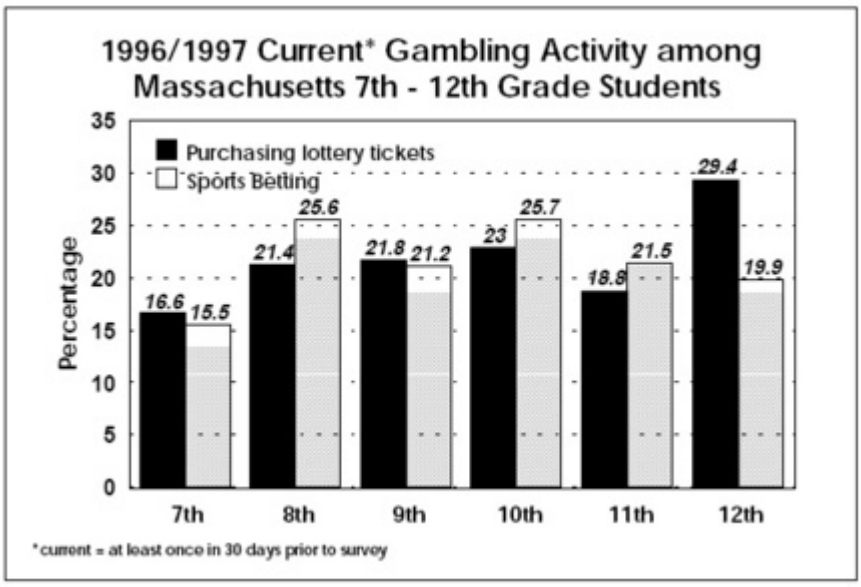
The WAGER, Vol. 2(31) – Patterns of gambling activity among Massachusetts adolescents

August 5, 1997

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health recently conducted a survey of 6,844 randomly selected Massachusetts public middle and high school students to assess trends in students' substance use. In addition to investigating patterns of substance use, this survey investigated students' participation in sports betting and the lottery. This survey revealed that 49.8% of the 7th to 12th grade students had bet on sports in their lifetime and 21.6% had bet on sports during the 30 days prior to the survey. Middle school students (grades 7 and 8) and high school students (grades 9 to 12) had similar rates of sports betting: lifetime rates were 51.1% (middle school) and 49.1% (high school) and past-month rates were 20.5% (middle school) and 22.2% (high school). Rates of participation in the lottery for these 7th to 12th grade students were similar to the rates of sports betting: 49.5% of the students had purchased a lottery ticket in their lifetime and 21.8% had done so in the past month. However, comparisons of middle school and high school students revealed that high school students had somewhat higher rates of lottery participation (51.0% lifetime, 23.2% past month) than middle school students (46.6% lifetime, 18.9% past month). In addition, comparisons with a similar study of the same population conducted in 1993 revealed that participation in the lottery has decreased since 1993 (1993 lifetime rate = 61.7%, 1993 current rate = 28.8%). No data on sports betting were collected in the 1993 study. These data reveal that many adolescents engage in illicit (i.e., underage) gambling at an early age; by the 7th grade, at least 42.6% of this sample had gambled illegally. Further research can determine which of these forms of gambling precedes the other and the nature of the gambling initiation process for adolescents. In addition, inclusion of gambling items on state surveys of adolescents will allow researchers and policy makers to identify trends in gambling among this population.



Sources: *Health & Addictions Research, Inc. (1997). Adolescent substance use in Massachusetts: Trends among public school students. Boston: Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

This public education project is funded, in part, by The Andrews Foundation.