

Perspectives on Sports Betting among Young Adults in Massachusetts

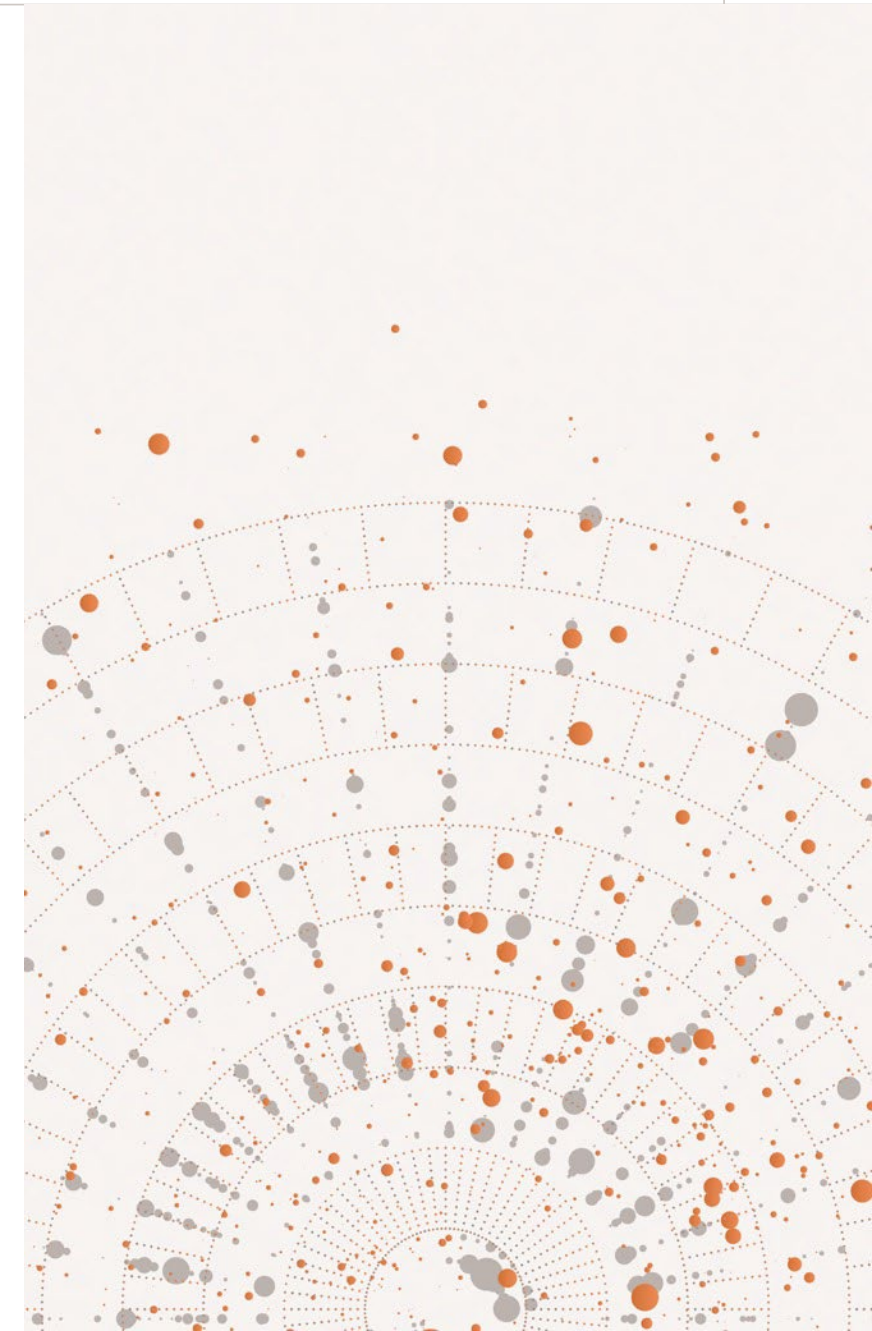
August 27, 2026

NORC at the University of Chicago

Introduction and Methods

The Massachusetts Gaming Commission (MGC) funded NORC to conduct a community-engaged research study to examine research questions including:

- What are young adults' perspectives on sports betting?
- How are young adults engaging in sports betting?
- What factors influence young adults' engagement with sports betting?
- How has legalized sports betting affected young adults in Massachusetts (e.g., social, economic, well-being)?
- What policies or programs may mitigate negative effects of and/or support the well-being of young adults who bet on sports?



The study's approach is based on NORC's Community-Engaged Research Framework

Community engaged-research approach:



• **Engaged 15** community members throughout the study to participate in a Community Advisory Board (CAB)



• **Co-developed** research questions, study design, and study materials, and conducted **participatory analysis** with the CAB



• **Recruited and trained 2 young adult community interviewers** to facilitate **peer-to-peer** discussion

Researcher-Community Partnership



© 2023 NORC

Source: Adapted from the Culturally Responsive Evaluation Framework and based on principles adapted from various frameworks for community-engaged research

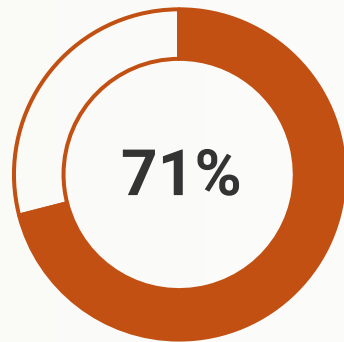
From 2023-2026, NORC conducted a qualitative research study comprised of interviews and focus groups

- Interviews with **12 sports betting researchers, policymakers, and vendors** to provide context on retail and online sports betting in Massachusetts and inform study design.
- Perspectives from **62 young adults** (ages 18 to 25), including 39 interviews and 5 focus groups with 23 young adults to understand their experiences with and perspectives on sports betting.
- Interviews with **6 young adult support professionals** (e.g., College Counseling Center Directors, Athletic Directors, mental health clinicians) on potential impacts of sports betting on young adults and inform recommendations.

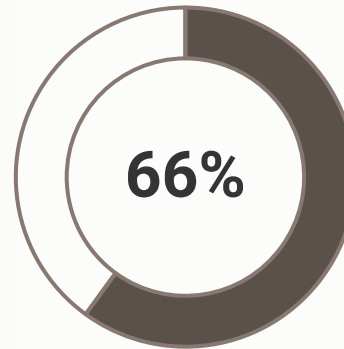
Among the 62 young adult study participants, most bet on sports, over half were female, and the majority were White

Among the 62 young adult participants...

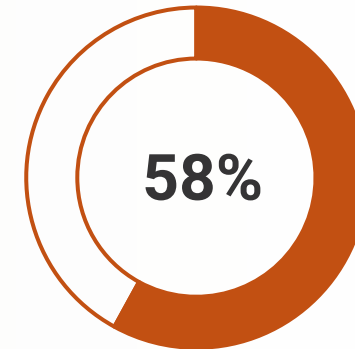
Bet on Sports



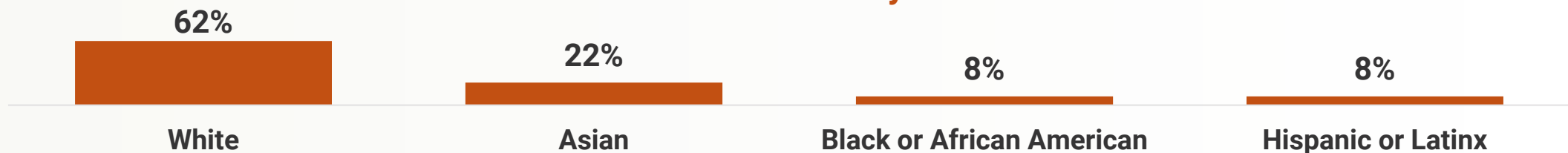
Ages 21-25



Female

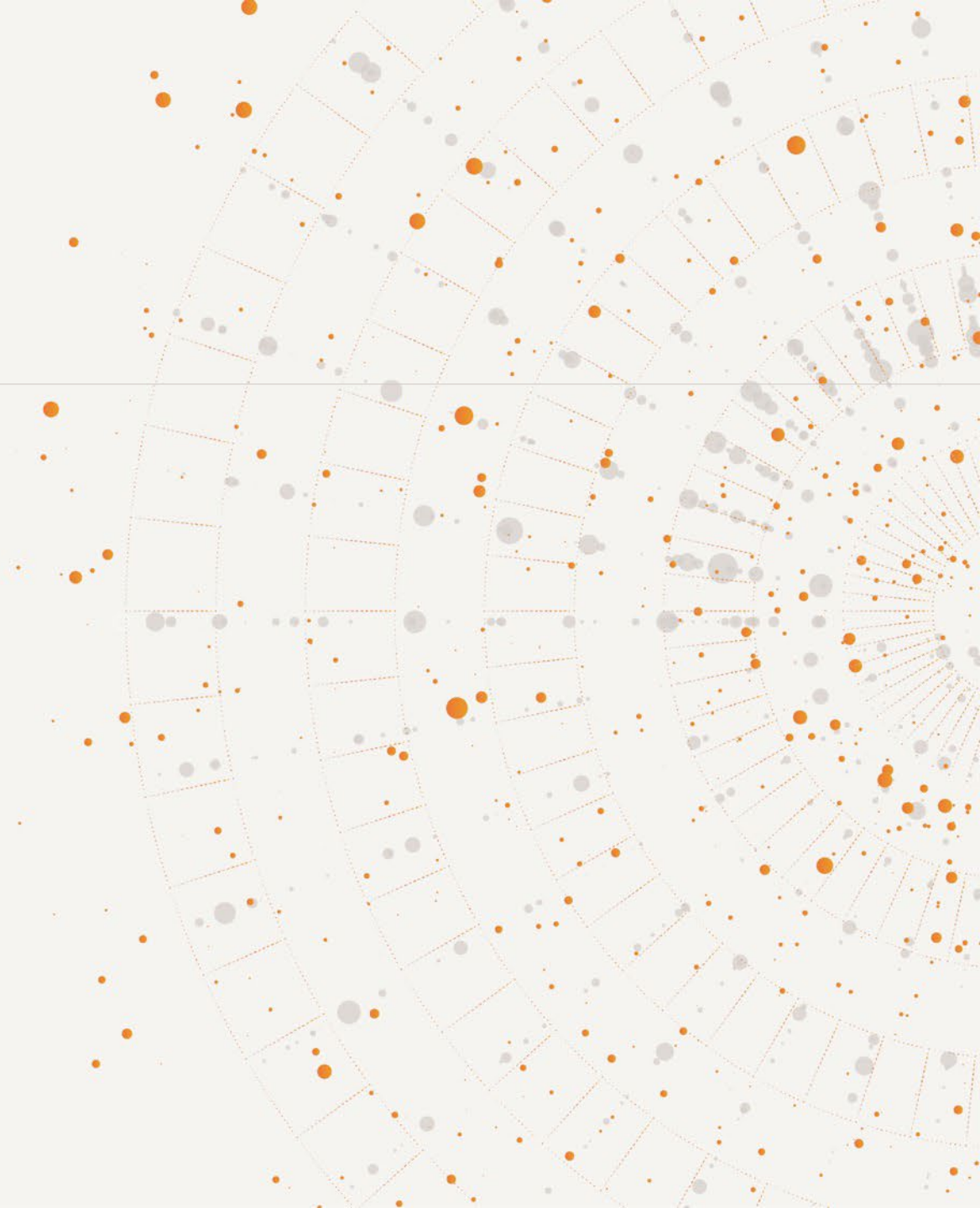


Race/Ethnicity



Key Findings

Patterns of sports betting behaviors among young adults



Most young adults engage in sports betting “casually” and “infrequently,” wagering less than \$10, and using mobile apps

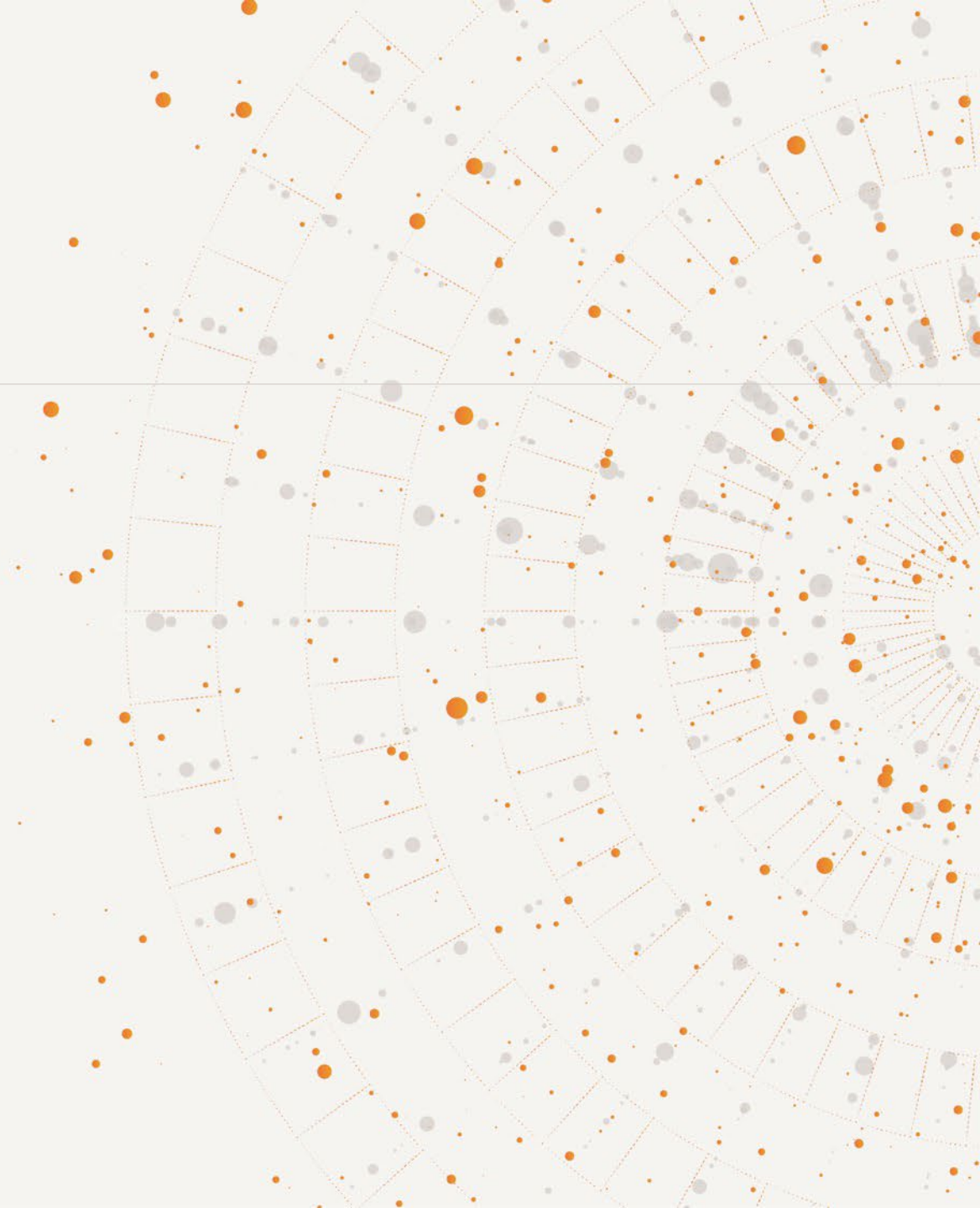
- Most engage in sports betting **casually**, with increased engagement around sporting events
 - Standard bets range from \$0.50 - \$10; a few wager more than \$50
 - Betting behaviors ranged from daily to at least once per week
- Sports young adults bet on varied, but bet types consisted primarily of **Moneyline** bets and occurred mostly **online**
 - Young adults bet on a range of sports, but **football and basketball** most common
 - **Moneyline** bets perceived to be more simple, less risky
 - Young adults primarily use **mobile platforms**, with DraftKings most frequently cited; several young adults noted leveraging informal peer networks and bookies
- Young adults also engage in other related activities

— “ —

“The type of bet I usually do is just go for the winner or top 5/top10 of the major PGA [Professional Golfers' Association] events happening throughout the year. I don't have enough confidence to make the parlays or anything big like that.”

- Young adult focus group participant

How Young Adults Perceive Sports Betting



Young adults perceive sports betting as a **low-risk, casual** form of entertainment

Benefits

Perceive betting as a social activity

- Bolsters social connectedness
- Increases engagement with sports

Betting generates income and state revenue, and enhances consumer protections

Harms

- Negative financial impacts
- May lead to addiction

Young adults recognize risks associated with sports betting, but downplayed or exempted themselves and peers from these risks

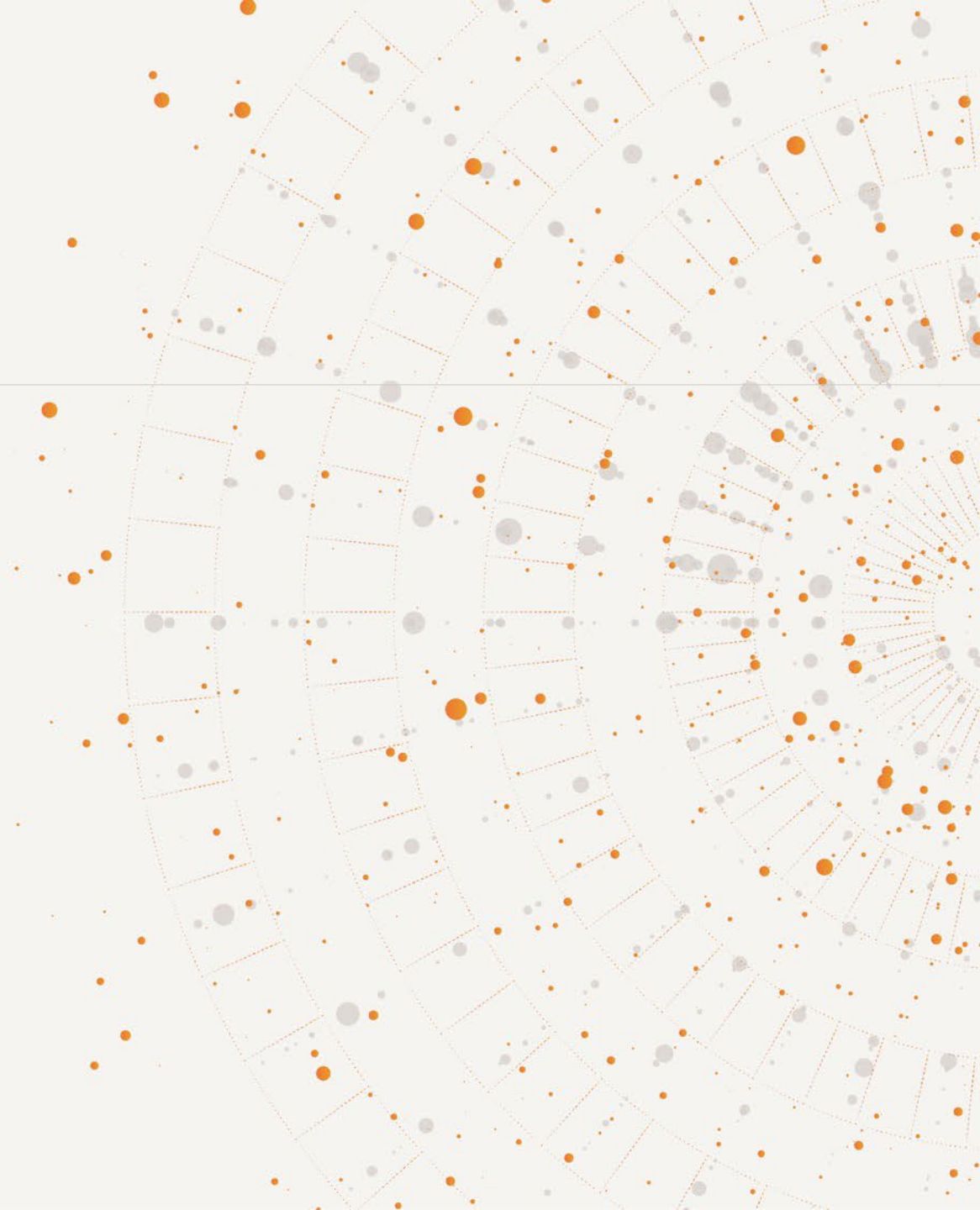
- Equate sports betting with making discretionary purchases



“I think that it can get out of hand pretty quickly if you don't monitor it, so I think that having proper regulations around it can be important... With proper regulations, it can be a fun pastime.”

- Young adult focus group participant

How the Normalization of Sports Betting Shapes Risk



Sports betting is widely perceived as normalized, driven by its ubiquity and social embeddedness

- **Social context** and **peer influence** contribute to normalization
 - Strongly held belief among young adults that sports betting fosters shared conversation and camaraderie
 - Word of mouth, peer influence, and family dynamics spread interest and generate participation
- Proliferation of **mobile and online platforms** increase **accessibility** and **frequency** of placing bets
 - Described as “frictionless” and “immediate”
 - Convenience and access of mobile apps increase prevalence and use



“I'd say 90% of my friends here gamble. My male friends here gamble. It's a lot of people, a lot of college students are definitely into sports betting.”

- Young adult interview participant

Pervasive advertising and promotional incentives contribute to normalization and engagement

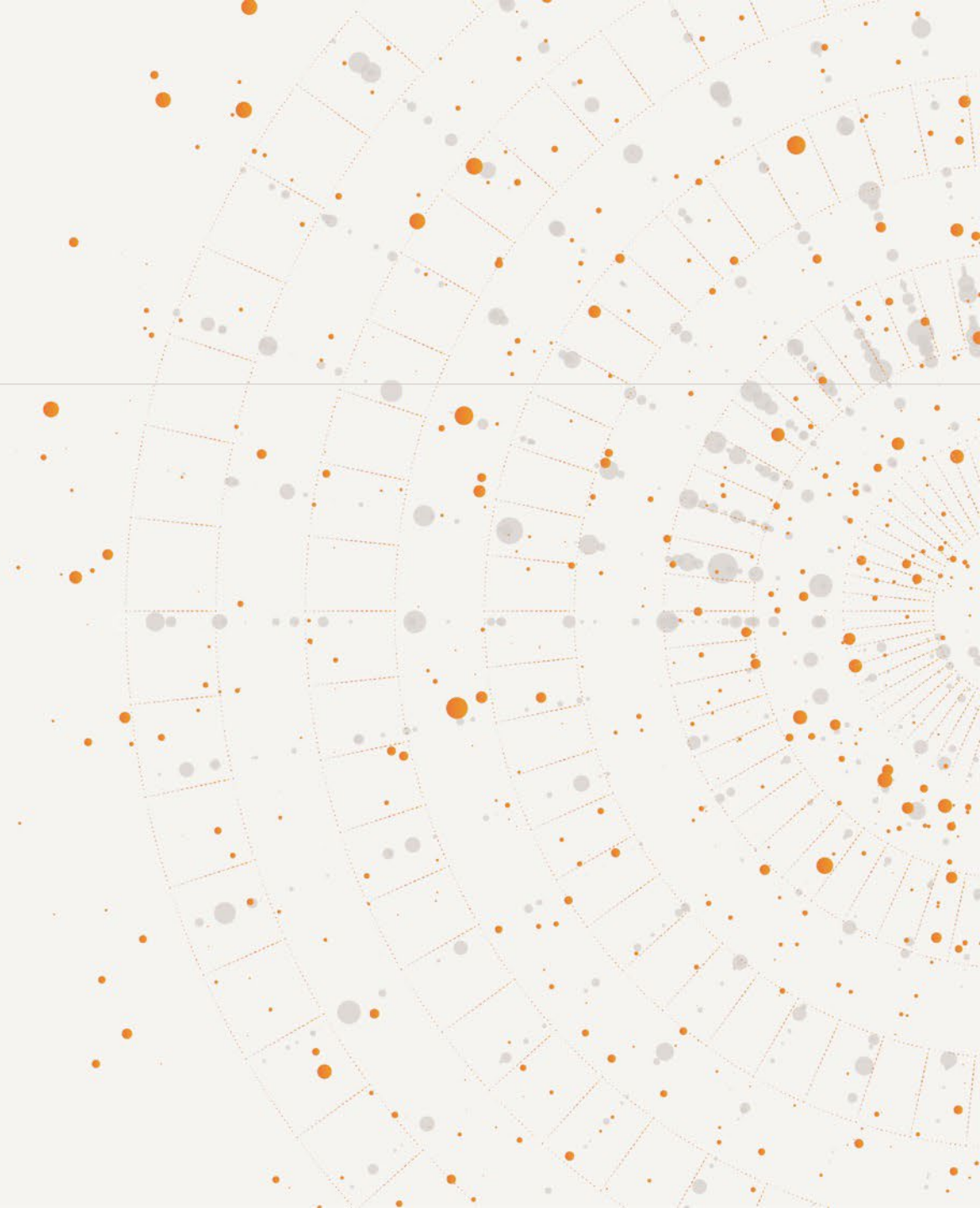
- **Widespread exposure to ads on social media platforms, mobile apps, podcasts, and streaming services**
 - Ads embedded into sports viewing experience
- **Promotional strategies framed as “free money” especially enticing for young adults with limited income**
 - Young adults choose which app to use based on promotions
 - Promotions persuasive, but often viewed as not delivering on what they promise
- **Ads target and feature young people**
 - Persuasive when they feature celebrities and influencers
 - Target mostly men, but young women are increasingly featured in ads
 - Young adults concerned about the impact of ads on young audiences



“It is interesting that a lot of the marketing and stuff towards college kids, I feel like, is heavy, when most of them probably can't legally bet.”

- Young adult focus group participant

Differential Experiences Across Groups



Experiences vary across subgroups of young adults

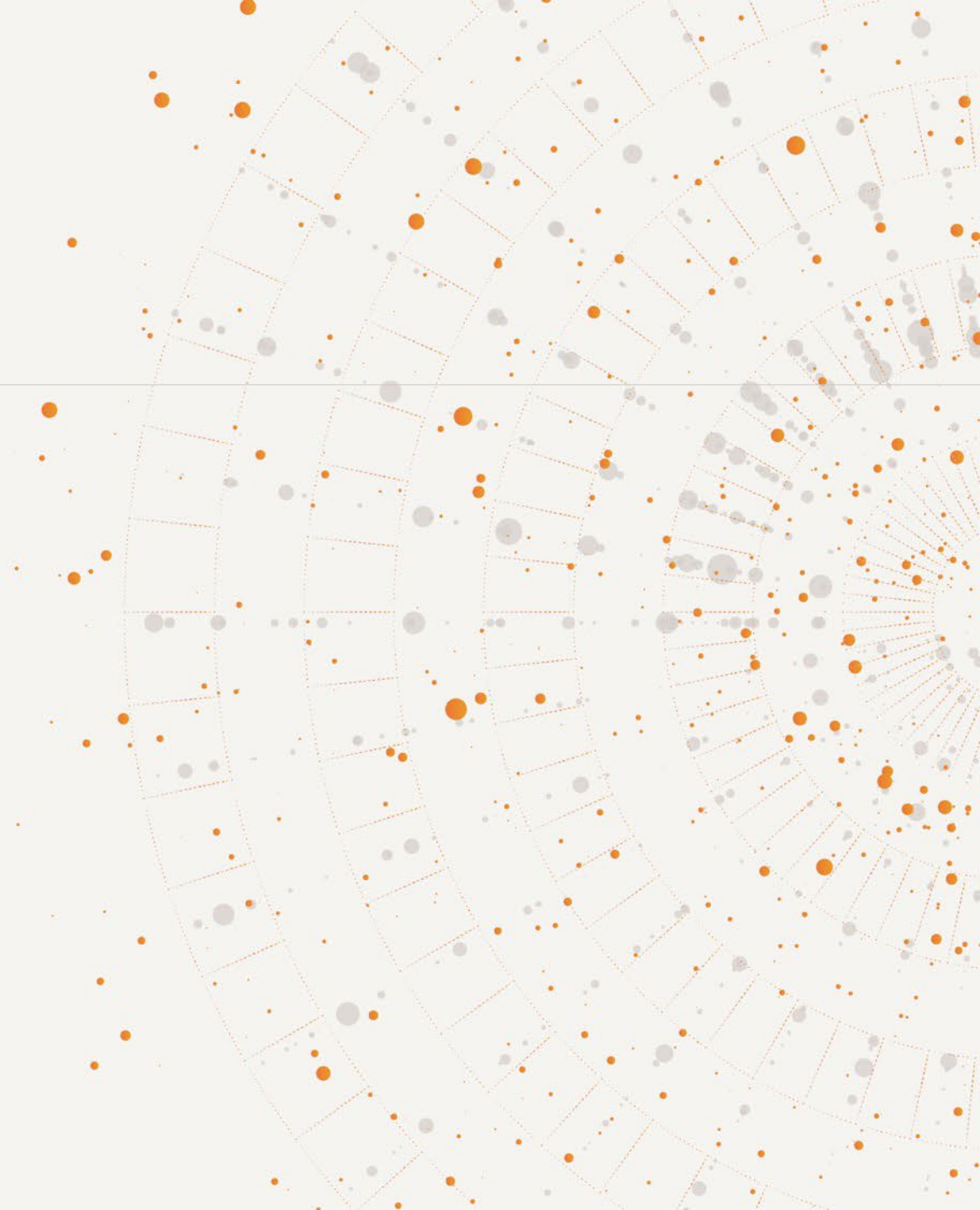
- **Underage young adults are engaging in sports betting despite restrictions**
 - Loopholes include fake IDs, offshore accounts, VPNs, or informal networks and bookies
- **Young adults perceive that sports bettors are primarily men, but believe young women's engagement is increasing**
- **Campus culture and word of mouth facilitate betting on college campuses, particularly within "sports schools"**
 - Collegiate athletes deterred from betting by NCAA restrictions, but young adults expressed concern for mental health impacts of sports betting on the athletes



"I was first exposed to it when I was in college, especially since my boyfriend was in Greek life, and was very big in sports, and all of his friends were very big sports fans, so I was just around it a lot. And then especially when it was legalized a couple years ago, it really exploded."

- Young adult focus group participant

Opportunities to Mitigate Risks and Potential Harms



Awareness of existing resources and supports for problem gambling is limited

Young adults report limited awareness of existing supports

- Awareness largely limited to helplines and disclaimers
- Many questioned whether current resources are effective
- Responsibility is viewed as shared across government, vendors, colleges, communities, and individuals

Young adult support professionals reported feeling underprepared to address sports betting harms.

- Receive insufficient training, resources, and support services



Vendors



Government/
Policymakers



Community



Individuals



Colleges/
Universities

Participants suggested multiple avenues for mitigating harms among young adults

Opportunities for prevention and protection

- Expand education and public awareness campaigns
- Increase visibility of support resources on apps, campuses, and public websites
- Improve financial literacy and responsible gambling education

Strengthen safeguards and policies

- Implement stronger in-app tools (spending limits, activity summaries, warnings)
- Enhance advertising oversight and consumer protections
- Consider policies addressing underage access and high-risk betting behaviors



Vendors



Government/
Policymakers



Community



Individuals



Colleges/
Universities

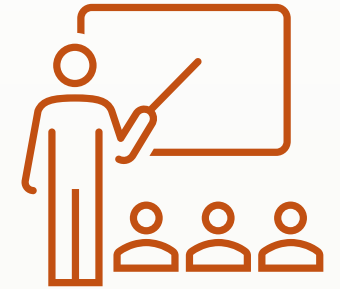
Discussion and Recommendations

What does this all mean?

- The normalization of sports betting is reinforced by **widespread advertising, easy mobile access, and peer influence**.
- Young adults often engage in sports betting because they perceive it as **low risk** and believe they have **high personal control** over their betting behavior.
 - Young adults recognized risks such as financial loss, impulsive betting, and addiction, including behaviors consistent with DSM-5 indicators of gambling disorder.
 - Despite these risks, most participants viewed problem gambling as something that affects other people, not themselves.
 - Discussion of broader mental health consequences was limited among young adults.
- Participants described **underage sports betting as common**, occurring through both informal **peer networks** and **regulatory loopholes**.
- Young adult support professionals reported feeling **underprepared** to address sports betting harms, citing **insufficient training, resources, and support services**.
- Participants emphasized the importance of harm reduction approaches.

NORC Recommendations

1. **Strengthen Statewide Education and Public Awareness on Gambling Harms**
2. **Regulate Sports Betting Advertising and Promotions**
3. **Strengthen App-Based Safeguards Using Opt-Out Defaults**
4. **Expand Access to and Awareness of Gambling-Specific Support Services**
5. **Address Underage Betting and Regulatory Loopholes**
6. **Adopt Harm Reduction Approaches for Collegiate Athletes**
7. **Invest in Ongoing Research, Monitoring, and Evaluation**



This study offers several strengths that enhance the credibility and relevance of the findings; however, we also acknowledge limitations

Strengths:

- In-depth understanding of young adult experiences
- Multiple stakeholder perspectives
- Fills a critical research gap
- Community-engaged design

Limitations:

- Findings may not generalize beyond Massachusetts
- Sports betting policies and practices continue to evolve
- Results are based on self-reported experiences

Acknowledgments

Project Team

NORC

- Petry Ubri, MSPH
- Jared Sawyer, MPH
- Katie Gallant, MSW
- Maya Ng-Yu

Previously at NORC

- Jenna Sirkin, PhD,
- Christina Drymon, PhD
- Alva Chavez
- Samantha Augenbraun, MPH

Gemini Research Group

- Rachel Volberg, PhD
- Calyx Terrafen

Community Advisory Board Members

- Anna DiGravio
- Anthony Sardak
- Benjamin Starr
- Daniel Echeverria Cordoba (also served as interviewer)
- Erica McCummings
- Frank Poon
- Hugo Rengifo
- Jacob Wallack
- Josh Garber
- Linh Ho
- Matthew Jodoin-Siegel
- Stephanie Cadet
- Veronica Monserratt
- Yanqing Huang (also served as interviewer)
- Zachariya Ibrahim

Questions?

Thank you.

Petry Ubri
Project Director
Ubri-petry@norc.org

 Research You Can Trust™

 **NORC** at the
University of
Chicago