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Researcher says United States lead, revenue possibilities will eventually bring single-game wagering to Canada

Canadians interested in placing bets on individual sporting events likely won't have to wait long before they can do so legally, says University of Lethbridge researcher Dr. Robert Wood.

In the wake of the recent United States Supreme Court ruling that struck down a federal law prohibiting sports gambling, thereby opening the door for individual states to legalize betting on sports, Wood says Canada will eventually follow suit. And the biggest reason is the money at stake.



“It’s a product that many Canadians want and that’s evident by the fact that Canadians are spending more than \$4 billion per year on sports betting at offshore, online gambling sites and none of that money comes back to the government through taxation,” says Wood, a gambling researcher and professor in the Department of Sociology. “To see that kind of money wagered online to offshore gambling houses is just an outflow of revenue from the country. Add to that another estimated \$10 billion that is being bet through organized crime, and you have upwards of \$14 billion in lost revenue.”



Current Canadian law is actually quite lenient, says Wood, allowing for most forms of gambling. However, one form that is expressly prohibited is placing bets on the outcome of an individual sporting event. The gaming industry has worked around that law by offering parlay betting through products such as Pro-Line and Sport Select, which allow players to bet on multiple games or events at one time. Horse racing, which includes

parimutuel wagering, is also permitted under the purview of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

But as Wood points out, there's a demand for single-game wagering and the United States has now opened the door for single-game sports betting in North America.

"I'd be surprised if we don't follow suit. There is often a trickle effect associated with gambling," he says. "The fact that it will be legal in the U.S. is going to make it pretty hard for us to maintain it as an illegal form here."

Gambling also does not carry the stigma it once did.

"You're trying to regulate something that many people want to do and something that, for most people, is not that morally contentious anymore," he says.

If and when the federal government does decriminalize sports betting, Wood says it is imperative a comparable product is offered to turn people away from what's available through organized crime.

"Even if the government legalizes sports betting, it doesn't mean you're going to stop all illegal gambling – it depends on the quality of the product," says Wood. "We've seen that with online gambling. Some countries have regulated online gambling in order to minimize the outflow of cash, but the product they offer isn't very desirable, the games aren't what gamblers want to play and ultimately it fails."

There's also a social cost to gambling, one that could be better addressed with increased resources to tackle the issues associated with problem gamblers. How the government would distribute its newfound revenue is a big part of any proposed change to the legislation.

"There's always going to be a social cost to gambling," says Wood. "There's a small proportion of the population that becomes addicted to gambling or develops some sort of severe form of problem gambling and that's always going to be the case, whether it is legal or illegal. The key for governments is to make sure they are reinvesting enough of the gambling revenue in a way that's going to minimize the harm. Our governments haven't been terribly good at doing that."

When the legalization of sports gambling might come to pass in Canada is unknown and there is no current move afoot to change the law but Wood sees it only as a matter of time.

"For the government, it comes down to revenue. Right now, it's just lost revenue that could be used to fund any number of positive social initiatives, and to treat gambling problems that already pose a cost to our health-care system."

To view online: <http://www.uleth.ca/unews/article/wood-says-united-states-lead-revenue-possibilities-will-eventually-bring-single-game>

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