

# CRITICAL gambling studies



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## COMMENTARY

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## The Manitoba Gambling Research Program: Influencing Research Agendas Through Funding

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### Introduction and Context

Research on gambling has been increasingly conducted by psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience researchers, as discussed in the introduction to the inaugural issue of *Critical Gambling Studies* (Nicoll & Akcayir, 2020). Generous funding and relatively quick publishing opportunities for projects on problem gambling attract researchers in those fields. At the same time, anthropologists and other social sciences and humanities researchers have been pushed out of the field of gambling research, which increasingly favours quantitative studies (Nicoll & Akcayir, 2020, p. ii). Sources of gambling research funding, including sponsorship for conferences, are a significant topic in critical gambling studies. With much of the funding coming from the commercial gambling industry, questions of ethics combine with concerns about the very shape of gambling research—who determines what is studied, how it is studied, and for what purposes (Nicoll & Akcayir, 2020, p. iv)? So, what does a now-defunct gambling research program tell us about research funding models?

When I arrived to take a new academic job in Manitoba in 2010, I had been researching casinos and gambling since the 1990s—specifically American Indian casinos and related economic development and policy issues. At the University of Winnipeg, I stepped into a busy administrative position and mostly put aside my gaming

research. However, this research interest caught the attention of my colleague Leah Gazan, who was, at that time, in the Faculty of Education at the University of Winnipeg (she left academia in 2019 when she was elected as a Member of Parliament in Winnipeg). Leah was involved with the Manitoba Gambling Research Program's (MGRP) Research Council. She kindly took the initiative to introduce me to the research staff and invited me to join a conversation about revising or, at least, opening up the focus of their research grants. At that time, the same research teams won grants year after year, and all were focused on psychological and psychosocial research related to problem gambling. There was no social or cultural research related to gambling enterprises being funded, as the MGRP research priorities were entirely about problem gambling. As a cultural anthropologist, I studied casinos as sites of economic self-determination, not as Petri dishes of gambling addiction. Despite a lengthy conversation about my own and other social scientists' research on gambling and the value of non-medicalized research on the topic of gaming, gambling, and casinos, the program did not change its approach. My records show an email I sent to the MGRP on August 19, 2013, about their latest Call For Proposals:

I'm concerned that it doesn't show any changes to the types of proposals being solicited. Again, my M.A. students won't

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be applying as they are more likely to want to research gambling from a social perspective than from a medicalized perspective. Let me know if you do consider opening the field in the future. (Julie Pelletier, personal archives)

Full disclosure: I was awarded conference travel funding from the MGRP, as they supported disseminating any gambling research.

In late 2017, the Manitoba Gambling Research Program was phased out by the new Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries (MBLL):

While the Manitoba Gambling Research Program has accomplished much during its six-year existence, the program has required significant staff resources from Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries to administer. As the program is phased out, Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries will reallocate funding and staff resources to other social responsibility initiatives. This includes a continuing strong commitment to research and evaluation. (Manitoba Gambling Research Program, n.d.-c)

More about this “continuing strong commitment to research and evaluation” to follow. Thus, Manitoba-funded gambling research ended. My interest in the MGRP is as a case study in gambling research funding that focused entirely on problem gambling, an approach that benefited the funder: Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries.

### **Methodology**

This project relied heavily on secondary sources (or grey literature) and limited interviews. The grey literature—see Haynes (2022) for more on the effectiveness of grey literature in gambling studies—included reports and press releases produced and published online by the Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Corporation (MBLL) via the [Manitoba Gambling Research Program \(MGRP\)](#).

The online archive is relatively extensive, containing annual reports for the projects that were funded, the amount of funding awarded per project, the sponsoring institution for the project, the names of the researchers who received funding (including student stipends and awards), and final research reports where relevant. Press releases and other documents in the online archive contain additional information, including the names and affiliations of the MGRP Board members and MBLL staff assigned to the program. Two staff members in the Social Responsibility arm of MBLL continue an association with the MGRP as part of their roles. I interviewed one of these individuals, Carly Sacco, for clarification when the archival materials were unclear to me. Attempts to interview the now-retired administrator with whom I met in 2012 were unsuccessful.

### **Research Priorities and Implications**

Between 2012 and 2017, researchers could apply for funding from the MGRP. At the time, the MGRP was the research arm of the Manitoba Lottery Corporation, an unusual arrangement. The most similar structure in Canada is the University of British Columbia’s Centre for Gambling Research, founded in 2014. That centre was established with funding from the British Columbia government and the British Columbia Lottery Corporation. According to the centre’s website (Centre for Gambling Research at UBC, n.d.) and a commentary by director Luke Clark in *International Gambling Studies* (2015), it functions independently of the lottery corporation, the provincial government, and the gambling industry. Like the MGRP, the focus of their research is problem gambling. Also like the MGRP, this is an approach that benefits the funders, whether or not they are at arms’ length, by keeping the focus of gambling research on gamblers and not on gambling policies, such as the legalization of gambling by private or government entities, the dependence on gambling revenues by governments, and

questions of economic self-determination in the form of gaming businesses by Indigenous communities.

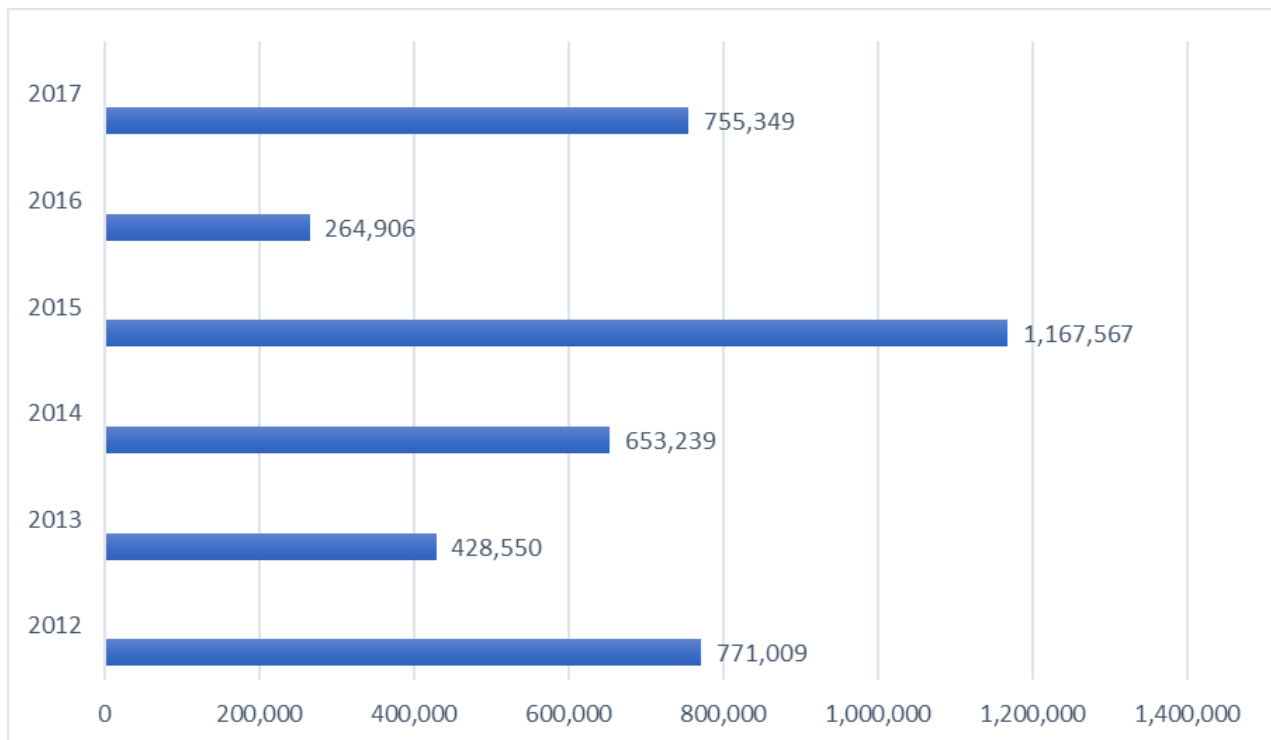
The MGRP’s research priorities illustrate the focus on gamblers and their “problematic” behaviours. The only reference to policy is found in the Preventing & Reducing Gambling-Related Harm section: “10. Identify what responsible gambling policies / practices / programs are effective in preventing and / or reducing gambling-related harm (e.g. alcohol controls, signage, pop-up warnings, employee training, etc.)” (MGRP, n.d.-b). Note that none of these possible “policies / practices / programs” address broader societal questions of legalized gambling; instead, they are aimed at the individual gambler’s decisions and actions. This narrow focus is part of a wider trend.

Nicoll and Akcayir note:

Our meta-analysis of gambling research over three decades (1996–2018) demonstrated a serious imbalance in

gambling research in Anglophone countries, where the majority is produced. We found that around 60 percent of the peer-reviewed literature in Scopus and Web of Science, from researchers working within and across jurisdictions in the UK, Canada, US, Australia and NZ, was generated within a relatively small group of disciplines—psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience. (2020, p. i)

The MGRP’s list of 20 priorities appealed to researchers in psychiatry, psychology, and neuroscience, while presenting little to no room for researchers in the humanities or other social sciences who might have a different critical approach to gambling research. MGRP also identify how many funded proposals met each specific research priority, with some projects meeting more than one goal. Notably, no projects met Priority #10 (MGRP, n.d.-b).



**Figure 1:** Total annual grants awarded by Manitoba Gambling Research Program from 2012–2017. (Data compiled from Manitoba Gambling Research Program, n.d.-a)

## Funds Awarded and Implications

During the MGRP's short tenure, it awarded more than \$4 million in research grants, studentships, and conference travel grants. The MGRP had an annual budget of \$1 million, and their funding decisions were made by an appointed Research Council made up of community members and gambling stakeholders. An analysis of the grants awarded by the MGRP over its six years of operation is instructive. Figure 1 shows how funds were distributed over time. The MGRP funded many projects in its first year. In the second year, applications were more numerous but for smaller amounts, focusing on conference travel grants. I was unable to determine why granting dropped precipitously in 2016. The subsequent jump in grants in 2017 likely reflects the news that the MGRP was ending, but funds were still available. The MGRP did not require projects to be completed by the end of its existence. As of 2022, [Final Research Reports](#) were still being posted to the MGRP website (personal correspondence, Carly Sacco, 2022).

We can observe other significant trends when analyzing the MGRP data for regional representation. The MGRP either required or preferred proposals that included a partner from Manitoba, which led to an overrepresentation of projects from that province—I identified only one funded proposal that did not have a Manitoba connection, led by researchers at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. In particular, a preference for University of Manitoba researchers is indisputable, as they received at least 30% of all MGRP funds. Preference for a Manitoba research partner arguably kept more of the province's funds in the province, but should that be a priority, particularly when the research agenda is gambler-focused, not policy-focused? This does not mean that geopolitical differences do not show up in biomedical and psychological research on gambling, but they are often seemingly devoid of social implications. For example, factors such as social class, race,

ethnicity, and experiences of colonization are reduced to operationalized variables instead of contextualized in the societal setting.

The MGRP's bias toward Manitoba researchers was met by the capacities within the province's higher education system. Manitoba has only five universities: University of Manitoba (UM), University of Winnipeg (UW), Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), Brandon University (BU), and Université de Saint-Boniface (USB). Of the five, UM is the largest and the only institution in the province with doctoral programs. Only three of the five Manitoba universities received grants from MGRP—UM, UW, and BU—with UM dominating the funding field (MGRP, n.d.-a). The research priorities of the MGRP, while too narrow, were undoubtedly of interest and importance to researchers outside of Manitoba, as demonstrated by the wide range of partners in Canada and from other countries (MGRP, n.d.-a). However, the dominance of UM in research capability in the province resulted in a small number of researchers, research projects, and research approaches being overrepresented by successful funding applications.

## Conclusion

The province launched the MGRP in November 2011, with a phased ending announced in December 2017. It is possible that Brian Pallister's Progressive Conservative provincial government, elected in 2016, brought about the end of the MGRP as Pallister was notoriously against higher education and, one could extrapolate, anti-research. However, according to Carly Sacco, who is still employed in the Social Responsibility department of the MBLL, the decision to phase out the MGRP was an internal one. The MGRP was managed by the Social Responsibility department, which had no staff dedicated solely to its work. According to Sacco, the phase-out was not meant to save money, but rather was a reallocation of resources "to strengthen other elements of MBLL's Social Responsibility

program” (Carly Sacco, email communication, January 20, 2021).

In the introduction, I noted that I would come back to the work of the Social Responsibility program and what it has accomplished since the MGRP ended, particularly the “continuing strong commitment to research and evaluation” promised in 2017 (MGRP, n.d.-c). The Social Responsibility program provides posters, advertisements, and other materials about gambling harm-reduction strategies at community events and on their website: [Informed Gambling](#). In addition to information about gambling, they are also responsible for providing information about alcohol and cannabis: “2% of annual net income is earmarked for social responsibility initiatives including alcohol- and gambling-related consumer information, research and treatment.” (MBLL, n.d.-b). The MBLL also sponsors events and gives donations as part of its Community Investment programs (MBLL, n.d.-a). It does not, however, demonstrate a “strong commitment to research and evaluation” (MGRP, n.d.-c) in any of its programming. When the Manitoba Liquor Commission and the Manitoba Lotteries Corporation, both crown corporations, merged in 2014 to become the Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Corporation, the announcement touted an annual savings of \$3 million. These savings could continue to support gambling research, as could a portion of the 2% of annual net income set aside for gambling, alcohol, and cannabis information, research, and treatment. The funds could support gambling research with a broader focus and agenda, attracting and funding a broader range of scholars and students.

The impact of the MGRP funding was significant: it provided more than \$4 million over six years, supported researchers in four countries from several institutions, and created new gambling research scholars through student stipends. The number of publications generated due to the MGRP is too complicated to calculate for my self-funded project, but it is significant.

How the MGRP-funded research affected policy is also outside the scope of this article; however, it is fair to assume that it kept the emphasis on gamblers as individuals making bad decisions and not on substantive policy analysis and possible change. The MGRP funding priorities’ focus on gambling addiction and related negative behaviours continued the pattern of examining gambling through a medicalized psychological lens.

The broader and more interdisciplinary approach to gambling research that I fruitlessly encouraged the MGRP to take would have welcomed anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, historians, social geographers, social economists, Indigenous studies researchers, artists, literary researchers, and more. With other scholars, I have looked at American Indian gambling enterprises as sites of Indigenous resistance, expressions of economic sovereignty, arenas of political and legal identity policy formation and conflict, as places for Indigenous artistic and historical expressions to occur, and more. Similar research has been done relating to First Nations gambling enterprises in Canada (see Belanger, 2006, for an overview of Indigenous casinos in Canada). There is much more to be done. In a recent article, Darrel Manitowabi, one of Canada’s leading scholars on Indigenous gambling enterprises, introduced “an Indigenous-specific theory of casinos as modern manifestations of the *windigo*, a cannibalistic animate being in the Algonquian oral tradition” (2021, p. 113), which he describes as an Indigenous anthropological approach. Indigenous theorizing and research practice can provide a counter to “what Unanga scholar Eve Tuck calls ‘damage-centered’ dominant narratives,” also known as the deficit model or approach that characterizes much gambling research (as cited in Chew & Hinson, 2021, p. 5). I have supervised and worked with graduate students, many of whom are Indigenous, who earned degrees in Indigenous governance, Indigenous studies, anthropology, and Peace and Conflict Studies. Had the MGRP been open to



funding interdisciplinary research, at least some of those brilliant minds would have pursued gambling research in fields other than biomedical.

While attending a gambling conference in Canada, I listened to a presentation about an approach to gambling harm reduction that would involve monitoring gamblers' bank accounts and other information in order to set limits—known as affordability checks. As an Indigenous studies scholar, I was reminded of Canada's *Indian Act*: a far-reaching set of policies that monitors and attempts to control the lives of Indigenous peoples in Canada. For example, what are commonly known as "First Nations casinos" in Canada are businesses that are tightly controlled by provinces, while having a percentage of the revenues allocated to designated First Nations and Métis communities. Kate Bedford uses the term hyper-surveillance to describe the scrutiny experienced by marginalized and vulnerable people, particularly in relation to gambling affordability checks (2023). While she is describing the Single Customer View, an approach by the gambling industry in Great Britain, her analysis resonates with policies and approaches in Canada and the United States where the poor, the unemployed / underemployed, those with disabilities, and BIPOC populations are considered in need of government oversight and interference. A personal experience of this was my years spent in poverty as a single mother, relying on social assistance and having every purchase and decision I made closely scrutinized by the government bodies who managed the welfare programs, as well as by judgmental citizens worried about their taxpayer dollars. Bedford concludes that affordability checks like the Single Customer View "risk over-regulation of groups long regarded as insufficiently mature, and ramped up surveillance of us all via merging of private and public databases about our leisure, while opaque, misleading, and unfair products continue unchecked" (2023, p. 46). The type of

gambling research funded by the MGRP likely influenced gambling policy by keeping the focus on gamblers and their "problem" behaviours instead of on the entities that facilitate gambling for profit, their products and offerings, their access to and use of customer data, or their own culpability related to gambling harms. I am advocating for a broader approach to gambling research that would include an important critical approach—one that is critical of gambling policies and approaches, as well as critical of gambling research.

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### Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement

This research project is approved by the University of Winnipeg University Human Research Ethics Board (#17743). The research is self-funded. I presented an earlier version as a poster at the 2022 meeting of the Alberta Gambling Research Institute (AGRI). AGRI, a Canadian research body, is funded by provincial revenues from gambling. Its funding and conference decisions are made through academic peer review without input or influence from provincial or other operators in the gambling industry. I received no funding from AGRI or from the gambling industry to conduct or present this research.

As noted above, I received conference travel funding from the MGRP when it was in existence: \$1,480 in 2013 and \$1,911 in 2014. A graduate student I supervised received \$360 in 2014 in conference travel funds. None of these conference presentations referred to the MGRP other than as a funding source for travel.

I am an associate editor of the peer-reviewed, open-access journal [Critical Gambling Studies](#). The journal is hosted by the University of Alberta Libraries. The journal has not sought, nor received, any industry funding. The journal's [Governance Standards](#) outline the ethical guidelines for editorial board members and submitting authors.

### Author Details

Julie Pelletier is a cultural anthropologist at the University of Winnipeg in Canada. Her research interests include American Indian and Canadian First Nations casinos and gaming, the decolonization and indigenization of academia, and Indigenous representation.