



## In Tennessee, a Gambling Lab Produces World-Class Research

Inside an academic building at the University of Memphis, there's a suite with a bank of slot machines and distinct casino carpeting. To the uninitiated, it seems every bit like a casino. But upon closer exam, it's actually a gambling "lab," a place where gambling behavior is studied and analyzed.

The lab is one of several ways that the Tennessee Institute for Gambling Education and Research (TIGER) conducts a wide range of gambling research. Along with other research approaches, such as community surveys and crowdsourcing (through the internet, social media and smartphone apps), TIGER research covers a wide range of topics, including:

- Addictive disorders
- Examining and mitigating health disparities in urban and rural communities
- Assessment, prevention and treatment
- Psychotherapy process and outcome research
- Validation of assessment tools
- Understanding the relations between gambling, substance use and other comorbid conditions



The research emphasizes real-world application. "We believe in reciprocity between the experimental approach and the clinical approach," says James Whelan, Ph.D., professor and executive director of TIGER, which consists of two arms: a gambling clinic that provides treatment to people with gambling problems and a gambling lab where

research takes place. "What we learn in the lab setting informs what we do in the clinical space. And many of our research questions originate from experiences with people."

The clinic keeps a database of the approximately 1,800 people they've treated and can ask questions of the database that include factors such as a client's risk factors and demographics. "It always comes back to our experiences learning from people with lived experiences," says Dr. Whelan. "Our goal is to generate knowledge that we can apply to improve outcomes."

TIGER was established in 1999 after Dr. Whelan had a client whose depression was caused by gambling. "I realized that nobody really knew how to approach treatment for someone with a gambling problem and that this was likely to be an increasing need in the community as casinos were built," says Dr. Whelan. From that initial experience, TIGER has grown to become a national and international leader in addressing gambling disorders and in contributing to literature for prevention and assessment and treatment.

After 25 years of gambling research, what findings have been the most surprising? Dr. Whelan mentions two areas. One involves the effect of substance use on gambling. "We figured the effect of alcohol would mean taking greater risks and stupid gambling," he says. "But we actually found that it's the gambling experience itself that creates risky drinking behavior. It's as much a psychological issue as it is a physiological one. Until someone has a blood alcohol level of close to .09 and over, it doesn't seem to have any effect on risk-taking decisions."

Another finding that Dr. Whelan found interesting was the impact of cognitive-based interventions coupled with at least one visit to Gamblers Anonymous (GA).

"Our research demonstrated that those going to a *single* GA meeting along with cognitive treatment had better outcomes than those who didn't attend any meetings." Dr. Whelan surmises that the importance of seeing others who have the same issue — even just once — plays a key role.

As gambling addiction research continues to spread in various directions — a period that Dr. Whelan refers to as "the wild west" — there is much to be excited about at TIGER. Some areas under study include how to maximize the impact of peer recovery specialists and how responsible gambling messages should be tailored to individual demographics, including those engaging in ever-growing sports betting.

"One of our studies focuses on younger men and the type of messaging that's appropriate for them," says Dr. Whelan. "We're finding that they won't use the terms "therapy" or "help" but they might ask for a "class" they can attend to help with a gambling problem."

Another study on young men focuses on the relationship between gambling and college success. TIGER research finds that the more they gamble, the more likely they are to drop classes, which threatens to jeopardize the money they've invested in college.

Looking ahead, Dr. Whelan says that the gambling field is at an interesting juncture with great opportunity. "There needs to be cooperation and shared responsibilities between gambling operators and regulators that's guided by research," he says. "And there has to be a healthy respect for individual responsibility."

*The Tennessee Institute for Gambling Education and Research (TIGER) is funded by the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. For more information, visit <https://www.memphis.edu/gamblingclinic/>.*



Susan Sheridan Tucker  
Executive Director  
MNAPG

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

# A Hazy Crystal Ball

Happy spring! Even with a fairly mild winter, I so appreciate our seasonal cycles and welcome the budding of trees and bird song.

Another year of Problem Gambling Awareness Month (PGAM) is behind us. This year, in addition to increasing our social media messaging budget, we again worked with the *Star Tribune* to target specific groups with specialized messaging and reran our public service message “Gambling Addition: It’s Real” through streaming and other online platforms.

This year’s theme was “Every Story Counts,” emphasizing the impacts on gamblers as well as their families. If you click on <https://mnapg.org/gambling-addiction/gambling-stories/>, you can read our collection of gambling recovery success stories as well as hear some great podcasts that feature individuals sharing their stories.

We continue to create messaging for gamblers, health providers and families incorporating these goals:

1. Raising awareness of the risks of gambling (with an emphasis on sports betting) and reminding folks that **Gamban**, an app that blocks online gambling, is available at no cost.
2. Reminding behavioral and mental health providers to screen for problem gambling by using the Brief Bio Gambling Screen.
3. Raising general awareness of problem gambling and its sometimes negative effects, emphasizing that help is available and the addiction should be destigmatized.

MNAPG received more press requests than ever before as the sports betting bills continued their way through the state capitol. At this writing, we have three weeks left in session and the bills are still in play. Attempts were made to increase the guardrails MNAPG and others have advocated for, but it’s unclear what will survive the negotiating that will occur in the closing hours of session. Whatever the outcome, MNAPG will either be preparing for another year or two of legislative efforts to increase consumer protections and access to aggregated player data or pivoting to address the impending largest expansion of gambling this state has seen since the 1980s. If the latter is the case, MNAPG hopes that the legislature will have at least provided additional funds to address the likely increase we’ll see in problem gambling.

Stay tuned...

Susan Sheridan Tucker

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## WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT!

We thank all our members, donors, volunteers and affiliates who have contributed to our mission.

Become a member today. Visit [www.MNAPG.org](http://www.MNAPG.org) to join us.

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Minnesota Alliance on Problem Gambling is a nonprofit agency whose mission is to help those affected by problem gambling in Minnesota. We do this by promoting awareness and understanding of the issue via our website, newsletter, community education programs, sponsorship of the Minnesota State Conference of Problem Gambling, and training of professionals in preventing and treating problem gambling.

*Northern Light is funded by a grant from the state of Minnesota. Designer: Evans-Stark Design. Writer: Bill Stein*



# Behind Every Number, There's a Story

*Note: The following article was written by Bill Stein, MNAPG staff writer, for this year's Problem Gambling Awareness Month theme: Every Story Counts.*

**Each March, the National Council on Problem Gambling recognizes Problem Gambling Awareness Month (PGAM).** It's an opportunity to raise awareness about problem gambling and promote prevention, treatment and recovery services. This year's PGAM theme is "Every Story Matters."

As one who's chronicled the gambling struggles — and recoveries — of nearly 50 Minnesotans over the last 15 years, I believe in the power of stories to bring the reality of this addiction to light and to demonstrate how treatment can change lives.

There are an estimated 250,000 problem gamblers in Minnesota. And for every problem gambler, countless other people in their orbit are affected, including family members, friends and coworkers.

But numbers are one thing. The real impact that gambling disorder has on the lives of our neighbors, our parents, our siblings and our friends is quite another.

The stories of the people impacted by gambling addiction paint a more complete, human picture of the destruction this addiction can bring as well as the triumphs of those who have faced their demons and are living full, productive, satisfying lives.

Gambling addiction is an equal opportunity disorder. Virtually anyone — men or women, young or old, and those from every religion, race and socio-economic background — is at risk for developing a gambling problem.

The stories of Minnesotans I've documented have reflected this tapestry. Consider these:

- A member of the Navy, who was among the boots on the ground in the Middle East, was faced with the challenge of coming home and trying to match the excitement and high-tempo routine he had become accustomed to. The closest adrenaline rush he could find was gambling. He eventually developed an addiction and accompanying depression before he found the help he needed.

- "Tim" became a kind of celebrity in his town after he won \$500 in a church picnic at age of seven. He chased that high of winning for 34 years. Then he entered inpatient treatment for his gambling and has since turned his life around.
- "Jean" was the gambling addict you'd never suspect. She wasn't a video gamer, didn't like football pools and didn't play the stock market. She didn't even start gambling until she was almost 50. It took being fired from her job (from stealing money to support a gambling habit) and serving a lengthy prison sentence until she confronted her addiction and began her recovery.
- "Cecelia" was five months pregnant when she learned about her husband's gambling activity. It ultimately became such a problem that he lost his job, the couple's only source of income. She sought help from Gam-Anon, which helps those whose lives are negatively impacted by a problem gambler. She educated herself about her husband's gambling addiction and ultimately left the roller coaster life her husband's gambling had caused. She is now thriving, and working to support others who have been through what she has.
- "Dick" was a self-professed straight arrow, a regular church-goer and a good family man with a well-paying job in management. But once pressures drove him to make frequent visits to the casino, things changed significantly. Dick ended up with large credit card debts and owing the government thousands of dollars in taxes.
- "Lori" rarely gambled until work stresses and unresolved childhood trauma drove her to gamble as often as she could. In time, she put gambling ahead of her home, her husband, her kids and even food for herself. Depressed and suicidal, she'd planned to end her life until an eagle swooped over her car as she took her son to visit his grandmother. She saw the eagle as a sign of hope, went online to find help and learned of the successful recoveries that others had had. She subsequently started the 30-day inpatient gambling program at Project Turnabout in

Granite Falls and turned her life around.

While each of these stories is unique, they often have a lot in common. I've found that many of the recovering gamblers we highlight have these characteristics:

- A big win early in their life that creates a high they "chase" for years.
- Their gambling often occurs with other mental health conditions. For example, a gambling addict may also experience substance or alcohol abuse.
- They are typically either: 1. An "escape gambler" who gambles to escape life's problems, or 2. An "action gambler" who may appear egotistical, successful and outgoing, and often prefers to play games involving skill, such as poker or sports betting.
- Relapses are often stops along the way in their overall recovery process.

There many other similarities, such as lying about money and time spent gambling, stealing to acquire money and a preoccupation with gambling. Many of the gamblers I've profiled have also attempted suicide, sometimes several times.

What also comes through when sharing the stories of problem gamblers is the pain they feel for what their gambling has caused others. They regret the lies they've told, the gift money they've squandered, the retirement savings they've spent and the way they've prioritized gambling over family, friends, relationships and jobs.

These are good, well-meaning people. They often didn't know there was such a thing as gambling addiction, and if they did, they weren't sure how or where to get help. They struggled to find other people who understood them.

In the end, after speaking to so many people, I've come away with great admiration for those who have turned around their lives — and great hope that the many others currently suffering from this devastating disorder can eventually become success stories of their own.

# The Role of Community Engagement in Addressing Problem Gambling

The term “community engagement” is something you hear often. But what exactly is it and how can it be applied to problem gambling prevention and treatment?



Northern Light sat down with Adina Black, MNAPG program manager, to better understand community engagement in the context of problem gambling.

**NL:** How would you define “community engagement?”

**AB:** Community engagement is about utilizing peoples’ lived experiences to understand the needs and priorities of a community, and to use that knowledge to inform what kind of efforts need to take place. For example, when you think about a business selling a product to a target audience, they have to develop it so it speaks to the audience directly — to make sure it’s what they want and that they’re invested in it. It’s the same with solving community health issues. You want to make sure that whatever solutions, programs and initiatives you’re developing, that the direct audience is going to benefit and partake. I like to use an analogy that illustrates this aspect of community engagement. Suppose someone came to you out of the blue with soup and said, “Take this, it will make you feel better.” You’d be hesitant because you haven’t been told what’s ailing you, if you’ll

even like it or have an allergy to it. You’d be asked to take something without the soup giver knowing about your needs or how to address them.

**NL:** How do you apply this to problem gambling?

**AB:** If you look at problem gambling, you want to include those impacted by the problem. Either people with gambling disorders, those who treat them, or family and friends impacted by people with gambling problems. You want them to be involved and informed to address the problem. Nobody can speak to the problem better than those who have lived experience.

Then you also want to determine the issues that are most impactful and harmful and what resources we can create to meet those needs. For example, is it to create a clinic? And if so, will people feel comfortable going to those services?

**NL:** Do you feel we’re at a critical point in orchestrating community engagement with problem gambling?

**AB:** Definitely. We’re at an interesting point in Minnesota right now with so much gambling legislation pending. It feels as though we’re watching a gambling addiction epidemic taking place. We’re at a point where we can really do something. Now is the time to build relationships with the various community organizations that can impact the range of social factors that contribute to problem gambling. They will be integral to preventing and treating the issue

as it grows. As the opportunity to gamble expands, we will also notice an increase in those who deal with issues around gambling. It’s important to work collaboratively to get ahead of the storm. What can we put in place for prevention, education and bringing awareness? Are we making sure that people in a position to potential diagnose a gambling problem are screening for the disorder? And for those in the throes of gambling addiction, how can we give them access to treatment?

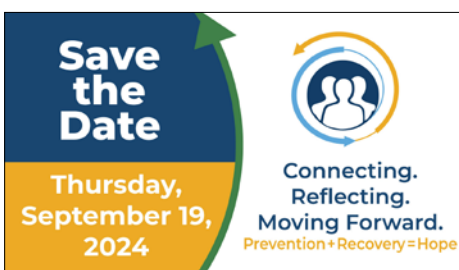
**NL:** What can you tell us about current community engagement efforts?

**AB:** Currently, our work is focused on communities most at risk, such as communities of color, certain ethnic groups and groups catering to young men. These are the groups that are, statistically, most at risk to develop problems with gambling. I’m connecting with several groups that represent and provide services to those communities.

**NL:** Are there other areas you plan to pursue in the future?

**AB:** Yes. We plan to connect with groups in religious communities as well as in the corrections arena to help identify more people who are vulnerable or who may be experiencing gambling disorder. We’re also open to hearing feedback from community organizations that we haven’t connected with yet. We’d love to explore new collaborations we can undertake together, better serve the community and ultimately help produce better outcomes for all Minnesotans.

## Upcoming Conference Opportunities — Save the Date



### Minnesota Conference

The Minnesota Conference on Problem Gambling takes place on Thursday, Sept. 19 at the Hilton Minneapolis/Bloomington.

While we’re still finalizing the day’s sessions, here are some topics we plan to cover:

- The intersection of gambling and suicide
- Financial counseling for families
- The impact of gambling on families
- Community leader panel discussion about gambling
- Update on sports betting legislation
- National gambling attitudes survey results

Please check [mnapg.org](http://mnapg.org) in the coming months for additional information about the conference as we solidify the agenda.



### National Conference

The National Conference on Gambling Addiction & Responsible Gambling takes place in San Diego on July 17-19. The conference brings together world-class presenters to deliver powerful and insightful messages about problem gambling and responsible gambling. For more information and to register, visit [ncpgconference.org](http://ncpgconference.org).

# NCPG Modernizing the National Problem Gambling Helpline



The National Council on Problem Gambling (NCPG) is making significant improvements to the National Problem Gambling Helpline. The changes are expected to provide consistent standards across participating states and provide insights into those calling the helplines, ultimately making help more accessible to people in need of problem gambling information and support services.

There are four primary aspects to the modernization project, which began in 2021. The first was establishing a national helpline number, 1-800-GAMBLER, something that was initiated in 2022. The single national number means a reduction in the number of state helpline numbers that need to be listed in national gambling ads. It also ensures that anyone living in participating states will be automatically routed to their local state

helpline when dialing 1-800-GAMBLER.

The second part of the project is upgrading the technology. This involved improving telephony and routing systems, synchronizing text and chat data collection forms, and ensuring access to language translation for services for all contact centers within the National Problem Gambling Helpline Network. While this work isn't flashy to the public, it ensures that everyone gets connected to their contact center efficiently and effectively, and that language is not a barrier to care.

The third portion of the project involves working with the 27 contact centers that comprise the network to help each one grow, standardize communication and training, and ensure the centers obtain accreditation with the appropriate governing body.

The final aspect of the project relates to data collection. NCPG is working with the various contact centers to get permission to gather specific helpline data. This will provide insights into trends about callers using the service and the reason for their call, ultimately allowing NCPG to better support advocacy efforts at the national and state levels.

NCPG's Helpline Committee has developed more than 15 data points they're seeking to obtain from the contact centers. Some of the information includes who is calling

the helpline (family member, individual who gambles, etc.), the kind of gambling that has caused problems (sports gambling, lottery, etc.), and the type of referrals made (to treatment, to peer support, warm transfer to crisis services, etc.).

"This information will allow us to identify and forecast trends, which will inform state and national advocacy efforts," says Jaime Costello, director of programs for NCPG. "For example, if we see that peer services are becoming a more common referral option, we'll be able to help the states advocate for more resources. Data strengthens advocacy efforts."

NCPG hopes to complete the initial stages of the National Problem Gambling Helpline Modernization Project by the end of the year and is hoping to extend the work beyond 2024. NCPG is seeking to secure additional or extended funding to ensure that the project can be continued through to completion. Funding for the National Problem Gambling Helpline Modernization has been provided by the NFL via the NFL Foundation.

*Note: Minnesota will continue to advertise its own helpline number, 1-800-333-HOPE (4673), for in-state messaging. If sports betting is approved, the NCPG helpline number will be used in ads to eliminate the need to have multiple numbers printed. Regardless of which number a Minnesotan calls, they will be connected to the state's help center vendor.*



## Lower-Risk Gambling Guidelines

A low-risk approach to gambling means choosing to gamble on a limited basis and because it's a fun recreational activity. By following these three guidelines, you can ensure you gamble responsibly (all guidelines should be observed to maximize safety).

1

### HOW MUCH

Gamble no more than **1%** of household income before tax per month

and

4

### HOW OFTEN

Gamble no more than **4 days** per month

and

2

### HOW MANY

Avoid regularly gambling at more than **2 types** of games

Note: these limits may not be suitable for those experiencing problems from alcohol, cannabis or other drug use, problems with anxiety or depression, or have a family history of addiction or problem gambling.

# Austin Strom's Story

*“Once Covid hit and the accompanying shutdowns, I had no shortage of free time. By this time, my minimum bet was already at least ten times more than when I started.”*



**My name is Austin Strom, and I am a gambling addict. I am 24, and for the last seven years, gambling has been my life.**

Gambling runs in my family. My parents and grandparents, who had their own gambling battles, would often gamble. I have numerous memories of them arranging a baby sitter to watch me when they would go out gambling.

So not surprisingly, when I had an assignment called “If I had 100 dollars” in kindergarten or first grade, my response was “I would go to the casino!”

In high school, I would occasionally partake in friendly sports wagers involving my team against my friends’ teams. I would also play blackjack with friends without betting money, but the objective never changed: win the game.

The day I turned 18 was long anticipated. I went to the casino with my parents and grandmother that day. I didn’t have the best luck, but since it was my birthday and my parents didn’t want me to lose on my birthday, they kept adding money in hopes of turning the tide. I don’t remember how that day played out, but I do remember spending about 12 hours at the casino, losing all I had with me. For the next month, I went to the casino multiple times, including a two-night stay by myself at the hotel. Other than a few

hours of sleeping, the rest of the time was spent at the Blackjack tables. I remember one day all I had to eat was a piece of pizza because to me eating was time away from the table.

I was then introduced to websites such as DraftKings and Bovada, where I could partake in daily fantasy sports. Before switching to actual sports betting, I lost several thousand dollars on fantasy sports. I would spend the next two years betting on sports weekly, if not daily. I would wait until the day I got paid, just to eventually drain my account and wait two weeks for the next paycheck. By this time, all of my gambling, which also included blackjack, was done online and I rarely went back to a casino.

Once Covid hit and the accompanying shutdowns, I had no shortage of free time. By this time, my minimum bet was already at least ten times more than when I started. When I ran out of money, I learned about online personal loans. I took out a \$1,500 loan and planned to make enough money to pay it off before my next paycheck. But that didn’t work out and I borrowed more and more, eventually owing up to \$30,000 over a three-week period.

By this time, I was determined to keep the addiction to myself so that nobody would

try to encourage me to stop. This pressure, combined with anxiety and depression I had struggled with for much of my life, brought me to consider suicide. This led to one of a few trips to the emergency room for personal safety.

At this time, I was ready to get the help that those around me had suggested, or so I thought. I enrolled in Gamblers Choice, essentially a 12-step program for gamblers. But my addiction continued, even while it was harder to hide. I came to realize that the program wasn’t something I wanted to do or what I was ready for at the time.

I continued to gamble, but eventually went to inpatient treatment at Project Turnabout in Granite Falls. I met great people who understood what I was going through. It also showed me that this addiction doesn’t care where you come from or what you do. My mindset improved but I left after three weeks, rather than stay for the full 30 days I was supposed to do. I re-enrolled in Gamblers Choice but would continue to gamble until Oct. 9, the day I placed my last wager. At this point, I had lost everything I could possibly lose, including my best friend. I was left with two choices — end it all or give it 60 days without gambling and see if living without gambling was something I could do.

# MNAPG Launches Effort to Raise Problem Gambling Awareness in Schools

I was assigned a “Goodbye Gambling” letter in my Gamblers Choice group, and I believe that really got me to a new place. Since then, I’ve really looked at everything after that as a new life. I’ve had to and am still currently rewiring my brain’s definition of fun. Sure, the highs aren’t as high as they were when I was gambling, and they may never be that way. However, that also means the lows aren’t as low as they were while I was gambling, and that’s a trade I will take every day of the week. My entire outlook on life has changed since I’ve quit gambling. I’ve got a new hope towards life and what’s to come that excites me. I’m definitely a different person than I was even just several months ago. My gratitude for everything life has to offer has grown substantially, and none of that would have happened had I still been gambling. That’s why it’s important that I just don’t gamble today.

If you or somebody you know is struggling with a gambling addiction, please reach out for help. Do it for yourself. So often we see this message and just let it slide by without giving it any thought.

As dark as it may seem, I promise there is light at the end of the tunnel. Let the journey of recovery be that light for you, like it was mine and so many others. I leave you with this quote: *“Sometimes when you’re in a dark place it feels like you’ve been buried alive. But perhaps you’ve just been planted and now is your time to bloom.”*



In today’s digital age, the allure of online gaming and gambling platforms can be enticing, often leading to harmful consequences for our youth. To help build awareness of these risks, MNAPG has created a toolkit specially designed to help schools raise awareness to students. The dynamic, easy-to-use toolkit helps schools communicate gambling and gaming information in a way that promotes safety and understanding.

The kit is free and includes materials for staff and parents (brochures and handouts, video links, PA announcements and content for parents) and materials for students (handouts, posters, bookmarks, and social media images and content).

Support is provided to participants at no cost, and includes MNAPG staff support and in-person speaker presentations. The kits benefit students, teachers, school counselors, coaches, PTA members and parents. If you’re interested in learning more about the toolkit, please contact Sonja Mertz at [smertz@mnapg.org](mailto:smertz@mnapg.org) or visit <https://school-toolkit.mnapg.org>.

## ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS

### Why belong to the Alliance?

You can make MNAPG’s voice stronger and affirm the value of our work. Gambling disorder is a real and destructive addiction. Our work is not about prohibition, but to ensure those negatively impacted have available resources for recovery and to minimize the risks for all. Better informed consumers make better choices. More members equal greater credibility with decision makers. Visit our membership page at [MNAPG.org/membership](http://MNAPG.org/membership).

## PLATINUM



Draft Kings

## SILVER



CharitAbleMN

## GOLD



Minnesota Indian Gaming Association



Running Aces



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Minnesota State Lottery



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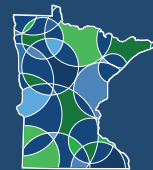


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Minnesota Alliance  
on Problem Gambling

# Northern Light



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