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We're happy to lead the world in gambling

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WE like to rank ourselves against the rest of the world but we could do without our status as the biggest losers.

According to international gaming industry consultants H2 Gambling Capital, Australians last year lost close to \$US1300 on gambling for every resident (not including tourists) aged 17 and over. Singapore, which recently built two mega casinos, was next on about \$US1150. Those famously lucky Irish came in third, but were hardly in the race with less than \$US600, while the Americans and British averaged losses of less than \$US400.

It would be one thing if Australians' willingness to bet on anything was no more than an endearing national characteristic. Instead, we have a problem on a uniquely Australian scale. This was brought home by a report last year from the Productivity Commission.

Pardon the following heavy diet of data but the statistics are staggering. The commission calculated total gambling losses at more than \$19 billion in 2008-09, a tripling over 20 years and an average of \$1500 per gambling adult. Considering the report estimated 70 per cent of Australians participate in some sort of gambling, that is in the same ball park as the H2 figures.

The expansion of gambling in the 1990s saw the share taken by casinos and electronic gaming machines, which we used to call pokies, rise from 40 per cent to 75 per cent in the 20 years to 2006-07. In 2009, there were 198,300 gaming machines in Australia, including 97,065 in NSW (but only 1750 in Western Australia).