Recovery Statistics

a drill into the Foundation Meeting's numbers — what each one counts, who is in it, and where it comes from

THE CLAIM, IN THE SCRIPT'S WORDS

its history paragraph · each figure tagged with its source

75%+
"who had Sponsors who followed the clear-cut directions in the Big Book were successful in sobriety"
1955 · PAGE XX

50%
"by 1965, our success rate had dropped to 50%"
1965 · **NO SOURCE GIVEN**

33%
"by 1980, we had dropped to 33%"
1980 · **NO SOURCE GIVEN**

<5%
"less than 5% for those finding as much as 5 years sobriety"
"RECENT YEARS" · CHIP SALES

The script reads these as one success rate falling over the half century since 1955. They are four different numbers, counting four different groups of people, and two of them come with no source at all. *Each is taken apart below and over the next two pages.*

PAGE XX — WHAT THE BOOK ACTUALLY SAYS

Foreword to Second Edition · 1955

> *"Of alcoholics who came to A.A. and really tried, 50% got sober at once and remained that way; 25% sobered up after some relapses, and among the remainder, those who stayed on with A.A. showed improvement. Other thousands came to a few A.A. meetings and at first decided they didn't want the program. But great numbers of these—about two out of three—began to return as time passed."*
>
> p. xx



- got sober at once and remained that way
- sobered up after some relapses
- the remainder — "showed improvement" if they stayed on

of every 100 who "came to A.A. and really tried" — the "other thousands" who came to a few meetings are not in the 100

- **Who is in the 100.** Alcoholics who "came to A.A. and really tried." The ones who came to a few meetings and left are counted apart, as the "other thousands" — and about two of every three of them came back.
- **How it was counted.** The foreword gives no method: it is the fellowship's own reckoning after twenty years. On tape Cliff says so himself — "Of course, this is an estimate. It's not really accurate." **tape 5:58**
- **The arithmetic.** 50 + 25 = 75. The script's "½ those who did drink" is the 25 out of the other 50; the last 25 "showed improvement" if they stayed on, and are not in the 75%.
- **The script's reading.** The book says *really tried*; the script says *who had Sponsors who followed the clear-cut directions in the Big Book*. Cliff's article adds that Dr. Bob, Clarence S. "and some of the others were realizing 90%+" — no source given — and "What Happened?" turns the 100 into "the alcoholics who came to us for help."

WHAT THE SCRIPT SAYS BECAME OF IT

where each figure comes from

WHEN	FIGURE	THE SCRIPT TIES IT TO	ITS SOURCE
1955	**75%+**	Sponsors following the Big Book's directions	page xx, above — an estimate
1965	**50%**	the 12&12 (1953) taken as directions	**none given** — not in the articles the script cites; Cliff repeats it on tape, "In 10 short years we were down to 50" **8:03**
1980	**33%**	"discussion/participation meetings," late 60's	**none given** — on tape, "dropped down to a third" **8:12**
recent	**<5%** at 5 years	drifting into group therapy	intergroup chip sales — Houston's are on the next page

The two ends count different people. Page xx's 75% leaves out the "other thousands" who came to a few meetings. A desire chip goes to anyone who picks one up — those same few-meetings people, and everyone starting over after a slip. So some of the fall from 75% to under 5% is a change of yardstick, not of results; how much, the numbers cannot say.

The Chips and the Members

the script's evidence — one intergroup's chip sales, and the General Service Office's estimate of members

THE "INTERGROUP STATS" — HOUSTON, 1996

Cliff B., *The Price of "Just Don't Drink and Go To Meetings"!!!* (c. 2000)

CHIP	SOLD	% PRINTED	PER 100 DESIRE CHIPS
Desire	24,246	100%	
30 days	8,839	36%	
60 days	5,960	25%	
90 days	5,019	21%	
6 months	3,370	15%*	
1 year	2,102	9%	
2 years	1,170	5%	
5 years	707	3%	
10 years	560	2%	
20 years	143	0.6%	
30 years	26	0.1%	

"NUMBER OF CHIPS SOLD BY THE INTERGROUP OFFICE IN 1996" · * 3,370 of 24,246 is 13.9%; the article prints 15%. Every other share checks.

After 1996, desire chips fell to **22,191** (1997), **19,504** (1998) and **16,285** (1999): "The other statistics remained the same."

> *"A very disturbing observation from the 1998 statistics is that 592 medallions were purchased for AA's celebrating 10 years of sobriety. The total number of folks taking 'desire chips' in 1988 was in excess of 40,000. Did only about 1.5% apply our Program?"*

592 ÷ 40,000 = 1.48%. On tape Cliff updates it: large-city intergroups in 2002, Dallas included, ten-year medallions "less than 1%" 8:12.

- **What's counted:** chips sold by one office in one year — sales, not people. A chip bought anywhere else never shows up.
- **Who's in the 100:** anyone who picks up a desire chip — page xx's "other thousands" included, and anyone starting over, so one person can be several desire chips.
- **Mixed years:** the 1996 one-year chips went to people who started in 1995, the ten-year medallions to people who started in 1986. Only the 1998-against-1988 check follows one year's newcomers.
- **What it does show:** the drop comes first and fast — 36 thirty-day chips for every 100 desire chips. That is the book's own "other thousands came to a few A.A. meetings."

THE "BOX 459 STATS" — MEMBERS, NOT RECOVERIES

G.S.O.'s U.S. estimates as the group tabulated them, 2004

YEAR	U.S. MEMBERS	CHANGE	0 – 1.2 MILLION
1987	727,145		
1988	778,045	+7.0%	
1989	835,489	+7.4%	
1990	896,033	+7.2%	
1991	1,012,623	+13.0%	
1992	1,079,719	+6.6%	
1992 to 1997: +7.3% in five years, under 1.5% a year			
1997	1,158,850		
1998	1,166,079	+0.6%	
1999	1,166,927	nil	
2000	1,161,436	−0.5%	
2002	1,160,651	−0.1%	
2003	1,168,990	+0.7%	

every change checks against the counts · 2001 is missing from the group's table

"What Happened?": "Our growth rate was approximately 7% and the number of sober members of Alcoholics Anonymous doubled every 10 years." Seven percent a year does double in ten ($1.07^{10} \approx 1.97$). The table's first years run 7%; 1992–97 grew 7.3% in all five; from 1997 the count stands still.

The book's own counts, the whole fellowship: about 100 (1939, p. xvii) · 2,000 (March 1941) and 8,000 (end of 1941, p. xviii) · "far above 150,000" in nearly 6,000 groups (1955, p. xv), "pyramiding at the rate of about twenty per cent a year" (p. xx) · "more than 1,000,000" (1976, p. xxii) · "two million or more" (2001, p. xxiii). G.S.O. now: 1,967,613 worldwide, 1,350,415 in the U.S. (December 31, 2021).

> *"The General Service Office does not keep membership records. The information shown here is based on reports given by groups listed with G.S.O., and does not represent an actual count of those who consider themselves A.A. members."*
>
> G.S.O., *Estimates of A.A. Groups and Members* (SMF-53, Rev. 01/22)

Reading it: how many people are in the rooms, not how many recovered. A count can grow while most newcomers leave, if enough come; it can stand still while those who stay do well, if fewer come. Box 459 is the U.S.; the forewords count the world.

The Baltimore Study

Crape et al., 2002 — five hundred injection drug users, one year, and what sponsoring others went with

THE STUDY

Drug and Alcohol Dependence 65 (2002) 291–301 · research, not Big Book — the script does not cite it

- **Who.** 500 current and former heroin and cocaine injectors in inner-city Baltimore, drawn from a long-running HIV study and "recruited from the community-at-large, independent of treatment center affiliation." **pp. 291, 293**
- **Grouped once, at the start.** Not in NA/AA (352) · in NA/AA with no sponsor (57) · sponsored, never a sponsor (62) · sponsored and sponsoring others (29). NA/AA and sponsor status was recorded only then. **pp. 293, 299**
- **What "abstinence" means here.** Reporting "no current use of cocaine or heroin" at the start and at both visits after it, six months apart — in the person's own words; drinking is not part of it. **p. 294**
- **Lost along the way.** 102 of the 500 (20.4%), deaths and jail included. **p. 294**
- **NA and AA together.** Of the 148 who attended, 73 went to both, 66 to NA only, 9 to AA only. **p. 293**

AT THE START, AND OVER THE YEAR

Table 2, p. 296

AT THE START OF THE YEAR	NOT USING AT THE START	ABSTAINING THE WHOLE YEAR	MEDIAN CLEAN TIME
not in NA/AA	34.4% 121/352	24.2% 64/264	12 months
in NA/AA, no sponsor	61.4% 35/57	44.7% 21/47	9 months
in NA/AA, sponsored	61.3% 38/62	39.1% 18/46	8.5 months
in NA/AA, sponsoring others	**93.1%** 27/29	**75.0%** 18/24	**60 months**

bars run 0–100% · median clean time is for those not using at the start

Read across the sponsors' row. A year's abstinence means clean at the start and at both visits, so each row can only keep what its first column had. The sponsors began 93% clean, with a median of five years; the other members, 61% clean with nine months or less. Their 75% is long sobriety holding — and long-sober people are the ones who sponsor.

WHAT THE AUTHORS CONCLUDE — AND THE LIMITS THEY NAME

pp. 297–299

> *"Over the 1-year study period, having a sponsor in NA/AA was not associated with sustained abstinence."*
>
> p. 298

> *Their own account of why: "The higher rates of methadone treatment among those without a sponsor, crossovers..., and the short time period of the study may have contributed some to making the sustained abstinence rates similar between these two groups."*
>
> p. 298 — on methadone at the third visit: 42.6% of the no-sponsor group, 26.1% of the sponsored (Table 2)

> *"In multivariate logistic regression analysis,* **being-a-sponsor was very strongly associated with sustained abstinence with an odds ratio of 3.2***..."*
>
> p. 298 — 95% interval 1.02 to 10.02 (Table 3, p. 297): wide, because only 24 sponsors were followed to the end; adjusted for meetings, treatment, community involvement, marriage, work and HIV status

> *"Being-a-Sponsor may both be a surrogate measure for degree of involvement in NA/AA as well as a lifestyle-change factor itself..."*
>
> p. 298

> *"All 29 NA/AA sponsors included in this investigation were sponsored." ... having a sponsor "may have acted as a 'gateway' to becoming a sponsor."*
>
> p. 298

> *"Unfortunately, neither was information available on other features of NA/AA meetings such as home groups, working the steps, speaking, etc...."*
>
> p. 299 — so it cannot speak to taking the Steps

> *"A substantial limitation in examining the association of sponsorship with abstinence was the 1-year study period."*
>
> p. 299 — its other finding: involvement in community groups (56% of those involved went to church activities), odds ratio 2.3

The book said it first, from experience: "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics. It works when other activities fail." (p. 89) — and in 1955, "strenuous work, one alcoholic with another, was vital to permanent recovery" (p. xvii). The study found the same association in 24 sponsors. It cannot show which way it runs.

Reading the Numbers

every figure on these pages, what kind of number it is, and what they add up to

THE EVIDENCE GRADIENT

how much weight each kind of number can carry

TIER	WHAT IT IS	THE NUMBERS HERE
1	**Counted** — someone kept the records, and the method is on the page	Baltimore's Table 2 and odds ratios · Houston's chip sales · G.S.O.'s member estimates (from group reports; "does not represent an actual count")
2	**From experience** — people who were there, no method given	page xx's 50 and 25 (1955) · the forewords' membership figures, 1939–2001 · "90%+" for Dr. Bob and Clarence S. · "7%… doubled every 10 years"
3	**Stated** — no source given anywhere	50% by 1965 · 33% by 1980

AT A GLANCE

figure · who says it · who it counts · tier

FIGURE	WHO SAYS IT	WHO, OR WHAT, IT COUNTS	KIND	TIER	PAGE
75%+	Big Book, p. xx (1955)	alcoholics who "came to A.A. and really tried"	estimate	2	1
90%+	Cliff B.	Dr. Bob's, Clarence S.'s and others' newcomers	recollection	2	1
50% · 33%	the script	—	assertion	3	1
<5% at 5 yrs	the script; "What Happened?"	"those expressing a desire to stop drinking"	chip sales	1	2
36 · 9 · 3	Houston Intergroup, 1996	30-day, 1-year and 5-year chips per 100 desire chips, one year's sales	sales count	1	2
≈1.5%	Cliff B.	1998 ten-year medallions against 1988 desire chips	sales, ten years apart	1	2
1.17 million	Box 459 (G.S.O.)	U.S. members, flat from 1997 to 2003	estimate from group reports	1	2
1.97 million	G.S.O., 2021	members worldwide, 1,350,415 of them in the U.S.	estimate from group reports	1	2
75% vs 39–45%	Crape et al., 2002	a year clean: sponsors, against NA/AA members with or without a sponsor	one-year study, self-report	1	3

Bottom line. No number here sets the Big Book's program beside "don't drink and go to meetings" and measures both. Page xx is the fellowship's 1955 estimate for those who really tried; the under-5% is chips sold to everyone who picked one up; Box 459 counts members, not recoveries; the Baltimore study followed drug users for one year and never asked about the Steps. Where the numbers do agree, they agree with the book. **Most who come don't stay** — 36 thirty-day chips for every 100 desire chips, and page xx's own "other thousands." **The ones who carry the message are the ones still sober a year later** — 75% of the sponsors against 39–45% of the other members, though they were also the longest sober to begin with. *"Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics."* (p. 89)

Alcoholics Anonymous (4th ed.): Forewords pp. xv–xxiii, checked against aa.org's per-foreword PDFs, and p. 89 · Primary Purpose Group "Foundation Meeting" script (foundation-meeting.doc) · Cliff B., "The Price of 'Just Don't Drink and Go To Meetings'!!!" (c. 2000) and "What Happened?"; "Box 459 Membership Estimates" (2004) — ppgaadallas.org via web.archive.org, texts in recovery/ppg/ppgaadallas/articles · Cliff B.'s Foundation Meeting recording, c. 2003 — tape quotes are the machine transcript's wording · G.S.O., Estimates of A.A. Groups and Members, SMF-53 (Rev. 01/22) · Crape, B.L., Latkin, C.A., Laris, A.S., & Knowlton, A.R. (2002), "The effects of sponsorship in 12-step treatment of injection drug users," Drug and Alcohol Dependence 65, 291–301, doi:10.1016/S0376-8716(01)00175-2 — PDF: recovery/guide/baltimore-maryland-study-crape-2002.pdf · companions: foundation-meeting (the study guide) and foundation-meeting-script (the script, word for word)