

## **Study shows alcohol is main problem for addicts**

***By Richard Willing, USA TODAY, 10/03/02***

Alcohol far more than drugs is the primary problem for American substance abusers who now consider themselves "in recovery," a first-of-its-kind survey of recovering alcoholics and addicts says.

About 46% of a nationwide sample of people who described themselves as Having a "serious" substance abuse problem said their problem was with alcohol only.

Eight percent said that they had both alcohol and drug problems but that alcohol was their main dependency.

By contrast, only 19% of the recovering substance abusers said their chief problem was drugs, and 4% claimed problems with both alcohol and drugs but said drugs were their primary problem.

About 22% said alcohol and drugs were equal problems.

The telephone survey, which was done in August by Peter D. Hart Associates Of Washington, D.C., questioned 250 people who described themselves as "in recovery" or "formerly addicted" to alcohol, drugs or both. The group Included ex-substance abusers with from less than six months to more than 10 years of recovery time. More than 80% had one year or more of recovery time.

The survey also polled 250 family members of people in recovery.

The researchers talked to an exceptionally large sample, more than 7,500 people, to find 250 recovering substance abusers who were willing to speak in an anonymous poll. The poll was paid for by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The survey was commissioned by the Alliance Project, a recently formed group of grass-roots recovery advocates, representatives of private substance abuse treatment centers, public health advocates and others working to treat drug and alcohol abuse.

The alliance, which holds its first national meeting this Friday through Sunday in St. Paul, plans a campaign aimed at changing public attitudes Toward people in recovery.

Substance abuse experts were not surprised to learn that alcohol remains the drug of choice for people with addictions.

"Illegal drugs get most of the attention, but we've known all along that alcohol is the bigger problem," said Jeff Blodgett, the Alliance Project's coordinator.

"Alcohol remains a very big issue, and it needs to have an equal place in the public discussion."

Also among the survey's findings:

Fifty-eight percent of recovering substance abusers believe their problem is a disease. But a significant minority, 26%, say it is a "personal or moral weakness." Thirteen percent say substance abuse is both a disease and a moral weakness.

Slightly more than half recovered through a self-help group such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and 27% used a formal treatment program. But 25% said they were able to kick drugs or alcohol without any outside help.

Nearly half, or 46 percent, have relapsed ? gone back to using alcohol, drugs or both ? at least once since beginning their recovery.

One-quarter of alcoholics and addicts say they face insurance or job discrimination. But nearly 40% said they had experienced social shame or embarrassment because they are recovering substance abusers.

The cost of substance abuse treatment and the fear of discrimination remains a major reason that alcoholics and addicts do not seek help.

About one-third of people in recovery believe the general public remains somewhat or very intolerant of them, even though they have quit abusing drugs and alcohol.

Recovering people would rather be referred to as having had a "serious problem with drugs or alcohol" than as alcohol or drug addicts or substance abusers.

The survey also collected what is said to be the first set of vital statistics on recovering people obtained through a random survey.

It found that two-thirds of recovering substance abusers are ages 35 to 59, that 41% are professionals or white-collar workers, that 17% are retired and 8% ? nearly double the national percentage ? are unemployed.

About 63% are Protestant or Catholic, while 19% follow other religions. About 16% said they were not religious. The survey found no Jews who were Recovering substance abusers.

In race and ethnicity, recovering people nearly mirrored their percentages in the American population. About 78% were white, 10% were black and 10% were Hispanic.

But recovering people appear to do significantly less well financially than the population as a whole. The survey found that 70% had annual incomes under \$50,000, compared with 44% in the American population at large.

The researchers speculated that the gap might not be quite that large, because recovering people were more likely to answer questions about income than low-income people generally are.

"What jumps out at you is that the face of recovery looks like America," said Allan Rivlin, who conducted the study.

"The message of recovering people to the rest of America is that the path to recovery may not always be a straight road, but that it works (and) recovery changes people."