

State to study impact of new casinos - Metro

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Massachusetts will not get its first slot machines until the summer, but the state is already becoming a laboratory for gambling research, which may someday help answer some of the longstanding public policy questions about the casino industry.

The state gambling commission has sponsored two scientific studies that will test how new casinos affect the level of problem gambling in the population, and whether new casinos lead to broader societal woes, such as increases in crime, more domestic violence, and lower home values.

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What makes the studies special is that they are beginning before casinos open in Massachusetts. The studies will measure the prevalence of problem gambling now, so researchers will have a baseline against which to compare the levels of problem gambling later, after as many as three resort casinos and one slot parlor open for business around the state. "The mission is to substantiate with data — not anecdotes or myths — what the impacts of casino gambling are in Massachusetts," said Stephen Crosby, chairman of the gambling commission. "It never has been done like this anywhere else and it will create a database of information that will be valuable worldwide. This will be a phenomenal resource." The initial phases of the two studies will cost more than \$4 million, which comes from taxes and fees on the casino industry, according to the gambling commission. The studies are being conducted by University of Massachusetts-Amherst researchers, led by principal investigator Rachel Volberg, who has studied problem gambling for about 30 years, according to UMass. The first research project, known as the Social and Economic Impacts of Gambling in Massachusetts study, has been underway since 2013. The plan calls for massive surveys of thousands of Massachusetts residents. "We are doing this very large survey before any casinos become operational and then waiting," Volberg said. "We will go out into the field with an identical survey a year after all of the casinos have opened — which gives us a snapshot before and a snapshot after, on problem gambling prevalence and gambling participation." The survey will measure, among other things, public attitudes toward gambling; the gambling behaviors of Massachusetts residents, most of whom already live within a few hours of casinos in Rhode Island or Connecticut; motivations for gambling and what casino customers perceive as the recreational value of gambling; as well as the number of people who may be problem gamblers. Another round of the survey will be performed around 2018, depending on how quickly the state's casinos industry gets up and running, Volberg said. The state's first slot machines are due to start spinning in June, at a Penn National Gaming slot parlor in Plainville, which is under construction. In about three years, MGM is expected to open an \$800 million casino and entertainment complex in downtown Springfield, and Wynn Resorts is due to open a \$1.6 billion casino hotel on the Mystic River waterfront in Everett. The gambling commission is soliciting bids for the final resort casino license it controls, for Southeastern Massachusetts. Separately, the Mashpee Wampanoag are trying to overcome

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legal hurdles in pursuit of a tribal casino in the southeast. As part of the study, researchers are also gathering community statistics, covering areas such as employment and business payrolls, household income, sales taxes, lottery sales, tourism visits, and many other categories, to track any measurable changes over time after casinos open. The second research project, known as the Massachusetts Gambling Impact Cohort study, will follow about 2,600 individual people for the next five years — or longer — as the casino industry moves into Massachusetts and matures, to see what happens to the individuals over time. “It’s truly remarkable that we’re going to be able to start this study in advance of any of the casinos being operational,” Volberg said. “That’s something that hasn’t been done before.” The cohort study “focuses on getting a better understanding about how problem gambling starts, develops, and resolves over time. To do that you really need to follow individuals, rather than taking a population snapshot.” In addition to legalizing Las Vegas-style casino gambling, the 2011 state casino law requires the gambling commission to study the effects of casinos in Massachusetts. The commission anticipates that the results of the studies will help the panel design policies to combat problem gambling. *Mark Arsenault can be reached at*

mark.arsenault@globe.com

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