

# Easy credit and online gambling sites lead students down the path to debt and addiction

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A group of Santa Clara University communications students, under the instruction of Barbara Kelley, researched and wrote this report on college gambling for *Metro*. Some of the student gamblers interviewed for this story would only agree to be interviewed if their identity was protected. Most are identified by first name only.

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AFTER PUTTING the finishing touches on his economics homework, "Justin," a Saint Mary's senior, picks up the phone and dials a familiar number. "Are you playin'?" he asks.

Justin dresses quickly in the dark, careful not to wake his roommate, and splashes his face with cold water. Thirty minutes later, a cigarette dangles between two fingers, and a computer screen glows in the dark of his friend's dorm room.

Justin paces behind his friend's desk. A fan pushes the stale air around the room as Justin and his pal plot their next move. They draw their cards, and the garish letters of [ParadisePoker.com](http://ParadisePoker.com) flash underneath the full house on the screen. They've won this hand, but the \$20,000 Justin has poured into his gambling habit taints the victory.

But while Justin seems in over his head, for him and other Bay Area college students, it could be even worse. Problem gamblers between the ages of 18 and 25 lose an average of \$30,000 each year and rack up \$20,000 to \$25,000 in credit card debt, according to the California Council on Problem Gambling. In a health advisory issued by the American Psychiatric Association early this year, 10 percent to 15 percent of young people reported having experienced one or more significant problems relating to gambling.

Still, despite the valley's web-savvy youth population and proximity to Tahoe, people don't want to face the problem. Many Bay Area university conduct codes neglect to mention gambling at all, and some local venues even promote student wagering. Bay Meadows racetrack advertises in college newspapers, while local card clubs hire college students to work as prop players. Meanwhile, credit cards enable students without extra cash to gamble even after accumulating debt, and the Internet beckons with numerous online gambling sites.

"People who are young are characteristically risky with drugs, alcohol, sex and gambling," says Christine Reilly, a researcher at the Harvard Medical School's Division on Addiction, "and are at a higher risk of these behaviors developing into addictions."

A high-profile sports betting scandal at Northwestern University that drew national attention in 1998 prompted the National Association of School Personnel Administrators (NASPA) to conduct a study on the prevalence and impact of college gambling. The results of the study, which surveyed students at seven universities, are still being compiled, but NASPA researcher Ken Winters, Ph.D., says young people are attracted to the thrill of betting. According to Edward Looney, executive director of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey, college students consider gambling more acceptable than drinking.

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[By the Numbers](#): Statistics address the who, what and why not of gambling.

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## Risky Business

Santa Clara University senior Jeff Marinacci doesn't regard gambling as a problem. On a January trip to Reno, he arrived at the tables with a few hundred dollars. But he and three companions won big. With \$6,500 in winnings, they rented a black stretch limo to make the four-hour drive home.

"Every time I go up," Marinacci says, "I think I'm going to win."

But while Marinacci doesn't seem concerned about developing an addiction, experts on addiction are. A study conducted by Clayton Neighbors, professor of psychology at the University of Washington, identified about 15 percent of college students as at least at risk for gambling problems. This number is much larger than the general population's, which Neighbors says runs between 3 percent and 5 percent.

Once these students develop a problem, half will become compulsive, according to Tom Tucker, director of the California Council on Problem Gambling: "Students are doomed to be the next generation of problem gamblers without prevention education at the college level."

Researcher Durand Jacobs, a clinical professor of medicine at Loma Linda University, says lack of exciting entertainment contributes to the number of students who try gambling. "Young males seek excitement from pervasive boredom," Jacobs says. "Gambling is like an upper drug, such as cocaine. It produces abnormal arousal levels."

In fact, a study published by a team of researchers in the journal *Neuron* found that gambling affects the brain in the same way as cocaine. According to the study, the areas of the brain stimulated by the anticipation and experience of gambling are similar to those stimulated by euphoria-inducing drugs.

This seems even more true for men. There are nine males with gambling disorders for every female, according to Dr. Kim Bullock of the Stanford University School of Medicine. Bullock, who studies impulse-control problems, says gambling disorders in men parallel compulsive shopping disorders in women.

Bullock attributes the low recovery rates for gambling disorders partly to genes that predispose people to risk-taking and depression. Gambling addicts may bet to fill an emotional void caused by underlying depression.

Filling that void becomes easier as opportunities to gamble increase--and they are increasing, especially with the prospect of an Indian casino in Oakland. The casino, planned for the site of the former Oakland Army Base, would undoubtedly attract area college students--especially those at nearby UC-Berkeley.

"I could see how students would get more involved with gambling, given the possibility of a closer casino," says Karen Kenney, dean of students at UC-Berkeley.

Kenney is also concerned that chapters of Berkeley's large Greek system and athletic teams would host events at the new casino, something other Bay Area schools already do. Members of Stanford's Sigma Chi fraternity make regular trips to nearby Bay Meadows. The group takes advantage of a promotion called Friday Alive, which boasts \$2 Big Beers and \$1 admission to go with the rush of betting on the horses.

"It's exciting to put money on it," says Brian Kreiner, the fraternity's social chair. "When people are excited about the outcome of the races, it creates an exciting atmosphere."

Bay Meadows has been targeting students with advertisements in local campus newspapers for the past three years. "They're dancing and having a couple of beers," says Mike Ziegler, Bay Meadows' vice president. "It's not threatening."

## Virtual Vegas

Even without casinos or card clubs in the area, the Internet can turn any college dorm room into a gambling opportunity. With more than 1,400 Internet casinos just a click away, college students can use the high-speed web connections in campus dorms to place bets on anything from the Super Bowl to Yahtzee.

Currently, all online casinos are based in offshore locations like the Caribbean, Australia and the United Kingdom. In a matter of minutes, users can download software or log onto a server to access casino games. Operators make the sites as user-friendly as possible, accepting credit cards, debit cards, personal checks or wire transfers. The sites mimic the look and feel of Las Vegas with sounds of chips stacking and slots ringing, effervescent colors and simulated card tables.

Harvard researcher Christine Reilly says because young people are comfortable using the Internet, online gambling is a problem for their age group.

"The Internet is quick and easy and offers instant gratification," she explains. "It leaves you very little time to think. You just act without noting the drawbacks."

The drawbacks seem to have been lost on Nevada lawmakers, who voted to approve online gambling in June 2000. The bill, after a 17-4 state Senate vote, went to Gov. Kenny Guinn, who signed it June 14.

On the other hand, the Justice Department says Internet gambling is still illegal in the United States, and last February, Republican Rep. James Leach of Iowa sponsored a bill called the Internet Gambling Funding Prohibition Act to prohibit the use of bank instruments for unlawful Internet gambling.

"Particularly vulnerable are young people," says Leach, former chairman of the House Banking Committee "who are members of the most literate computer generation."

The Financial Services Committee, under the chairmanship of Rep. Mike Oxley (R-Ohio), held hearings until the bill was passed Oct. 31 with a vote of 34-18. It was referred to the Judiciary Committee, which has until March 29 to act on it, or the bill will go to the House floor.

Similarly, a bill titled Combating Illegal Gambling Reform and Modernization Act was sponsored by Republican Rep. Robert Goodlatte of Virginia on the first of November to expand and modernize the prohibition against interstate gambling. It, too, sits in the Judiciary Committee with Rep. Leach's bill. No update has been given on when it might reach the House floor. Since both bills are similar, they may be combined before going to the House.

Credit card companies like Visa and MasterCard are actively lobbying against new legislation like Leach's bill and New York Democratic Rep. John La Falce's Internet Gambling Payments Prohibition Act, which contain provisions that prohibit the use of electronic fund transfers and, most importantly, credit cards. (MasterCard representatives did not wish to comment on the issue.)

### What's in Your Wallet?

With graduation just a few days away, "Amarillo Slim" spends his nights at the bar and his days at the pool, just like many of his Santa Clara classmates. However, unlike his peers, Slim is shouldering a \$10,000 debt, most of which he attributes to gambling.

The senior recalls a December trip to Tahoe with fraternity brother Jeff Kopaceck. Plans for a relaxing weekend changed as Slim bolted for the casino the second he and Jeff parked the car.

"I was like, 'I can't hold back,'" he remembers.

After a few hours at the tables, Slim and Kopaceck were up \$400. Red Bull and vodka fueled increasingly aggressive betting. Yellow \$10 chips thrown on double-down hands were replaced by black \$100 chips. Slim and Kopaceck were beyond drunk--they were drunk enough to believe they could beat the game.

"It's the alcohol, man," Kopaceck says. "If there were no drinking in casinos, people would lose nothing."

Slim recalls filling out credit card applications he received in the mail during his freshman year. Those two credit cards, which now carry a combined balance of around \$10,000, have seen their share of casino ATMs. They've also enabled Slim to gamble the way he likes: big.

Forty percent to 60 percent of cash wagered in casinos is withdrawn from ATMs, either from personal accounts or as cash advances from credit cards, according to the National Gambling Impact Study Commission Report. Credit card companies are not required to report amounts borrowed for gambling.

On a spring-break trip to Las Vegas, Slim called his credit card company to request a \$1,000 extension. After making him wait a few minutes for approval, they granted it to him, along with another \$500 two hours later.

"It is easier to gamble for college students now, as credit cards are so easily accessible," Reilly says. "Companies are very aggressive toward college students with their marketing strategies."

Santa Clara resident Arul Chinnappan, a recent graduate of the University of Florida, never gambled until he received an email: "Congratulations Arul, you won \$100!" Out of curiosity, he clicked on the gambling site and began playing blackjack. After an hour, \$230 of his money was gone. The next day, his email account showed 10 letters from online casinos offering money to play and six emails from credit card companies. After three months, Chinnappan owed credit card companies \$12,000.

"Do college students have the money to be gambling with? No," Tom Tucker of the California Council on Problem Gambling says. "But if they have credit cards they do."

## In Denial

There was a time when "Brian" was afraid to answer the phone when it rang in his apartment two blocks from UC-Davis. He knew it was his girlfriend, knew she was calling about their dinner plans in San Francisco. But he also knew he needed to save money to pay the credit card bills in front of him, which added up to about \$8,000--all from one bad month at the Reno Hilton Casino.

"Once you sit down in the chair and look at the cards, there is only one thing on the gambler's mind," Brian says. "And that is to win more."

But Brian didn't win, and quickly found himself thousands in the hole and unable to stop. It was only when his father confronted him about his habit that he was able gain control.

"He told me to either quit gambling or quit him," Brian says. "Knowing how hard my father worked in his life, I knew gambling was the last thing he would permit his son to do."

For most compulsive gamblers, it takes more than a lecture from dad to put an end to such a serious problem. But the gap between numbers of college-aged pathological gamblers and those who seek treatment is sizable. Approximately 5 percent of college students are compulsive gamblers, according to a meta-analysis study conducted at Harvard in 1997. But the Helpline Report for the California Council on Problem Gambling found that only 10 percent of all callers were between the ages of 21 and 25. Reilly says this indicates that college students often don't seek treatment.

"The numbers are still relevant, because we still continue to keep feeding estimates from other prevalent studies," Reilly says. "We continue to keep updating and haven't seen any noticeable differences in the numbers."

Sandy, who asked her last name be withheld, became a compulsive gambler while working in card rooms for 10 years. Today, she is a public relations manager for Gambler's Anonymous, which experts consider the most effective treatment. She says she "went back and forth with my addiction until I was finally able to follow the program. Not everyone can do it.

"It's an unbelievable addiction. You lose your home and your family. You want to die."

Ed Looney of the Council on Compulsive Gambling of New Jersey cautions that compulsive gambling, like most addictions, is an impulse disorder that can be treated only when the addict is willing to make lifestyle adjustments.

"It's so developed that you need to change yourself," Looney says, "And if you don't, relapse is a reality. Most people who come to self-help groups will relapse."

Looney, also a recovering gambling addict, says facing reality is the hardest step for compulsive gamblers to take.

But most college-aged gamblers don't seem ready to take that step. Marinacci still believes he can win every time he bets, while Stanford Sigma Chis see their Bay Meadows trips as harmless fun. Brian only quit after a threat from his father but still wouldn't say he's completely done gambling.

And when Justin has enough time, he makes the 30-minute drive to Lucky Chances, a card room in Colma, instead of betting on the Internet. He slips into lightweight Polo khakis, dress shoes and a short-sleeved shirt--he likes to keep his arms free. He travels light, carrying only his cell phone and Chapstick: the weight of coins or keys is distracting.

Eight hours later, he returns home, unable to fall asleep. He replays each move he made that night, wondering what the outcome would have been had he played his cards differently. And although he knows he is at risk for developing a gambling problem, at this point he feels he can control it.

"I worry about if I'll be able to stop this," he says. "My parents voice concerns all the time. My mom hates that I play; every time she gives me money, she asks, 'Is this for gambling?' But I'm in college, and I have so few responsibilities. I have the next 45 years of my life to work everyday."