



Theodore Oliver of Saskatoon began **gambling** seriously at the age of 23. He quickly became addicted to online betting. He **prioritized** it over everything else. That included food, bills, and even relationships.

“I’d be down hundreds of dollars, my eyes burning and bloodshot from staring at the screen,” Mr. Oliver recalls. “I desperately needed a win. I hadn’t paid my rent in more than three months. In my twisted way of thinking, [I believed] winning would fix everything.”

Now 26, he’s been recovering from this destructive behaviour. But he’s still haunted by how he felt when he was addicted. And he still has to control the urge to bet, he says. The reason? Every day he sees ads encouraging him to try his luck at beating near-impossible **odds**.

“I find myself constantly reminded of that darker time by the stream of gambling ads,” he says. “But the temptations are loosening their hold on me.”

BOMBARDED!

Avoiding those ads is an uphill battle for people like Mr. Oliver. That’s especially the case for those who watch sports on TV. They’re exposed to nearly three gambling ads every minute during a typical sportscast.

How do we know? A recent study looked at five NHL and two NBA games played over a five-day period in October 2023. CBC Marketplace and England’s University of Bristol did the research. They found that gambling ads took up nearly 40 minutes of a three-hour game.

These pro-gambling messages took many forms. They included betting company

DID YOU KNOW?

About \$15 billion was bet on sports in Canada in 2020 but only three percent, or about \$500 million, was done legally.

logos, commercials, sponsored segments, and information about odds. Less than three percent of the ads talked about age restrictions or where to get help with a gambling addiction.

ALL BETS ARE ON!

There’s a reason pro-gambling ads are everywhere now. It has to do with the Safe and Regulated Sports Betting Act that became law in August 2021.

The new law made it legal for people to bet money on individual games like the Grey Cup. Up until then Canadians could lawfully bet only on lotteries or on multi-sport contests called parlays.

DEFINITIONS

GAMBLING: the activity of betting money, for example in a game or on a horse race

ODDS: the connection between two numbers that shows how much money someone will receive if they win a bet

PRIORITIZE: to treat something as being more important than other things



All four federal parties backed this change to Canada's **Criminal Code**. Their logic? Canadians were already betting billions of dollars on single games anyway. They were doing so illegally or via the so-called **grey market**. By removing the ban, lawmakers hoped to keep that money out of criminal hands. What's more, the taxes the government could collect from these betting purchases could be used to pay for social programs.

The law left it up to the provinces and territories to decide how to handle this change. Each of them promptly launched single-game gambling products, available through their provincial lottery setups.

COMPETING FOR BETTORS

Ontario went further. It let private companies get into the act. It formed an agency, iGaming Ontario, to oversee gambling operators who quickly began competing for a piece of the pie. Gambling sites and businesses boomed. Between October 1 and December 31, 2023, 49 operators and 72 gaming websites sprang up.

Ontarians responded big time. They bet \$3.1 billion on sports and e-sports. That was more than one and a half times what they had spent on this kind of gambling in the preceding three months.

Private companies became more eager than ever to cash in. To gain more customers, they began filling the airwaves with ads. And many ads used high-profile athletes to make gambling more enticing.

A POSITIVE FIRST STEP

That set off alarm bells. Experts say people **susceptible** to risky gambling behaviour shouldn't have to deal with big-name stars urging them to bet.

"Using hockey stars like Wayne Gretzky and Connor McDavid makes betting look like a surefire money-maker, and fun," says health journalist André Picard. "The reality is, losing is the norm. Multimillionaire athletes peddling sports betting are [like] the doctors who were featured in smoking ads prior to the 1950s. History won't be kind to them."

The Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) regulates the province's gambling sector. Last August, it ordered the industry to

A BAD BET

Problem gambling affects all ages. But young people are especially vulnerable. Gambling, Gaming and Technology Use (GGTU) is a mental health and addiction group in Ontario. It says that teen gambling can lead to an adult addiction.

The GGTU reports that one-third of Ontario students surveyed in 2019 had gambled. Worse, some four percent of high school students reported symptoms of low- to moderately-severe gambling problems. And two percent had severe symptoms.

People under 19 can't legally gamble. However, they may learn the habit through video games that award prizes with black market cash value or through betting on organized e-sport video games. The best advice? Don't start. But if you have already, ask an adult for resources to help you quit.

stop using athletes and other celebrities in ads. Still, many people want all gambling ads outlawed.

"[They] hurt people," says expert Bruce Kidd. "We want to minimize, if not eliminate, that harm." ★

DEFINITIONS

CRIMINAL CODE: a federal law that defines most criminal offences

GREY MARKET: an unofficial but not illegal system of selling goods or services

SUSCEPTIBLE: likely to be influenced or harmed by something



COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. When a person bets money on the result of a sports contest this is called:

2. How much money did Canadians gamble on sports in 2020?

3. Name the law that was enacted in August 2021. Which other law did it change?

4. How did this new law change gambling across Canada? Explain.

5. Why did Parliament pass this law?

6. Describe how this new betting opportunity was applied across Canada.

7. How did Ontario's approach differ from other jurisdictions? What businesses were set up?

8. How much money did Ontario residents wager on sports betting from October 1 to December 31, 2023?

9. How did many of the for-profit betting companies respond to this large increase?

10. What changes to sports betting ads featuring athletes were introduced last August?



QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. The article begins by sharing the story of Theodore Oliver, a recovering gambler. What was your initial reaction after reading Mr. Oliver's story? What questions would you like to ask him about his experience?

2. The article tells us that the federal government removed the ban on single-game gambling to keep money out of the hands of criminal betting organizations. It also states that the taxes the government has collected from these betting purchases could be used for social programs. Do you believe that the government's decision to legalize single-game gambling has had more of a positive or negative impact on Canadians as a whole? Provide examples to support your ideas.

3. The Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario (AGCO) recently changed the rules for sports betting advertising in the province. Professional athletes can no longer appear in these ads unless they are promoting responsible gambling. The AGCO also restricted certain characters and figures from appearing in sports betting ads because they may be more appealing to minors. As you see it, what impact will these restrictions have on the gambling habits of the viewers who watch these ads? Support your ideas with reasons.
