



Wanna Bet: The Rise of Campus Gambling

Members of the school community discuss the prevalence of gambling on campus and the psychological impact it can have on students.

Lydia Gugsu and Celine Wang

On a Thursday night, Ezra* is sitting on the couch at home with his friend, hoping to relax after a long school day. Ezra is captivated by the colorful graphics on his computer. As the slots spin and chips fall into place, he leaps up in excitement, one arm wrapped around his friend and the other raised in exhilaration. After losing \$200 the previous night, he had just won \$350. His friend, warning that he shouldn't touch the \$150 he made in profit, left Ezra's house, but it was too late. Ezra said he never thought a small bet with friends on slots would spiral into an obsession.

"When my friend left my house, he told me, 'Don't touch the balance. Withdraw it in the morning so you'll make a profit,'" Ezra said. "I didn't listen. I ran the money up to \$850 that night and thought I could get \$1000. I ended up losing and lost all the money I had won. It was four in the morning, and I had to wake up for school in two-and-a-half hours. Since I've started, I think I've wagered \$20,000 and lost \$4,000."



Illustrated by Iris Chung

Gambling and online poker have seen a rise in popularity amongst underage players in the past few years, according to Vice. The National Council on Problem Gambling found that around 60-80% of high schoolers have gambled yearly, including 14-19% who are considered to have "signs of losing control." Additionally, statistics show that teenagers are twice as likely to gamble than adults.

Upper School Psychologist Tina McGraw '01 said the unpredictability of gambling wins makes it especially addictive for young minds.

"Becoming addicted to gambling happens because of intermittent reinforcement," McGraw said. "This happens when someone who is gambling occasionally wins. The win sets off a big reward in the brain through dopamine. The gambler's behavior is then reinforced, and the behavior escalates. Casinos know that sometimes rewarding their patrons with wins will keep them playing slot machines and other games. The gambler's fallacy is that [they think] 'I just need to play one more time to win big,' and that mindset can be very dangerous."

Ezra said that for many students, gambling is more about the thrill and escape it provides rather than just winning money.

"I mostly stick to the slots," Ezra said. "Poker is a lifestyle. In terms of our school, poker is very much just a game and people get enjoyment out of randomness. People see it as a fun thing they can do on the side that takes them out of [the school] environment."

Although the school's student handbook states even "friendly" gambling such as athletic contests or card games is strictly prohibited, a relatively high percentage of students do gamble. According to a Chronicle poll of 110, 16.2% of students gamble using real money, whether it's online, recreational or with friends. Toby*, who plays poker, said the game has become less about gambling and winning money, but instead more about connections with peers.

"I play poker almost every day during lunch," Toby said. "For me, it has become routine, and it's been the best way for me to socialize with groups of people that I haven't spent enough time with over the past six years I've been here. It might just sound like an excuse, but the reason I started getting into the game in the first place was because I want to spend more time with some of these people, and what better way than to do what they do?"

Toby said playing poker at school has never affected other parts of his life.

"Poker will never affect my academics or mental health because me and a couple of other people that I play with keep each other in check," Toby said. "Nobody's ever ditched class to play poker. That's never happened. It's primarily a social activity. Some people smoke and do other things on this campus. It's not atypical for people who participate in those kinds of things to just cut classes because they feel the impulse to do such things, but for gambling, that's rarely the case."

Compulsive gambling, also called gambling disorder, is the uncontrollable urge to keep gambling despite the toll it takes on one's life. If someone has a problem with compulsive gambling, they may continually chase bets that lead to losses, use up savings, and create excessive debt, according to Mayo Clinic. Motivations for adolescent gambling may largely be a result of a stressful lifestyle, according to the National Institutes of Health. Toby said the emotional weight of losing money makes gambling feel far more intense than any other activity.

"When you lose, you want to make it all back," Toby said. "It's not even peer pressure. You just feel that pit in your stomach and start to realize, 'Oh, God, I just lost.' It's nothing like losing a board game because that's just prizes and words and labels. [Gambling] has high stakes, real stakes, and that makes it seem like you have an opportunity to make it all back."

Leonard* said many gamblers focus on the rewards without recognizing the risks and addictive nature of the game.

"A lot of people are only seeing the upside, and not seeing the downside in any game you play," Leonard said. "What's the upside to winning? You won a couple hundred bucks, but it's just a waste of time. Also, the dopamine hits are not good for you at all. It gets very addictive and it's almost as bad as drugs."

Leonard said he does not gamble anymore since he believes the majority of the games are rigged to favor the house.

"The house always wins," Leonard said. "Most people don't remember the fact that the house always has the odds. No matter what game, whether it's roulette or poker, it's going to be skewed toward the house. I've seen my friends losing a ton of money from gambling, which is why I've stopped gambling."

Ezra said while poker may be gaining more attention among students at the school, it has not necessarily become more problematic on campus.

"I don't think poker is becoming more normalized," Ezra said. "Maybe more people are finding out about it, but from my experience, I know it was [popular] last year. I honestly don't think it's that bad. Normally, from what I've seen, no one buys in for more than about \$10. I feel like the reason it's becoming more widespread is, as I said, because more people are just finding out about it. [My] friends are playing it with [almost] no money, no stakes and are having a fun time with it. Others play with some money but never exceed about \$10, so I think it's not that bad."

The gender imbalance in gambling is significant, according to the National Library of Medicine. In the U.S., 69% of men gamble compared to 36% of women, and emerging adult men were twice as likely to have gambled and almost three times more likely to have gambling problems compared to emerging adult women. Eliza*, who plays blackjack, said although she thinks heard the gender imbalance is shocking, it does not really affect her.

"I don't gamble that much," Eliza said. "But when I do, there aren't many girls who do. I've heard of some women being underestimated in their abilities, and that's pretty disappointing. I tend not to be the best poker player, so if I am underestimated, I tend to find that maybe it is well placed."

Leonard said he has seen how easily betting can become an obsession for those around him.

"I didn't think of it as that serious, but I will say, speaking on behalf of some of my friends who do gamble a lot, I've seen them start to yearn for it all the time," Leonard said. "Most people get very enticed by the chase. One time, one of my friends lost around 100 bucks, and instead of quitting, he put another 100 bucks, which he lost, and then another 100 bucks. In the end I think he gained 800 bucks, but then you want to know what happened a week later? He lost 800 bucks. It's a very dicey situation to put yourself in."

