Women Closing Gap in Risky Drinking, Driving

**BY BETSY BATES**

*Los Angeles Bureau*

SANTA BARBARA, CALIF. — Longitudinal data from a large national alcohol abuse survey suggests that the gender gap is narrowing with regard to drinking and driving. Women's rates of risky alcohol-related driving behaviors are actually increasing in some cases.

"The worldwide decline in alcohol-related traffic fatalities seems to have leveled off or reversed in recent years," said S. Patricia Chou, Ph.D., at the annual meeting of the Research Society on Alcoholism.

A careful look at trends in drinking and driving patterns may help to explain why. Some news was positive when Dr. Chou reported on data collected in 1991-1992 and then again in 2001-2002 as part of the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC), a landmark, long-term survey of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

The study highlighted several potential worrisome patterns over time. More 21 and 23-year-old females were driving after drinking in 2001-2002 than they were in 1991-1992. Although the difference was not statistically significant, there was certainly no decline in this behavior among young women.

Drinking while actually driving also declined overall in the 10-year period, but not among females aged 45-64 years, or among Hispanic females aged 18-29 years.

"This percentage increased to 40% when non-AA meeting attendees to express commitment to core elements of the program, including making amends, believing in and deferring to that power, and participating in fellowship and step activities of AA. Some of these activities predicted abstinence or total alcohol consumed among consistent AA attendees, but belief in a higher power and deferring to that power did not.

Among erratic or former AA attendees, no relationship could be seen between commitment to the core elements of the program and abstinence or a reduction in drinking, despite the fact that one in four said AA was "pretty helpful" or "very helpful" in combating their drinking problems.

Dr. Tonigan said it is vital to find out which elements of AA are successful, so that those elements can be integrated into therapy for people who choose not to stay in the formal AA program.

Study Detects Some ‘Heretics’ Among AA Program Faithful

**BY BETSY BATES**

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SANTA BARBARA, CALIF. — A comprehensive 10-year study of Alcoholics Anonymous participants has unveiled several surprising findings about the program’s influence over a membership that numbers more than 1.2 million in the United States and 2 million worldwide.

Perhaps most notably, J. Scott Tonigan, Ph.D., and his associates at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, found that many one-time AA participants rarely or never attend meetings and may not place much stock in a higher power’s role in their recovery, yet continue to read AA literature and believe that the organization helps them stay sober.

One of the underlying premises of AA is that, to be successful, members must commit to lifelong abstinence and meeting attendance, as well as dedication to a “spiritual awakening” that includes turning over “to a power greater than themselves” the control alcohol holds over their lives.

A Little Bit of Heresy

Eight of the 12 steps forming Alcoholics Anonymous’ core framework mention a higher power, “God, as we understand Him,” and/or prayer. The 12 steps describe the experience of the organization’s early members:

- 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
- 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
- 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

A separate analysis found that regular attendees of AA meetings were more likely than erratic or former attendees to express commitment to core elements of the program, including making amends, believing in and deferring to that higher power, and participating in fellowship and step activities of AA. Some of these activities predicted abstinence or total alcohol consumed among consistent AA attendees, but belief in a higher power and deferring to that power did not.

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