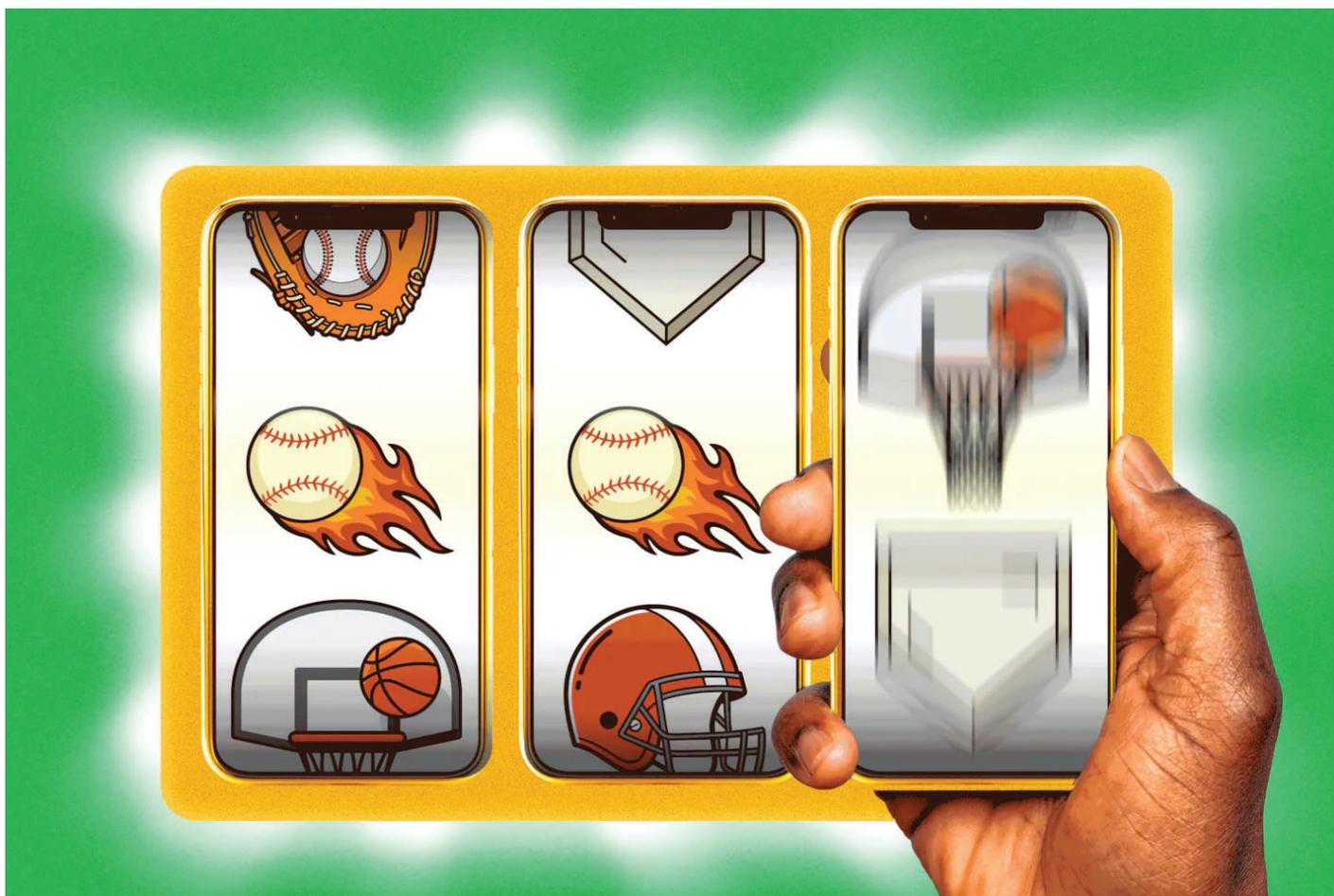


PERSPECTIVE | MAGAZINE

Prop bets in sports are dangerous. Officials in Massachusetts were warned of the risks.

Amid a torrent of scandals, 56 percent of monthly bettors here now believe the harms of gambling outweigh the benefits.

By **Jason Schwartz** Updated December 15, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



IMAGES FROM ADOBE STOCK; ILLUSTRATION BY KEILANI RODRIGUEZ/GLOBE STAFF

On the night of June 7, 2023, Red Sox outfielder [Jarren Duran](#) looked out from the batter's box at one of baseball's most fearsome closers: Cleveland's Emmanuel Clase. With the Guardians up 5-2 in the ninth, Clase wound up and delivered a not-so-fearsome pitch: a [91 mile-per-hour slider](#) that spiked the dirt between Duran's shoes and the plate.

According to a recent [federal indictment](#), an associate of Clase won \$58,000 by betting that the pitch would be both a ball (or a hit-by-pitch) and slower than 94.95 miles per hour. It was just one example, feds allege, of a two-year scheme in which Clase tipped off coconspirators about certain pitches so that they could lay down bets (with Clase taking kickbacks). In some cases, the pitcher even allegedly called or texted his associates mid-game to coordinate their plans.

This particular scandal is just one of several to afflict big-time sports since a 2018 Supreme Court ruling led to the widespread legalization of sports betting. Proposition, or prop, bets — in which gamblers wager on specific events within a game — have proven to be a major threat to ensuring fair competition. Just ask former Celtic [Terry Rozier](#), who was arrested in October on charges stemming from allegedly fixed props (he has pleaded not guilty).

Many prop bets are made in-game, as feds alleged was the case with Clase. Researchers have found that these types of bets are [particularly addictive](#), with bettors able to rapidly cycle through them on their phones. Rachel Volberg, an epidemiology professor and gambling expert at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, says that in-game bets change sports betting “from an old-fashioned lottery game” to “to something that looks much more like a slot machine.”

According to a [recent survey](#), led by Volberg, of Massachusetts residents who gamble at least once per month, 20.9 percent were considered “problem gamblers” in 2022 — meaning they had lost control of their gambling and experienced harm related to it. By the fall of 2024, after sports betting had been legalized, that number rose to 28 percent.

Nearly 43 percent of the bettors in the study, published in June as part of a multi-year research project out of UMass called SEIGMA (Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts), were deemed “at risk” —meaning they had either lost control or experienced gambling-related harm.

If only somebody could have seen this coming.

In a perfect world, that person would have combed through gambling studies, summarized their findings, and developed specific policy recommendations. And those guidelines would have helped lawmakers along the path to legalizing sports betting.

Friends, I am here to tell you that perfect world exists. It is called Massachusetts.

In November 2021, with the state headed toward legalization, the [Massachusetts Gaming Commission](#) launched such a study with SEIGMA, led by Volberg.

The report made more than a dozen recommendations, advising, for example, restrictions on advertising and celebrity endorsements. The most notable: “Prohibition of in-play sports betting.”

The study highlighted how those bets were “disproportionately used by problem gamblers” — and though it did not specifically address how in-game betting might affect the integrity of the actual sports being played, Volberg calls those risks “obvious.”

The report was not published until August 22, 2022, nearly two weeks after Governor Charlie Baker signed sports betting into law. But lawmakers had received a draft before passing the bill, which then-Gaming Commission chair Cathy Judd-Stein acknowledged in a public meeting.

It didn’t matter: In the [text of their bill](#), Massachusetts legislators explicitly stipulated that in-game betting would be legal (they also placed few restrictions on advertising). The bill’s cosponsors, state Representatives Daniel Cahill and Steven Howitt, did not agree to comment for this story.

Amid a torrent of scandals and negative headlines, 56 percent of monthly gamblers in Massachusetts now believe that the harms of gambling outweigh the benefits, the SEIGMA survey from June found.

I asked Volberg whether she ever has the urge to say, “I told you so.”

“You know,” she says, “I’m a human being.”

She is also a realistic human being.

“The fact of the matter is that the sports betting operators very much want in-game prop betting because it represents such a large fraction of their revenues. And so our recommendation would not have been very popular,” she says.

More revenue for the sports betting operators also means more tax revenue for the state. “Of course they don’t want to part with it,” Volberg says. “They legalized sports betting because they needed money.”

Massachusetts is not alone. None of the 38 states that have legalized sports betting has barred in-game or prop bets in professional sports. As states made their laws, “I saw very little evidence that anyone was considering harm minimization or harm prevention,” Volberg says.

In other words, Massachusetts knew the risks.

The tide may be slowly turning. Last year, Baker, in his current role as [NCAA president](#), called for an end to prop bets on college sports. Major League Baseball recently announced an agreement with leading sportsbooks to limit bets on individual pitches to \$200 and exclude them from parlays. And NBA Commissioner [Adam Silver](#) has called for sportsbooks to limit their prop offerings on fringe players, who he says might not “have the same stake in the competition.”

In Massachusetts, [state Senator John Keenan](#) introduced a bill in January that would ban both in-play and prop bets, as well as restrict sports betting advertising, among other measures. Last month, a joint House and Senate committee discussed it at a hearing on [several gambling-related bills](#). For now, Keenan says, his bill has been designated to stay in committee for further work. Even if the bill never advances, it seems that others are finally coming to Volberg's side.

"I don't believe it's too late," she says.

Jason Schwartz is a writer and editor based in Brooklyn, originally from Newton. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

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