



Young People and Online Gambling: What the United States Can Learn from Ireland's Approach

Why Youth Gambling Online Matters

Each year, millions of Americans tune in to “March Madness,” the NCAA’s national college basketball tournament. In recent years, the tournament has also become one of the most heavily wagered sporting events in the world. As sports betting platforms partner with broadcasters to promote odds, in-game wagers, and bonus bets throughout the tournament, gambling is increasingly integrated into how American families consume sports.

In the past decade, gambling moved out of the casino and into our pockets via mobile apps. Online gambling platforms allow users to place wagers on sports, pop culture, and political moments, such as who will be on the next cover of Rolling Stone or the 2028 U.S. presidential nominee. These features are now advertised during major American television broadcasts, including the Golden Globes and Super Bowl. Gambling, which was once geographically and socially contained, is now embedded in mainstream culture and seeping into young people’s digital lives.

Expanded online access to gambling coincides with rising rates of youth betting. Globally, 17.9% of youth under 18 gambled in the past 12 months, with significantly higher rates of youth gambling in North America (33.7%) and Western Europe (26.6%) ([National Council on Problem Gambling, 2025](#)). About half of this gambling takes place online. Recent studies suggest 4-5% of youth ages 12-17 show at least one sign of a gambling problem compared to approximately 1% of adults ([Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2026](#)). In Massachusetts, the percentage of youth experiencing a gambling problem has increased fourfold in just two years. Gender is a major component in youth gambling trends, with research suggesting boys are significantly more likely to gamble and show signs of problematic gambling than girls ([National Council on Problem Gambling, 2025](#)).

Despite these trends, regulatory approaches to youth gambling vary significantly. In the United States, gambling is regulated primarily at the state level, resulting in a patchwork of age restrictions, advertising rules, and enforcement

mechanisms. Ireland's modernized regulatory framework prioritizes child protection, advertising restrictions, and licensee accountability, with full implementation expected by the end of 2027. At a time when youth gambling rates remain high in the United States, Ireland's approach offers useful insights for U.S. policymakers grappling with fragmented oversight, continuing the longstanding cultural and economic partnership between the two nations.

The State of Youth Gambling in the United States

In recent years, American access to legal sports betting has expanded rapidly. In 2025 alone, American bettors wagered approximately \$160 billion on sports, generating roughly \$16 billion in revenue for platforms ([Penzenstadler and Procell, 2026](#)). Analysts note Americans now risk more money on sports betting than they spend annually on movies, books, concerts, and professional sports tickets combined.

Young men aged 21–34 represent the most lucrative demographic for Sportsbooks, accounting for more than half of bets placed on mainstream platforms. Approximately 60% of these young male bettors place at least three bets per week. Many of these platforms attract users through promotions including new member bonuses of up to \$300 and “No Sweat Bets,” which offer users an account credit toward future bets if their wager is unsuccessful. These tactics frame sports betting as a safe financial decision for young adults, but can ultimately contribute to problematic gambling behaviors.

Pending class action lawsuits allege that some online sports betting vendors market their services to individuals under the legal betting age. Major sporting events like March Madness reveal the scale of underage demand. During the 2026 Super Bowl, an age-verification vendor reported more than 50,000 minors attempted to create betting accounts in a single hour of the broadcast ([Penzenstadler, 2026](#)). The company detected multiple forms of fraud, such as false identities, fraudulent documents, and repeated use of the same photos across different accounts. Regulators report cases of minors using stolen identities to create betting accounts, including relatives' identification.

Some parents who use sports betting apps have also reported their children accessing their accounts without adult permission. State regulators have documented hundreds of instances involving suspected underage bettors. New

Jersey's Casino Control Commission reported that DraftKings accounted for 620 suspected underage cases since 2023, totaling nearly \$2.8 million in wagers. While legal operators deploy identity verification tools, challenges persist with enforcing age assurance in a rapidly expanding digital market with significant appeal to boys and young men.

Ireland's Approach to Gambling Regulation

The Irish Gambling Regulation Act of 2024 represents a structural effort to curb youth exposure to gambling and reshape the regulatory environment surrounding betting. While youth gambling has been outlawed in Ireland for decades, many young Irish people held positive opinions of gambling and participated in gambling through illegal means. Similar to the American context, 22.9% of Irish 16-year-olds reported gambling for money in 2019 ([McAvoy et al., 2023](#)). Among these youth, 21.3% reported difficulty controlling their gambling, 19% expressed a desire to place larger bets, and 8.1% reported lying to adults about how much money they wagered. 10.3% of underage bettors gambled "excessively" and 5.6% met the criteria for problem gambling. Irish youth who used online gambling platforms were more than four times more likely to exhibit these problem gambling behaviors. As noted in the United States, youth gambling was more common among boys (28.2%) compared to girls (17.9%) and boys accounted for 80% of youth experiencing problem gambling.

To address the culture around youth gambling, the Irish regulator aims to impose the "heaviest penalties in Europe" for companies that allow young people to gamble ([Murray, 2025](#)). Gambling companies must obtain a license from the Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland and comply with strict age-verification requirements as a condition of operating. Financial penalties for enabling youth gambling can reach up to €20 million or 10% of company turnover and individual directors can receive up to eight years in prison. Irish regulation also addresses advertising promoting gambling to young people. In Ireland, gambling websites cannot sponsor events with a majority youth audience or youth participants, including sports clubs and fields ([Gambling Regulation Authority of Ireland, 2025](#)).

In terms of television and radio advertising, gambling ads cannot be shown between the hours of 5:30am and 9:00pm and advertising cannot "portray gambling as attractive" to young people. The Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland (GRAI) enforces these elements through its licensing agreement, which also

requires companies to contribute to the Social Impact Fund for preventative education, gambling research, and problem gambling treatment programs. By focusing on legal and financial enforcement for operators and a public health framework for education and treatment, Ireland is directly addressing gambling on a national scale.

Principles for Youth Protection in the United States

While the United States and Ireland differ in their size, regulatory systems, and governance structure, Ireland's recent reforms highlight several key transferable values in youth protection. Rather than prescribing specific regulatory models, these principles reflect broader values that can shape policy discussions as online gambling continues to expand. By considering these overarching themes, the United States can develop culturally appropriate youth protection measures.

1. Prioritizing Youth Protection in Gambling Advertising

In Ireland, regulators aim to prevent the normalization of gambling by placing limitations on marketing. Specific restrictions on gambling advertising at family-friendly events, targeting minors with ads, and limited time frames for television marketing reduce youth exposure to gambling. As gambling becomes increasingly integrated into mainstream entertainment, policymakers may explore how advertising practices shape children's perceptions of betting and consider stronger policies for youth protection.

2. Strengthening Age Assurance and Accountability for Operators

High-profile events such as March Madness and the Super Bowl expose the demand and challenges in enforcing age restrictions in digital environments. While age assurance technologies are an important safeguard, documented attempts by minors to bypass these systems demonstrate their limitations. Ireland's approach highlights the value of combining age assurance with broader accountability mechanisms for operators. In the United States, strengthening transparency, reporting, and oversight around underage access attempts may help policymakers better understand where current protections fall short.

3. Adopt a Public Health Framework for Problem Gambling

Ireland addresses problem gambling through a public health framework. Ireland's Social Impact Fund provides additional resources for education, research, and treatment for those experiencing problem gambling. In the United States,

discussions about youth gambling may increasingly benefit from considering how prevention, treatment, and research can be integrated into broader public health strategies. Additionally, requirements for increased transparency regarding user behavior and risk assessments for online gambling could provide additional data for researchers at the state and national levels.

4. *Ground Potential Regulation in Evidence-Based Research*

As digital gambling markets rapidly evolve, grounding regulatory discussions in strong empirical evidence can help find the best protection measures. Ireland's reforms are informed by national research on gambling participation, problem gambling indicators, and youth exposure to betting marketing. The Social Impact Fund provides opportunities for further research to identify the best strategies for problem gambling prevention. In the United States, continued data collection and transparency could help regulators better understand how young people encounter gambling environments and where existing safeguards may fall short. One area that may warrant further study is the relationship between gambling behaviors and gaming experiences common among young people. Recent research suggests some game features such as chance-based rewards and the use of real money in game purchasing may shape attitudes toward risk and wagering. While these features are not classified as gambling, additional research could help clarify the relationship between these mechanics and later engagement with gambling platforms. Stronger research partnerships and data collection can ensure policy discussions are informed by evidence.

Gambling is no longer confined to casinos and racetracks. Through digital platforms, betting has entered many American households and found a place in mainstream media. As access increased, young people began gambling at greater rates than previous generations. Ireland has taken significant steps to limit the risks and prevent key harms from online gambling. American policymakers should learn from these actions by:

- expanding research
- strengthening age assurance regulation and guidance
- limiting exposure to gambling advertising
- prioritizing holistic approaches when considering youth protections.

This March Madness season presents an opportunity for state and federal policymakers to learn from Ireland's example and keep sports fun while reducing the risks of gambling, especially for minors.