiveness. The complex interplay of cultural norms, social influences, economic pressures, and digital accessibility shapes problem gambling. The D2A framework is a multi-level strategy that identifies and tracks trends in gambling behaviors, contextualizes data through community engagement, and develops culturally relevant programs for the most affected populations.

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1  https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-the-department-of-public-health

The framework is instrumental in interpreting and acting on the SLS/CLS findings, which reveal how youth gambling is normalized within families, influenced by peers, and enabled by digital platforms. The framework ensures that solutions address the real-world drivers of problem gambling by integrating the perspectives of those directly impacted, rather than relying on generalized or outdated assumptions.

## The Role of Community Engagement in Public Health

Community engagement is fundamental to OPGS's approach. It involves collaborating with individuals who share geographic proximity, special interests, or similar circumstances to address concerns that affect their well-being.[2] This collaborative process ensures the affected community is actively involved in identifying problems and designing solutions. Community engagement is not a one-time task; it is an ongoing effort that requires dedication and persistence, evolving alongside changing community needs. Community partnership is essential to the engagement process and enhances community members' sense of ownership and responsibility, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

OPGS has engaged over 2,000 community members and forty community-based organizational partners across Massachusetts, consistently embedding community perspectives to shape its programs and services. The SLS and CLS events described in this report are essential components of OPGS's community engagement efforts.

## Community Profiles[3]

Although OPGS provides statewide support and oversight, the SLS and CLS focus strategically on Springfield and Everett, the two Massachusetts communities that host two of the state's resort-style casinos. This focus stems from the understanding that problem gambling behaviors and associated harms tend to concentrate in areas with direct, ongoing access to casino facilities. Residents in these communities face increased exposure to gambling opportunities, promotional materials, and risk factors that may contribute to the onset of worsening of problem gambling.

## Everett

In 2023, the estimated population of Everett was 50,318. The city is racially and ethnically diverse: 37.9% identify as White non-Hispanic, 31.3% as Hispanic or Latino, 12.8% as Black or African American non-Hispanic, 7.8% as Asian non-Hispanic, and 23.4% as multiracial. About 45.5% of the population was born outside of the U.S., and 62.9% of residents over the age of five speak a language other than English at home. According to the U.S. Census, 15.4% of Everett residents live in poverty, slightly higher than the state average of 10.4%. Just over 90% of residents have broadband internet, similar to the state average.[4]

## Springfield

In 2023, the estimated population in Springfield was 153,672. The city is racially and ethnically diverse: 29.3% identify as White non-Hispanic, 47.4% as Hispanic or Latino, 20.0% as Black or African American non-Hispanic, 2.8% as Asian non-Hispanic, and 23.0% as multiracial. Approximately 10.2% of the population was born outside the United States, and 39.7% of residents over the age of five speak a language other than English at home. According to the U.S. Census, 25.3% of Springfield residents live in poverty, over two times higher than the state average. Lastly, 83.2% of households have access to broadband internet, almost 10% lower than the state average.[5]

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[2] Cyril, S., Smith, B. J., Possamai-Inesedy, A., & Renzaho, A. M. (2015). Exploring the role of community engagement in improving the health of disadvantaged populations: a systematic review. *Global health action*, *8*(1), 29842.

[3] Figures add up to more than 100% because race and ethnicity percentages are combined.

[4] U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Everett, Massachusetts (n.d.) Retrieved August 08, 2023, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/everettcitymassachusetts

[5] U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Springfield city, Massachusetts (n.d.) Retrieved August 08, 2023, from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/springfieldcitymassachusetts

# Methods

## Listening Sessions Recruitment and Structure

OPGS and JSI conducted outreach and recruitment efforts for several weeks prior to each session. Efforts included inviting attendees from previous SLS and CLS sessions, sharing announcements through the OPGS newsletter, distributing flyers and save-the-date notices at community events, leveraging word of mouth, and using various social media platforms with content available in both English and Spanish.

There were eighty-seven unique participants across both SLS sessions. These individuals represented thirty-one distinct communities, organizations, academic institutions, service providers, health centers, and local governments. OPGS held the 2024 SLSs on Tuesday, October 1, and Thursday, October 3. The session on October 1 focused on Everett, MA, and the session on October 3 focused on Springfield, MA, due to the proximity to the casinos in Massachusetts. Both sessions were in English.

The 2024 CLSs were held on Tuesday, October 8, and Wednesday, October 9. The session on October 8 was facilitated in English, and the session on October 9 was facilitated in Spanish. These sessions follow the same structure as the SLSs, but do not have OPGS staff in attendance. The exclusion of OPGS staff in the CLSs is done intentionally to foster an environment where community members may feel more comfortable asking questions and providing feedback. There were seven participants for the English CLS and three for the Spanish CLS. In total, there were ten unique participants across both CLSs.

The listening sessions were conducted virtually via Zoom and each lasted 90 minutes. The SLSs were scheduled during the workweek and conducted in English, while the CLSs were held in the evenings and offered in both English and Spanish. All sessions followed a formal, structured format.

Each listening session opened with a presentation that provided participants with context for the activity. For the SLS, the OPGS Director opened each session by stating its purpose, sharing the OPGS vision and mission, presenting findings from the previous year's session, and providing an overview of current and future programs informed by the SLSs and CLSs. The CLS sessions followed the same structure but did not include OPGS staff to create a more comfortable space for community members to ask questions and provide feedback.

Following the opening presentation, attendees were divided into subgroups as needed, with a maximum of twelve participants per group. A JSI facilitator then posed the following questions to gather feedback and insights:

## 2024 SLS and CLS Engagement Questions

1. In your life, neighborhood, and community, have you noticed youth participation in gambling/gambling related activities? If yes, please list examples.
2. How has youth exposure to and/or participation in gambling impacted your life, neighborhood and community?
3. What cultural and/or community approaches would you recommend OPGS apply to prevent and mitigate youth gambling?
4. What data/information do you think OPGS should prioritize/focus on as part of their surveillance of problem gambling and related behaviors?

After the subgroup discussions, a representative from each group presented the most salient points from their conversations. The listening sessions concluded with the OPGS Director (for SLS) or JSI facilitator (for CLS) answering questions and sharing the next steps.

## Data Collection

The 2024 SLSs and CLSs included thirteen subgroups: five from the Everett SLS, four from the Springfield SLS, and four from the CLSs. To capture detailed participant insights, JSI audio- recorded the discussions—with participants' consent—and transcribed them verbatim to support analysis. All transcripts were then analyzed at an aggregate level.

The sampling frame refers to the set of individuals who were eligible to participate in the study. The sampling frame was not stratified by geographical area, meaning participants were not grouped or selected based on their city of residence. Although the SLS sessions were designated as either Everett or Springfield, residents from both cities attended each session. Because of this overlap, it was not meaningful to divide the sample by location.

# Coding Process and Analysis

JSI conducted the analysis using MAXQDA, a qualitative software platform that supports systematic coding and thematic organization. The process followed a two-phase approach grounded in established qualitative methodologies.

## Phase 1: Data Immersion and Codebook Development

Three analysts each read every transcript twice and cross-reviewed one another's work to ensure consistency and reduce bias. Open coding was conducted in MAXQDA to identify patterns and contextual insights. These codes informed a collaboratively developed draft codebook.

## Phase 2: Thematic Coding and Codebook Refinement

The team refined the codebook through regular meetings, clarifying definitions and consolidating overlapping codes to reflect participant language and lived experience. The finalized codebook was applied across all transcripts using a constant comparison method, with ongoing updates as new themes emerged. Reflexivity was maintained through team discussions and shared documentation.

# Axial Coding and Second-Level Analysis

The team then conducted a second-level analysis to explore relationships between themes, grouping related codes and identifying cross-cutting patterns. The refined codebook helped structure the final findings and ensured the analysis captured both individual and collective insights.

# Application of the Data-to-Action Framework to Thematic Analysis

This thematic analysis was primarily guided by the Data-to-Action Framework, which provided a structured lens for organizing and categorizing emerging themes in alignment with OPGS's strategic priorities. While the framework informed the overall orientation of the evaluation, its principal application was in the interpretive phase of analysis, specifically, in the classification of themes that surfaced during coding.

1. **Monitoring and Surveillance:** Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to track trends, identifying emerging issues, settings, and comorbidities, and informing decision-making. This component helped the analysis team identify patterns in gambling behaviors and related risk factors across different community groups.

2. **Contextualizing Data:** Understanding the settings, circumstances, and lived experiences of those affected by problem gambling to provide meaningful context to the data. By examining data through this lens, the team captured nuanced insights into how problem gambling manifests in specific communities.

3. **Comprehensive and Responsive Services:** Translating findings into relevant, person- centered solutions. This step emphasized the need to develop targeted interventions that reflect the unique needs and challenges of Everett and Springfield residents.

4. **Evaluation and Quality Improvement:** Assessing outcomes, identifying gaps, and refining strategies to improve program effectiveness. Insights from the listening sessions informed recommendations for ongoing program improvements.

5. **Community Engagement and Feedback:** Aligning data collection, interpretation, and action with local needs and priorities. Engaging community members in these sessions fostered trust and ensured that findings accurately reflected their experiences.

# Results

## Listening Session Participants

OPGS held the Everett SLS on Tuesday, October 1, 2024, and the Springfield SLS on Thursday, October 3, 2024. The 2024 CLSs were held on Tuesday, October 8 (conducted in English), and Wednesday, October 9 (conducted in Spanish). Overall, there were 87 unique participants across the SLS sessions and ten unique participants across CLS sessions, including seven in the English CLS and three in the Spanish CLS. These individuals represented thirty-one distinct communities, organizations, academic institutions, service providers, health centers, and local governments.

## Emerging Themes

JSI organized the themes uncovered in the analyses around the five components of the D2A Framework. Results are presented below, along with demonstrative and anonymized quotes from session participants.

### Monitoring and Surveillance

Participants highlighted specific monitoring and surveillance issues related to problem gambling that warrant attention as OPGS expands its data collection efforts. Youth-related concerns emerged prominently, including increased exposure to gambling, the influence of popular media, fantasy sports, and lottery participation.

*"Yes, I've noticed concerning trends in youth participation in gambling in Massachusetts. Some examples are increased exposure to online gaming platforms, social media ads targeting younger audiences, the rising popularity of fantasy sports, and daily fantasy sports among youth, accessibility of lottery tickets and scratch-offs at retail locations."*

Participants also called attention to the intersection of gambling behavior and risky behaviors among youth, such as substance use.

*"There's an intersection between gambling behaviors and substance use among youth, as gambling can contribute to the feeling of bravado and invincibility, leading to other risk behaviors."*

*"A lot of my friends who gamble also drink or smoke weed—it all kind of goes together in our social group."*

## Contextualizing Data

Participants highlighted the role of family dynamics, peer influence, digital venues, and economic pressures in normalizing and reinforcing problematic gambling behaviors. They noted that addressing the gaps will require collaborative, family-centered approaches that integrate education, regulation, and community engagement efforts in order to effectively reduce gambling-related harm among youth.

### *Cultural Normalization of Gambling*

A significant number of participants described how families often introduce gambling in childhood through everyday activities. In many cultures, gambling is part of celebrations or gatherings, making it seem like a harmless pastime. From early exposure at home to casual exchanges of scratch-off tickets, young people learn to see these actions as normal.

*"Parents buy scratch tickets and they have their kids scratch them. I mean, that's really how a lot of young people get introduced."*

Tradition often obscures potential harm, especially in communities where cultural practices incorporate gambling.

*"The impact of youth exposure is, in my community, specific…because we have gambling as something so cultural, we don't have any type of prevention yet. They do not realize that this is a problem.*

### *Gambling and Gaming*

Some participants noted that youth frequently engage in gambling-like activities within video games. These games, often featuring loot boxes, in-game character visual alterations or "skins," and microtransactions, may condition young people to accept financial risk-taking as part of normal gameplay. The language of "just a few dollars" can mask the more significant learning process of wagering and chance.

*"Young people are being conditioned… they're conditioned to wage and practice micro-currency, micro-transactions, that we don't notice like, 'Hey, I'm just using $2 on Roblox.'"*

Beyond purchasing items, there are markets where young people trade or bet on virtual goods. These features blur the line between harmless fun and activities that resemble gambling.

*"In games like Fortnite, young people gamble on skins. They're earning or purchasing these items and then going off-site to trade or wager them."*

Participants noted how social networks associated with gaming further embed gambling- like behaviors in youth culture. By comparing "wins" or valuable virtual items on platforms like Twitch or YouTube, young players feel pressure to keep up with their peers, potentially escalating their in-game spending.

*"With social media, there are a lot of chance games … Candy Crush and streaming services like Twitch … going back to games on the phone … targeted ads like DraftKings … slot machine games that may be targeted to younger people."*

### Economic Drivers of Gambling

Many participants highlighted how economic challenges steer youth toward gambling. Whether it stems from a desire or need to help pay bills or from perceiving gambling as a shortcut to financial relief, the promise of quick money exerts a strong influence over youth. This motivation can be potent in households experiencing poverty, where families view gambling as a potential lifeline.

*"Rather than working a job after school or something along those lines, they're trying to be as strategic as they can be, about their wagers so that it can potentially pay their parents' mortgage or pay for groceries during the week."*

Alongside personal motivations, familial expectations sometimes amplify the pressure to gamble. In some cases, it becomes entangled with hope for a better life.

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Participants shared that within economically strained environments, gambling can feel like one of the few accessible pathways toward financial relief. Memories of neighbors who have won large sums, even if infrequent, fuel narratives that one

wager could transform financial circumstances.

*"Especially for the North Shore, there's been a lot of million-dollar winners in Salem, Beverly, Peabody, Beverly, and I think Lynn had one too, within the last month or so. Trying to tell kids, 'That doesn't happen,' and there, they show you evidence that it could happen, they're just going to do it more and try to get their fix."*

### Adult and Family Influences

Adult relationships and family traditions emerged as powerful catalysts for early gambling behaviors. Youth learn from observing the adults in their lives, and when family members or older peers model gambling, it becomes normalized for younger children. Youth are introduced to gambling through explicit encouragement and passive exposure, such as watching parents, older siblings, or extended family members engage in casual betting.

*"Some examples that I think of youth participating in gambling would be when they're watching adults around them, maybe playing cards or gambling."*

Additionally, some participants described situations where family members unknowingly reinforce gambling habits by allowing children to play along in small-stakes betting or making jokes about winning and losing money.

*"…Yeah, I was as young as six years old … early memories of lottery tickets and watching family members being very engaged … And that had a big influence on them later in their life in terms of gambling, even though they didn't quite see it as gambling in the same way [as casino gambling], there's still a difference in their view of what is gambling."*

### Peer Influence and Recruitment

Social groups can encourage gambling by making it seem normal through shared activities. Sometimes, this begins with small bets in informal settings, leading some young people to risk increasingly larger sums.

*"The students themselves are saying... they hear their friends losing up to like $200. So, it's pretty large wagers. It seems pretty constant."*

In schools, lunchtime or free periods often provide opportunities for dice or card games that involve betting, even if the currency is candy or chips. Snack items like "Takis" or other goods may stand in as money, but the behavior still mirrors gambling patterns.

*"At lunchtime, they play dice games. Instead of money, sometimes it's Takis, which is really big currency for children right now."*

Participants provided anecdotes of how upperclassmen might introduce underclassmen to sports betting or card games.

*"Upperclassmen are indoctrinating underclassmen into this behavior. They're recruiting them as peers and saying to them, 'Hey, why don't you try to do this with us?"*

Participants described how peer-driven recruitment often occurs through direct social interactions, particularly in school, where older students introduce younger peers to gambling.

*"…they're recruiting them as peers … 'Hey, why don't you try to do this with us?' or '…getting together at lunch to literally shoot dice,' which is funny to me because it's such an old-fashioned way of gambling [informal, hand-held dice games] … and it's this weird intergenerational way for them to socialize."*

### The Role of Digital Platforms

Participants often pointed out that digital tools and online apps make it easier for young people to gamble. Youth sometimes access sports betting apps through shared accounts or alternative identification methods. Social media platforms also offer spaces for gambling-like activities, which can be more difficult to regulate or monitor.

*"Youth are very good at finding workarounds to access sports betting apps like DraftKings and FanDuel."*

The overlap between social networking and gaming allows young people to place bets or trade virtual items within a single platform or across multiple channels. This fluidity makes strict age verification or parental oversight challenging.

*"I see a lot of youth engaging in gambling, not necessarily through gambling apps, like specifically apps designed for gambling, but gambling through social media apps, for example, Facebook or Instagram, TikTok."*

Participants emphasized that youth find ways to bypass traditional age restrictions on sports betting apps and digital gambling platforms. Many young people rely on older friends or family to create accounts on their behalf, use prepaid cards or gift cards to deposit money, or access gambling through social media betting groups that

operate outside formal gambling regulations.

*"…they're engaging [in gambling] in many different ways, on their phones [mobile devices] … sweepstakes, gambling at school … sites with gray areas where it seems like they may be legal, may not be legal [unregulated platforms] … friends or parents setting up accounts for them … pools, leagues, fantasy leagues … so definitely engaging in different ways."*

*"Sports wagering online, although they have to verify their age, it's as simple as putting in a date before. They know what years are older than 21, so that's as simple as doing that, and those are the trends I'm seeing, at least with our young adults that we serve."*

Several participants noted that parents are frequently unaware of these activities, as gambling apps and websites do not always leave an obvious digital footprint. Even when parents do monitor online activity, they may not recognize gambling-related behaviors within gaming platforms, particularly those that involve microtransactions, loot boxes, or off-platform trading.

*"I think we can give information to parents about this issue ahead of time, because sometimes parents are not even aware of what kids do in the community. And I know, because of my brothers, when I was a kid. So, it is important to make sure parents are informed, and have a way to discuss that with their kids."*

## Comprehensive and Responsive Services

Participants highlighted several implications for delivering programs and services to mitigate problem gambling harm, particularly among youth and diverse communities.

Youth play a crucial role in gambling prevention, often serving as cultural liaisons within their families and among their peers. Many children act as primary communicators, bringing information from prevention programs back to their homes, which helps spread awareness beyond the initial target audience. Recognizing that youth also serve as caretakers and financial contributors within their households emphasizes the need for programs that align with their realities and responsibilities.

*"A lot of them, the children are the English speakers in their families. So, then they're able to be the cultural liaison to their families. So, they learn about gambling, they learn about some prevention strategies, and it's trying to bring more awareness around the issue. The other thing that we've learned is that a lot of the youth that we work with, they're also the caretakers and providers in their families."*

Participants emphasized that problem gambling often co-occurs with other complex social and behavioral health challenges. In particular, some highlighted its connection to domestic violence, underscoring the need for service systems to address gambling harms as part of a broader continuum of care.

*"Community-based organizations working with survivors of domestic violence have reported that problem gambling is often an issue either for their clients or their abusers, making it crucial to integrate gambling prevention into broader social service efforts."*

## Evaluation and Quality Improvement

### *Community-Centered and Culturally Responsive Evaluation*

Participants emphasized the need for comprehensive and disaggregated data to accurately assess the reach and impact of problem gambling services. One service provider highlighted the need for:

*"… Qualitative and quantitative data collection to inform policies, including youth testimonials and lived experiences."*

Another respondent underscored the importance of tailored survey designs.

*"Surveys should be structured to reflect the specific realities of different communities rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach."*

Additionally, participants identified a gap in qualitative data needed to inform strategies, highlighting the importance of qualitative research in understanding the real-life factors that contribute to problem gambling.

*"We got into great discussions around wanting to have a lot more qualitative data to inform different programming. There's some really good quantitative data, but qualitative data goes a step further to inform interventions."*

### *Data Gaps and Service Delivery Challenges*

A major challenge identified by participants was the lack of disaggregated demographic data.

*"As far as data that they would like to see, they really wanted to see more disaggregated data. So, data by race, age, ethnicity, gender, job category, income level–just that really basic demographic information so that they could inform strategies specific to certain communities*

*or groups."*

Another participant reflected on previous research limitations related to understanding problem gambling in the state.

*"The baseline study that was done couldn't find Latino people in Springfield, they couldn't find Asian people, they couldn't find Black and African American people, and it boggles the mind."*

Geographic disparities in data availability were a concern. Participants requested additional data from the state that would better help identify communities with higher incidence of problem gambling.

*"Can the Lottery Commission give us data by ZIP code or geographical information system so that we can see those inequalities?"*

*"I would be interested in seeing lottery sales by neighborhood... and see the disparity, this hopelessness disparity, which I know exists, but I want to see it numerically."*

## Community Engagement and Feedback

The qualitative findings shown in this section underscore the critical value of community engagement strategies in building knowledge about problem gambling.

The SLSs and CLSs have proven to be essential platforms for capturing lived experiences and expert perspectives, helping to inform and shape responsive and culturally grounded programs. Real life narratives emerged as especially powerful in changing perceptions and behaviors around gambling, particularly among youth. Embedding prevention messages within existing youth-centered spaces enhances both their relevance and impact, making community engagement a dynamic ongoing process.

These findings also highlight the value of community engagement strategies in advancing our understanding of problem gambling, especially among youth and marginalized populations.

The SLSs and CLSs demonstrate that community engagement is not merely a method for gathering feedback—it is a generative process that produces new, contextually rich knowledge capable of informing more equitable and effective interventions. The listening sessions functioned as vital conduits for knowledge creation and generating shared understanding among OPGS, stakeholders, and the community. By centering the voices of those most impacted—youth, families, community leaders, and service

providers–these sessions brought to light patterns of behavior, cultural norms, and structural influences that might otherwise be overlooked in more traditional research settings.

# Discussion

The 2024 Listening Sessions amplified the growing concerns of online gambling activities, accompanying aggressive marketing and its impact on youth. The contributions of the 2024 listening session participants highlight the evolving landscape of youth gambling behaviors, the normalization of gambling within cultural and familial settings, and the existing gaps in prevention strategies. These findings emphasize the need for culturally responsive, evidence- based, and data-driven approaches to mitigate problem gambling, particularly among historically marginalized communities and at-risk youth. This section discusses the implications of the listening session findings, organized around the OPGS D2A Framework.

## Monitoring and Surveillance

The report highlights an urgent need to expand monitoring and surveillance efforts beyond traditional epidemiological data in order to capture the reality of youth gambling. Participants pointed to online platforms, such as sports betting apps, e-sports wagering, and social media channels, as increasingly important spaces where gambling-like activities and advertisements are prevalent. This shift emphasizes the need for real-time surveillance mechanisms that leverage emerging technologies and social media analytics.

Two priority surveillance focus areas emerged during the listening sessions:

1.  **Peer Recruitment:** Older students often introduce younger peers to betting, whether through fantasy sports leagues or informal wagers, driving early initiation. Monitoring these peer networks can reveal how gambling spreads within youth communities.

2.  **Gambling and Substance Use:** Youth gambling frequently often co-occurs with alcohol and marijuana use, reflecting a clustering of high-risk behaviors. Surveillance systems should be adapted to track these intersections more rigorously, particularly in school settings, treatment programs, and community health data–so that intervention efforts can address co-occurring risks in an integrated manner.

# Contextualizing Data

Listening session findings demonstrate the extent to which gambling behaviors are embedded into familial and cultural traditions. From giving scratch-off tickets as gifts to organizing community events centered on raffles, many young people encounter gambling from an early age. This normalization can mask the transition from harmless recreation to problem behavior. Culturally informed prevention campaigns that collaborate with faith-based groups, cultural organizations, and community leaders can foster more open, relatable discussions about the risks of gambling.

In low-income communities, the perception of gambling as a viable means to alleviate financial hardship further magnifies its appeal. Participants reported that some youth view gambling as a quick path to economic relief, especially when faced with limited employment or educational opportunities. By integrating financial literacy components into prevention curricula, OPGS can address the broader socioeconomic factors that make gambling attractive. This approach may reduce the stigma around help-seeking by framing gambling risk within a larger conversation about economic challenges and community wellbeing.

These insights underscore the importance of contextualizing data by embedding cultural, familial, and socioeconomic factors into how we interpret gambling trends. This ensures that prevention strategies are grounded in the lived realities that shape it.

# Strengthening Services

Participants identified sports betting, fantasy sports, and in-game purchases (e.g., loot boxes or skins) as common gateways to gambling. Tailoring program materials to modern realities can make prevention efforts more relevant and engaging. For instance, educational modules could address topics such as the potential harm of online sports wagers, the psychological underpinnings of loot box purchases, or the blurred line between gaming and gambling.

Young people are uniquely positioned to influence each other's behaviors. Peer-led initiatives, such as youth ambassador programs or PhotoVoice projects, can harness this influence by encouraging youth to share personal experiences and act as "cultural liaisons" within their families. When combined with culturally tailored messaging—multilingual resources, context- specific examples, and storytelling approaches—prevention programs have the potential to resonate more deeply. Such

initiatives empower young people as co-creators of prevention messages, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and community accountability and strengthening the influence of these messages among their target audiences.

## Evaluation and Quality Improvement

Strong evaluation and improvement systems are essential for identifying effective programs and services and understanding if, how, and why they work. Study participants highlighted the importance of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of youth from diverse backgrounds. Employing the D2A Framework, OPGS could combine large-scale surveys with focus groups and community listening sessions. These mixed methods approaches allow for the identification of emerging trends in real time, enabling rapid adaptation of policies and programs.

Collecting disaggregated data on race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status is essential for pinpointing disparities in gambling prevalence and related harms. Such data enables policy decisions that are both evidence-based and equity-focused, ensuring that resources are allocated where they are needed most.

## Community Engagement and Feedback

Long-term success in curbing youth gambling relies on meaningful collaboration with schools, community organizations, and cultural institutions. By maintaining dialogue with partners and actively involving young people in program design, OPGS can build trust, stay attuned to emerging issues, and adapt programs and services as needed. Youth-led campaigns such as digital storytelling initiatives can serve as powerful tools for raising awareness.

Moreover, engaging young people as "information carriers" within families extends the reach of prevention messaging, ensuring that lessons learned in schools or community settings are shared at home.

# Recommendations for OPGS

The following recommendations may address emerging trends related to preventing youth gambling:

**Broaden and Diversify Data Collection.**
- Capture new gambling behaviors: Systematically track online betting, sports gambling, and social media-based gambling among youth.
- Disaggregate data: Collect information by age, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic factors to pinpoint disparities and tailor services.
- Foster community partnerships: Collaborate with schools, youth-focused nonprofits, and digital gaming platforms to gather real-time data on youth gambling patterns.

**Leverage Technology and Analytics.**
- Use digital analytics: Monitor gambling-related advertisements, app usage patterns, and discussions on social media to identify emerging risks.

**Integrate Cultural and Economic Considerations.**
- Develop culturally specific campaigns: Challenge harmful narratives and address the normalization of gambling, ensuring messaging resonates with diverse groups.
- Research economic drivers: Examine financial motivations behind youth gambling and incorporate financial literacy content into prevention programs.

**Enhance Prevention and Education Efforts.**
- Investigate digital gaming-gambling overlap: Differentiate between casual gaming, or playing mobile and video games, and problematic gambling to refine program materials and services.
- Update prevention materials: Include topics such as sports betting, loot boxes, and other digital gambling trends in educational materials.
- Implement peer-led programs: Train young people as ambassadors to educate peers on the risks of gambling and to promote healthy decision-making.

**Strengthen Family and Community Involvement.**
- Develop family-centered programs and services: Provide resources and training to help parents recognize and address gambling-related risks among

their children.
- Adopt multilingual outreach: Ensure materials and programs are accessible to communities most affected by gambling, translating resources as needed.

**Promote Ongoing Evaluation and Collaborative Partnerships.**
- Use mixed-methods research: Combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to assess the impact of interventions and refine strategies.
- Conduct community-driven evaluations: Involve youth directly in program assessments to ensure programs and services remain relevant and effective.
- Foster long-term collaborations: Maintain partnerships with schools, cultural groups, and community organizations to sustain momentum and adapt to evolving gambling trends.

# Conclusion

The findings of this report highlight the need for a comprehensive and adaptable approach to addressing youth gambling in Massachusetts. By expanding monitoring and surveillance efforts to include digital platforms, addressing cultural and socioeconomic drivers, and strengthening both peer-led and culturally tailored programs and services, OPGS can more effectively reduce gambling-related harm. Implementing strong evaluation methods, such as mixed-methods research and real-time analytics, will help refine strategies in response to the evolving gambling landscape. Sustained community and youth engagement will ensure that interventions remain relevant and resonate deeply with those most affected. In doing so, Massachusetts can move closer to a comprehensive, equity-focused approach that safeguards young people's well-being and promotes healthier, more informed behaviors across diverse communities.