**The legalization of sports gambling in the US was a mistake |**

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oral sessions with C. Hamard

**By** Bhaskar Sunkara in *The Guardian*, April 2024.

On Wednesday, the NBA announced that Jontay Porter, a center for the Toronto Raptors, was [banned](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2024/apr/17/jontay-border-gambling-ban-lifetime-toronto-raptors) from the league for life. An investigationfound that the bench player disclosed confidential information to gamblers, exited a match early to influence an “over/under” wager on his stat line, and bet on games using a friend’s account. Porter’s actions shouldn’t be trivialized. Sport is an important part of our culture – and fair competition and the integrity of results are essential to it. But the real threat to sports and the livelihoods of billions of fans lies with the leagues, special interests and media outlets integrating addictive gambling with the games we love. The profit-seeking corporate encouragement of this behavior needs to be countered with strict federal regulation before an [emerging public health crisis](https://www.kentuckytoday.com/news/gambling-and-its-dangerous-addictive-side-called-public-health-emergency/article_54fe68ca-c523-11ee-b577-f31fc5bd1e35.html) gets even worse.

In the 2010s, the Democratic governor, Phil Murphy, challenged the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (Paspa), which prohibited new sports gambling. At the time, the scope of illegal sports gambling was unclear, with some putting the number at [$50bn](https://slate.com/business/2014/11/adam-silver-says-theres-400-billion-per-year-of-illegal-sports-betting-in-the-u-s-alone-seriously.html).

The US supreme court took on the case in 2018, ruling that Paspa was unconstitutional. Today, 38 states and the District of Columbia have made sports betting legal. The early results have made billions for gambling companies, television networks, state governments, and players and owners alike. It’s been a nightmare, however, for millions of ordinary people.

When I bet on sports in high school, the process involved studying the Vegas lines in the Daily News and placing small bets with a local bookie. Today, technology has changed things radically: we can seamlessly place bets on our addictive smartphones and we don’t just bet before the games, we can bet on the outcome of every play, with AI models generating odds in real time.

Sports betting apps store dozens of data points on every customer: they know what you like to bet on, when to send you push notifications, and what offers can draw you back in if you haven’t gambled in a while. Like any drug, gambling activates the brain’s reward system. But most street-level dopamine-peddlers don’t have access to the power of big data. Nor do they have marketing departments. If you’ve watched a sports game, there’s no doubt you’ve seen advertisements from FanDuel, Draft Kings, BetMGM or any number of legal sportsbooks. ESPN, owned by the conservative Disney corporation, has even gone to the extreme of hosting its own sportsbook, ESPN BET.

The efforts are paying off. Last year, Americans legally wagered $120bn on sports, up 27.5% compared with 2022. And billions more are probably still bet illegally.

This sharp increase is a reminder that legalization does not just bring black markets into the light of day – it serves to radically expand markets. It’s no surprise that young people are suffering the most from legalization. Among young men, 38% say they’re betting more than they should. (481 words)