

## **How to Interpret the A.A. Triennial Membership Surveys**

**by Glenn F. Chesnut, Ph.D.**

The author, a much published scholar, taught for thirty-three years at Indiana University, and also taught during the course of his career at the University of Virginia and as Visiting Professor at Boston University.

The A.A. Triennial Membership Surveys for 1977 through 1989 show that, of those people who are in their first month of attending A.A. meetings, 26% will still be attending A.A. meetings at the end of that year. Of those who are in their fourth month of attending A.A. meetings (i.e., those who have completed their initial ninety days, and have thereby demonstrated a certain willingness to really try the program), 56% will still be attending A.A. meetings at the end of that year.

For more details see Arthur S. (Arlington, Texas), Tom E. (Wappingers Falls, New York), and Glenn C. (South Bend, Indiana): "Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Recovery Outcome Rates: Contemporary Myth and Misinterpretation."\*

The basic confusion over the Triennial surveys arises because so many people are not used to working with this kind of data, and draw the erroneous conclusion that only 5% (or less) of the newcomers who start attending AA meetings even make it to the end of their first year.\*\*

What the data actually say is that when visiting an average AA meeting on any given day of the year — if we look at those at that meeting who are somewhere in their first year in AA — 19% on the average will be somewhere in their first month of attending AA meetings, and 5% on the average will be somewhere in their twelfth month.

"Ah ha," these AA bashers cry, "this is PROOF POSITIVE that only 5% of the people who start coming to AA actually make it even to the end of their first year."

(Many of the AA bashers then do an extra little wiggle with the data to drop that 5% to one and a half percent, so they can claim that the AA success rate is no higher than the percentage of spontaneous remission among alcoholics who never come to AA or receive any other kind of treatment at all.)

These people do not know how to read an ordinary table of easy and uncomplicated data, and do the elementary grade school math to calculate a simple percentage.

I spent 35 years as a university professor, and colleges and universities use this kind of table all the time, as a way of checking to see how well they are doing. If too many students are dropping out or being flunked out at any given point, then university policies and retention strategies need to be revised and improved.

To illustrate how this kind of enrollment data is collected and analyzed, let us imagine that we are teachers at a college called Nobrainers University, where no students are ever flunked out, and no students ever drop out. They enroll one thousand new freshman students every September, and everybody who enrolls as a first year student ends up graduating with a degree four years later. The table for Nobrainers University would show the following enrollment figures on the day when we gathered our data:

1st year: 1,000 students = 25% of total student body  
2nd year: 1,000 students = 25% of total student body  
3rd year: 1,000 students = 25% of total student body  
4th year: 1,000 students = 25% of total student body  
TOTAL: 4,000 students

One of the AA bashers would look at this table and then shout "See! Only 25% of their students end up graduating! It's right there in black and white, before your very eyes. We AA bashers are so intelligent, and those AA people are so stupid. Anybody can see that Nobrainers University is cheating these people out of their money and carrying out an enormous fraudulent rip-off!"

In fact, you calculate the success rate in a table of this sort by dividing the number of 4th year students by the number of 1st year students. You can either divide 1,000 by 1,000, or 25% by 25%, and the result is the same: 100% of the students who enroll at this university end up graduating with a degree.

A more typical American university would lose perhaps five percent of their students per year (some of them failing too many courses, some quitting to get married or join the army or whatever, some of them just dropping out). It would have figures more like the following:

1st year: 1,000 students = 26.96 % of total student body  
2nd year: 950 students = 25.61 % of total student body  
3rd year: 902 students = 24.32 % of total student body  
4th year: 857 students = 23.11 % of total student body  
TOTAL: 3,709 students

A typical AA basher would look at this, and go on a long tirade against American universities: "You see! Only 23% of the people who enroll at that university ever graduate! It's right there in black

and white. The people who run American universities are nothing but liars and cheats. Thank goodness I am so much more intelligent than all of these stupid people who teach (or take classes) at Indiana University, the University of Virginia, or Boston University" (the three institutions where I taught during the course of my career).

The AA basher kind of math is nonsense of course. Nobody would go to college in the U.S. if over three quarters of the people who tried it failed.

In fact, if you want to calculate the percentage of new freshman students in the above table who will end up graduating in four years, you divide the number of 4th year students by the number of 1st year students. That is, you either divide 857 by 1,000 or you divide 23.11% by 26.96% (the ratio will automatically be the same). Either way you get the same answer: 85.7 % of the incoming freshman students end up graduating and receiving their degrees at the end of the four year course of study.

#### SO WHAT DO THE TRIENNIAL SURVEYS ACTUALLY SHOW?

The figures produced by the Triennial Surveys showed that, of those who were somewhere in their first year in AA, 19% on the average were somewhere in their first month of attending AA meetings, and 5% on the average were somewhere in their twelfth month.

5% divided by 19% is 26. That means that about 26% of those who were in their first month in AA at the time the survey was taken, were still going to be attending AA meetings twelve months later.

Now AA bashers like to take even these figures and wail and bemoan that this proves that modern AA has fallen onto bad times and no longer works like it did in the old days. "Only twenty-six percent? Why, in the old days, fifty percent of alcoholics got sober

and never drank again once they joined AA, while another twenty-five percent might have had a slip, but they eventually came back to AA, and then never drank again."

It is true that in early AA, they regularly claimed that AA worked for 50 % of alcoholics "who really tried" or something of that sort. But the guarding language was deliberate and necessary. No one has ever claimed that you could take a hundred alcoholics off of skid row or out of a treatment center or out of a county jail, and simply run them through one or two AA meetings, and magically make them WANT to get sober. That does not work today, and it did not work back in 1935 either (or 1939 or 1940).

In the little piece entitled "Alcoholics Anonymous Recovery Outcome Rates: Contemporary Myth and Misinterpretation,"\* calculations were therefore made of what percentage of newcomers who attended modern AA meetings for ninety days were still going to be attending AA meetings at the end of their first year. The official AA figures indicate that, of those who are somewhere in their first year in AA, 9% on the average will be somewhere in their fourth month of attending AA meetings, and 5% on the average will be somewhere in their twelfth month. If we take those two numbers, and divide 5 by 9, we will see that 56% of those who finish their first 90 days in the AA program, will still be in the program at the end of their first year.

This is amazingly similar to the early AA claims. Seventy or eighty years ago, they were saying that 50% of those "who really tried" ended up getting sober. This is almost identical to the modern figures, which show that 56% of those who demonstrate the sincerity of their commitment by attending meetings for 90 days when they first come in, will end up successfully completing their first year in the program.

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**\*"Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Recovery Outcome Rates:  
Contemporary Myth and Misinterpretation"**

by Arthur S. (Arlington, Texas),  
Tom E. (Wappingers Falls, New York),  
and Glenn C. (South Bend, Indiana)

This article may be read online as an Adobe Acrobat file at  
<http://hindsfoot.org/recout01.pdf> or as an MS Word file at  
<http://hindsfoot.org/recout01.doc>

Arthur S. is a computer expert who started out in Silicon Valley in California, and then moved to the Dallas, Fort Worth, Arlington area. He is famous for his "Narrative Timeline of AA History," one of the most important reference works which serious researchers into AA history need to have at hand while doing their work. In this 134-page document, Arthur gives not only an extended list of the dates and chronology of AA history, but also -- for each of these items -- careful page references to thirty of the top books on AA history and other sources which the researcher may utilize to learn more on each of these topics. In effect, it is a giant index to a huge collection of some of the best AA historical literature down through the years. Available online at <http://hindsfoot.org/aatimeline.pdf>

Tom E. prepared the carefully calculated tables and graphs which illustrate the article's conclusions.

Glenn C. is moderator of the internet group which provides the major interchange for new ideas and information among AA historians around the world.

See <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/AAHistoryLovers/info>

Also see his résumé at <http://hindsfoot.org/resume.html>

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Also see his books and articles on the Hindsfoot Foundation site at  
<http://hindsfoot.org/>

\*\*The 5% figure came originally from a man named Richard K., who belonged to the AAHistoryLovers back then, and who did not know how to read the statistical tables in the A.A. Triennial Surveys. I remember well how a number of us tried to show him how he was misreading the tables — that the 5% figure at one place was NOT the one-year success rate, merely the percentage of the people at these A.A. meetings who were in their twelfth month of attending A.A. — but he continued to insist that his misreading was correct.

And then, God help us, this blatant misreading began being repeated by certain other people on the internet, without these people remotely bothering to check where that figure had come from or who had dreamed it up. They would at best insert a footnote into their own work citing from a garbled and confused account which Richard K. had published himself by running off copies of his typescript on a photocopying machine, referring to that work in their own footnotes as though it was a scholarly book published by an accredited academic press.

Dick B. in Hawaii flooded the internet with references to Richard K. and the 5% figure to such an extent that even serious scholars were assuming that the 5% figure must be correct, "because it was all over the internet and everybody was citing it." Dick B. was insisting on this 5% figure so fanatically, because he was pushing his theory that modern AA could "once more" attain its supposed early 50% success rate once again, if only modern AA's would start praying to Jesus, and getting down on their knees and accepting him as their savior, and regarding his death on the cross as the substitutionary atonement for all their sins, and reading from the King James Version of the New Testament during all their AA meetings.