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**The Unrecognized Risks of Gambling for Male High School Athletes:  
Male Athletes Drove Recent Poker Craze and Are at Higher Risk of Gambling  
Problems**

Although athletics is a healthy and popular extracurricular activity in American high schools, it also has its risks. The recent poker craze among adolescents in the U.S. was driven largely by interest in poker play among high school male athletes, a just-released analysis of adolescent gambling in the National Annenberg Surveys of Youth (NASY) indicates. The analysis conducted by the Adolescent Communication Institute at the Annenberg Public Policy Center examined the responses of over 2,000 high school males over the period of 2002 to 2008. It found that the rise in gambling on cards among high school age youth that occurred from 2003 to 2006 was attributable primarily to male youth who participated frequently in sports, about 55% of high school males. As seen in Figure 1 below, at its peak in 2005 over 19% of male athletes reported playing cards at least once a week. This was compared to less than 4% of males who did not participate in athletics on a frequent basis (see also Table 2 below). The survey indicated that female youth were much less likely to engage in poker play at all and were therefore not a focus of the study.

The findings suggest that high-status male youth, a group that includes athletes, were at the center of the poker craze that occurred during the last decade. High-status students tend to have close-knit peer networks that enable them to organize poker and other parties at their homes. Other youth, who were likely left out of these networks, were less likely to gamble, and when they did tended to engage in more *formal* gambling activities (e.g., state lotteries and slot machine parlors) that do not require the cooperation of peers. Moreover, in most states these gambling activities are restricted to persons at least 18 years of age and would therefore be off limits to most high school age youth.

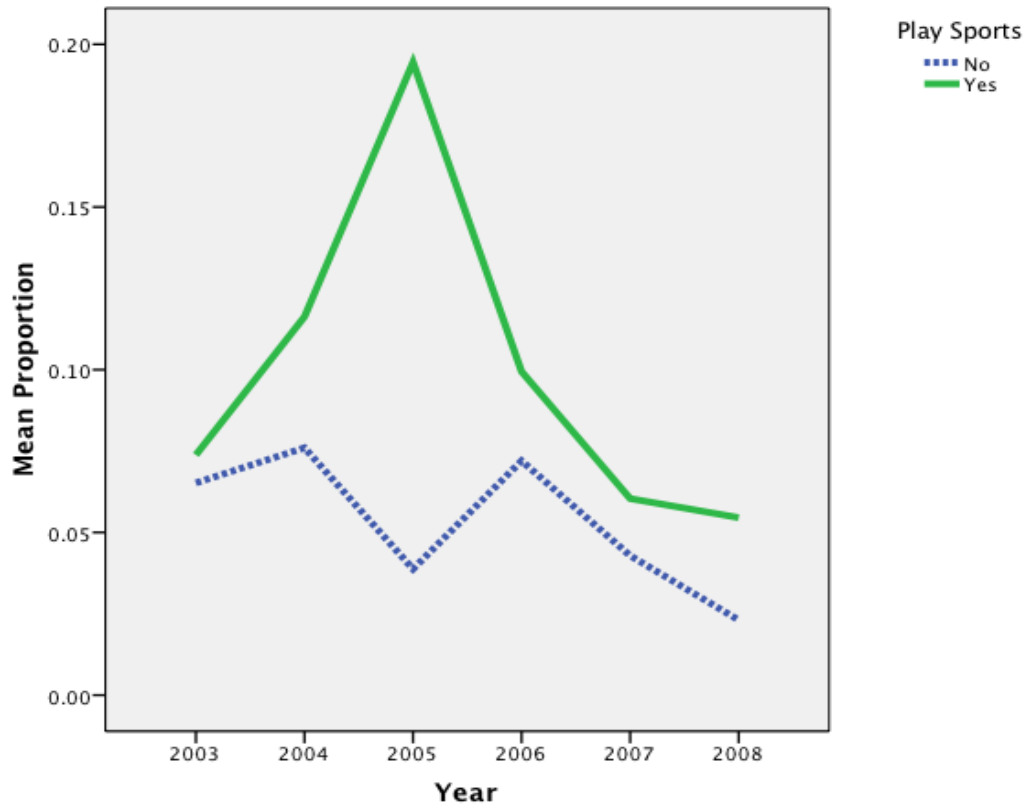


Figure 1. Weekly rates of card gambling among male students participating in sports frequently (most days in the week) vs. sometimes (some days) or not at all.

Statistical analyses supporting the role of athletics controlled for a host of other characteristics, including participation in other extracurricular activities and various background demographics. Despite these controls, athletic participation remained the most important characteristic associated with card playing.

Other forms of gambling that also require peer participation, such as informal sports betting (e.g., during March Madness), were also more likely to be reported by male athletes. In fact, as the poker craze subsided, sports betting rose among high school males, partially replacing the poker craze (see Figure 2 below). Formal types of gambling remained at lower levels throughout the study period.

The good news in these surveys is that all these forms of gambling tended to decline among high school males over the period of the study. Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that some high school age youth were allowed access to lotteries and slot machine venues despite the likelihood that they were under the legal age at the time.

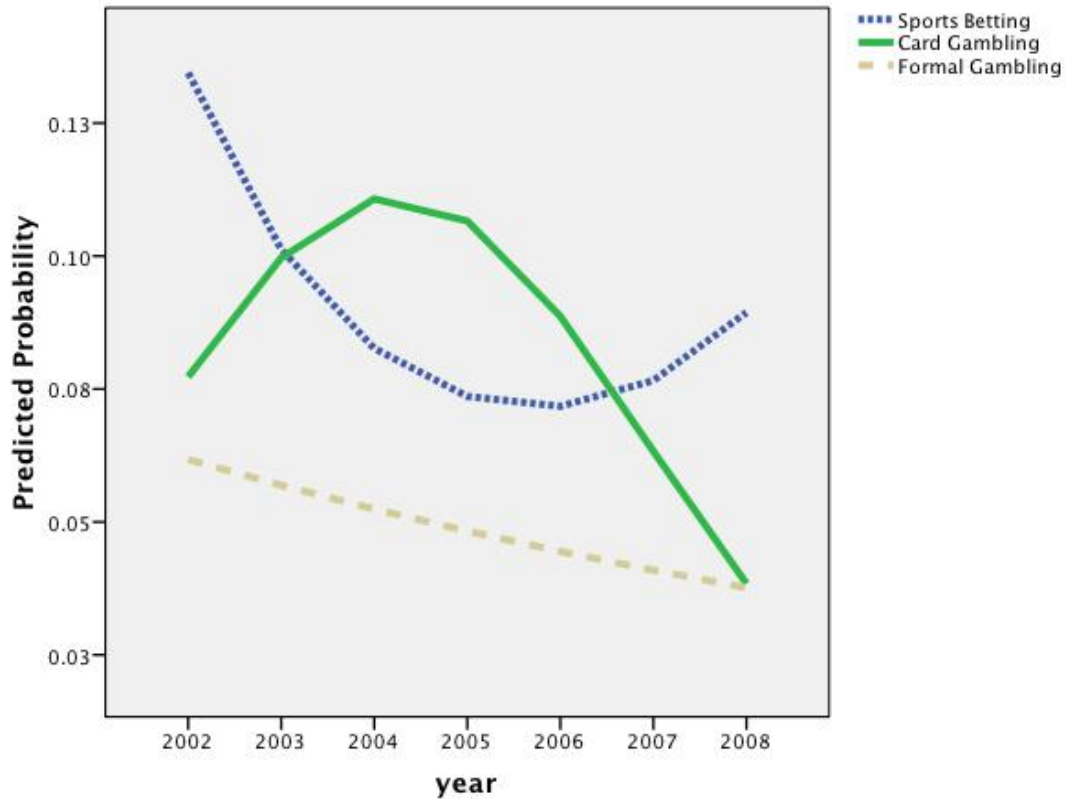


Figure 2. Trends in weekly rates of card gambling, sports betting, and formal gambling (lotteries and slot machines) among high school age males from 2002 to 2008.

“These findings indicate that male athletes are at greater risk for gambling problems,” said Dan Romer, who directs the National Annenberg Survey of Youth. “Other high school students are more likely to use venues that prohibit youth access, such as slot machine parlors. As a result, they are less likely to gamble and to develop gambling problems.”

Although problem gambling affects only a small proportion of youth (estimates range from 4% to 8%), high school poker players and sports bettors were found to report more symptoms of problem gambling, such as loss of control over betting, that were uniquely associated with their gambling habit than users of formal gambling activities. For example, as seen in Table 1 below, weekly card playing was uniquely associated with each symptom of problem gambling while only use of slot machines was uniquely associated with any symptom (in this case, tolerance). Since card playing is far more common among high school students, these differences in gambling problems can be significant.

Table 1. Percentage of weekly gamblers engaging in different types of activity and reported symptoms of gambling (estimated from years 2004 to 2008).

	Type of Symptom			
	Preoccupation (%)	Tolerance (%)	Loss of Control (%)	Withdrawal (%)
All Gamblers	34.1	6.1	17.0	11.1
Formal Gamblers (N)				
Slot machines (13)	23.1	15.4***	23.1	23.1
Lotteries (38)	44.7	13.2	28.9	13.2
Informal Gamblers (N)				
Cards (130)	54.6***	10.8**	35.4***	15.4*
Sports (118)	42.4*	11.9***	23.7	13.8

Note: Significant relations are based on logistic regression models with all four types of gambling as predictors of each symptom, \* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

The study was recently published online in the journal *Youth and Society* (<http://yas.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/03/06/0044118X10396641.full.pdf+html>). Benjamin DiCicco-Bloom, a Ph.D. candidate in Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, is the lead author of the study. According to DiCicco-Bloom, "I got the idea of student athletes being at the center of the poker craze by watching my brother and his friends play poker during high school. They would congregate at our home in relatively exclusive parties to which fellow athletes would be invited. The data collected in the NASY allowed me to test this idea."

In a certain sense, it is not surprising that male athletes are more likely to engage in poker and sports betting. During the poker craze, poker was treated as a sport in publications such as *The New York Times*, and poker tournaments were beginning to be featured on cable networks. In addition, major professional sports, as well as collegiate athletics, are heavily promoted as betting opportunities with current odds of winning prominently displayed in the media.

The findings suggest that the male youth most at risk of problem gambling in high school are also the ones most likely to be seen as well-adjusted. Nevertheless, youth who gamble in formal settings are also at risk. Those seeking to control gambling activities in high school youth need to recognize these differences to develop a realistic approach to youth gambling. In particular, our research indicates that athletes should be the target of prevention activities given that they are more prone to participate in informal gambling activities. Nevertheless, because only small proportions of youth develop gambling addiction problems, prevention activity will need to focus on those who gamble excessively whether in formal or informal settings.

Table 2. Percentages of athletes and nonathletes who reported different types of gambling on a weekly basis.

	Year of Survey					
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Type of Gambling						
Cards						
Athletes	7.4	11.6	19.4	9.9	6.0	5.5
Nonathletes	6.5	7.6	3.9	7.2	4.3	2.3
Sports						
Athletes	15.4	10.2	13.9	8.8	7.4	10.9
Nonathletes	8.7	3.2	3.9	3.2	5.0	6.2
Slots and Lotteries						
Athletes	3.4	1.4	2.1	2.9	2.0	3.0
Nonathletes	7.2	2.8	3.9	4.8	2.9	5.4
Number of Athletes	149	215	144	171	149	165
Number of Nonathletes	138	250	129	125	140	130

Note: Athletes reported that they participated in a sport most days of the week.

### Methodology

The surveys were conducted by telephone in the spring and summer of years 2002 to 2008 by Abt SRBI, Inc., using random-digit dialing procedures. The Adolescent Communication Institute of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania designed the surveys. The surveys included 900 respondents ages 14 to 22 per year; however there were 1,501 respondents in 2004 and 835 in 2008. Response rates range from 45 to 50 percent across all years, which is comparable to the rate obtained by the CDC in its national telephone surveys of behavioral risk factors in adults. For this analysis, the focus was on high school male students ages 14 to 18. The survey did not identify student athletes until 2003, so the data in Figure 1 start with that year. There were 1,905 male high school students in the study from 2003 to 2008. In total, there were 2,188 male high school students across the entire study period of 2002 to 2008.

Results are weighted to represent national proportions for age, gender, education, and region of the country. Respondents received \$10 in appreciation for their participation since 2006. Error ranges for the survey vary with the question, subgroup examined, and year of the survey. For the comparisons shown in Table 2, average differences in percentages of about 4% are beyond the margin of error.

All respondents were asked questions about a range of risky activities, including the frequency of engaging in specific gambling activities “in an average month.” Weekly gamblers are those who said they gambled at least once a week in an average month. Participation in sports was asked with the question: “Do you participate in a sport most days, some days, or not at all?” Respondents who said “most days” were classified as likely members of a sports team. The percentage who said most days (55%) is close to estimates from other sources of male participation in high school sports teams.

If respondents had engaged in one or more specific gambling activities in an average month, they were asked four questions about difficulties related to their gambling. These items asked whether in the past year the respondent had: (a) “often found yourself thinking about gambling,” (preoccupation) (b) “ever needed to gamble with more and more money to get the amount of excitement you want,” (tolerance) (c) ever spent more than you had planned on gambling,” (loss of control) and (d) ever felt bad or fed up when trying to cut down or stop gambling?” (withdrawal).

*The Adolescent Communication Institute (ACI) was created by the Annenberg Foundation in 2002 as part of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. The Institute aims to inform researchers, policymakers, and the public regarding strategies to prevent risks to healthy adolescent development and to enhance the well-being of youth. It conducts the annual National Annenberg Survey of Youth, the Annenberg Coding of Health and Media Project, and convenes conferences of expert panels regarding adolescent mental health and well-being.*

See <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org> for more information.

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