Alcoholics Anonymous is one of the best known methods of recovery for alcoholics in the world. It is estimated that there are more than 114,000 Alcoholics Anonymous groups and over 2,000,000 members in over 180 countries. This paper looks at Alcoholics Anonymous and its role in the restorative justice system. Although it is not generally considered a major player in the restorative justice movement, like programs such as Victim-Offender Mediation are, Alcoholics Anonymous and its theories meet requirements of a restorative justice practice. In this paper, I begin by looking at the history and the fundamental principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. Although research into the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous is not conclusive, as I explain at the end of the paper, I believe that recent research supports the conclusion that A.A. does play a positive role in the recovery of its members. Under this assumption, I look at the reasons why researchers have found Alcoholics Anonymous is in fact effective. Next, I consider both how Alcoholics Anonymous is a restorative justice practice and how this might explain why Alcoholics Anonymous is successful. Finally, I examine research into the effectiveness of A.A., though in the end I believe that A.A. is an effective tool in the recovery process of its members.

I. History and Fundamentals of Alcoholics Anonymous

In 1935 at Akron, Bill W. was introduced to Dr. Bob, both alcoholics. After working together for a period of time, these two men co-founded Alcoholics Anonymous (“A.A.”). Prior to this meeting, Bill had gotten sober and had maintained his recovery by working with other alcoholics. However, Dr. Bob had yet to attain sobriety, but upon
meeting Bill, the effect on the doctor was immediate. Bill explained to Dr. Bob that alcoholism was a “malady of mind, emotions and body.” ³ Partly as a result of this new view of alcoholism and partly as a result of Bill’s continuous support, Dr. Bob got sober, never to drink again. After both men were sober, the founding spark of Alcoholics Anonymous had been struck.

In 1939, the group published its basic textbook, Alcoholics Anonymous, also known as the Big Book. The Big Book explained A.A.’s philosophy and methods, the core of which is the now well-known Twelve Steps of recovery.⁴ One of the most important tenants of A.A. is that alcoholism is an illness, a progressive illness which can never be “cured,” but which, like some other illnesses, can be arrested.⁵ While there is no formal “A.A. definition” of alcoholism, according to many A.A. texts, it can be described as a “physical compulsion, coupled with a mental obsession.”⁶ This simple, fundamental belief - that alcoholism is an illness, not a choice - is the basis for all the other principles in A.A. It is really because of this belief that alcoholics in A.A. are able to recover, because it gives alcoholics permission to stop blaming themselves and instead allows them to take a step in an attempt to change.

Another important tenant of A.A. is that “we find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a Power greater than ourselves.”⁷ A.A. is not a religious organization, although one A.A. brochure states “one of the most common misconceptions about Alcoholics Anonymous is that it is a religious organization.”⁸ However, A.A. emphasizes the importance of believing in a “higher Power” and relying on that “higher Power” in order to recover. According to A.A., “a key factor [in recovery] seem[s] to be humility, coupled with reliance upon a Power greater than
ourselves. While some members … call this Power “God,” this is purely a matter of personal interpretation.” In other words, A.A. stresses the need for the alcoholic to rely on a higher Power in the recovery process, but it does not matter which particular religious bodies its members identify themselves with as individuals. Though A.A. repeatedly states that it is not a religious organization, it does incorporate many religious elements in the program. For example, many group meetings conclude with The Lord’s Prayer - though leaders ask members to join in only if they choose. As one A.A. brochure states, “[t]he A.A. program of recovery from alcoholism is undeniably based on acceptance of certain spiritual values.” Thus, although the founder’s made a fundamental decision not to define a set of religious beliefs as those held by A.A., it is important to recognize and note the strong influence that spirituality, or at least a belief in a higher power, has had on A.A.

Belief that alcoholism is an illness and belief in a higher power are both broad, yet essential principles which help lay the groundwork for a member of A.A. to recover. On a more fundamental level, an alcoholic must recognize that he or she is an alcoholic before he or she can even begin to recover. According to A.A., the first step toward recovery is for the alcoholic to admit to his or her “innermost self” that he or she is an alcoholic. The admission had to come from the alcoholic – “not from a doctor or a minister or wife or husband.” And it is only by fully accepting that one is an alcoholic that one can be ready to recover. Once the alcoholic has both admitted and accepted that he or she is an alcoholic, the only requirement for the alcoholic to become a member of Alcoholics Anonymous is a desire to stop drinking.
The “absence of rules, regulations, or musts” is one of the unique features of A.A. as a local group and as a worldwide fellowship.\textsuperscript{16} There are no bylaws that say a member has to attend a certain number of meetings within a given period.\textsuperscript{17} However, A.A. has a well-defined “recovery program” that A.A. members have been following since the founding of the group. The “Twelve Steps” are the core of the recovery program, which are based on the “trial-and-error experience of early members of A.A.”\textsuperscript{18} The Twelve Steps are not simply a set of tasks to be carried out.\textsuperscript{19} They are a guide for living and being in the world, and, for many individuals, they become a way of life as well.\textsuperscript{20} According to A.A., “members who make an earnest effort to follow these Steps and to apply them in daily living seem to get far more out of A.A. than do those members who seem to regard the Steps casually.”\textsuperscript{21} The Twelve Steps, which first appeared in the Big Book, are:

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 the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.22

Although following these Steps are by no means mandatory for membership in A.A., they are the Steps that A.A. members have found are the most helpful in the recovery process and the most productive. The first three Steps are most concerned with the member’s acceptance that he or she cannot control their alcoholism and that he or she must rely on a higher Power to recover as discussed above. After the member has completed these steps, he or she is ready to move onto the “personal housecleaning” Steps.

Step 4 involves doing a “moral inventory” of oneself. The Big Book advises the member to list people, institutions, or principles with which he or she is angry. According to the book, the only thing that counts is “thoroughness and honesty.”23 The Big Book advises the member to treat those people/institutions/principles which had wronged the member as “spiritually sick” and thus to avoid retaliation or argument.24 Finally, the Book recommends that the member look at the list and, instead of looking for the wrongs that others had done, looking for the member’s own mistakes – “where w[as] [the member] to blame.”25 Then, Step 5 asks the member to tell all of his or her story to another person. The only requirement of Step 5 is that the story must be entirely honest.26 Both Steps 6 and 7 look to a higher Power to “remove these shortcomings.”

Unlike Steps 4 through 7 which ask the member to look inside themselves to find and identify their shortcomings, Steps 8 and 9 insist that the member not only make a list of those who the member has harmed but also make amends directly to those people whenever and wherever possible. According to the Big Book, it is harder to go to an enemy than a friend, but it is much more beneficial.27 When making amends to the
person, the Big Book instructs the member to never criticize the person or argue and to never discuss the other person’s faults – the member must stick to his or her own faults.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, the Book reminds the member that he or she will go to any length to make direct amends no matter what the personal consequence.\textsuperscript{29} A.A. states that hopefully once the member has made it through Step 11, he or she has had a “spiritual awakening.” Step 12 is to carry the message to other alcoholics. The Big Book advises the member to tell his or her story to another alcoholic while talking about alcoholism as an illness.\textsuperscript{30} This Step plays a vital role in the member’s own recovery.\textsuperscript{31} This summary gives a very broad overview of the Twelve Steps. Later, this paper will examine individual steps further, especially in their relationship to the restorative justice process.

Finally, another principle of A.A. is sponsorship, which plays an important role in both the sponsor’s recovery and the newcomer’s (sponsored’s) recovery. A.A. says that the sponsor’s sobriety is greatly strengthened when he or she gives it away.\textsuperscript{32} Sponsorship strengthens the older member’s sobriety, because it offers the “satisfaction that comes from assuming responsibility for someone other than oneself.”\textsuperscript{33} At the same time, sponsorship assures the newcomer that “there is at least one person who understands the situation fully” – it gives the newcomer “an understanding, sympathetic friend when one is needed most.”\textsuperscript{34} The newcomer can call on the sponsor to provide advice, moral support, and a model to emulate. According to A.A., active sponsorship programs within the group remind all members of the group’s primary purpose, while also serving to unite the group.\textsuperscript{35}

While Alcoholics Anonymous is not an extremely structured or regulated program, it does have a firm set of principles and beliefs that its members are advised to
follow “because it is what has worked for other alcoholics in the past to help them in their recovery.” The importance of looking to a higher Power “greater than ourselves” is highlighted throughout the Twelve Steps. And A.A. says it is through trusting the higher Power and following the Twelve Steps that an alcoholic can recover. A.A. also recognizes that the A.A. group itself allows alcoholics to learn to “live the program and practice it in all their affairs.” The group as a whole gives each individual member a support system made up of other people who have first-hand knowledge of what every other member is going through – something that not even family or friends can offer to the alcoholic. Thus, it is through these principles that Alcoholics Anonymous believes that alcoholics have the best chance of recovering.

II. Why is Alcoholics Anonymous effective?

As section IV suggests, studies are not conclusive as to the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous. However, as most recent studies suggest, Alcoholics Anonymous seems to be the most successful treatment available for alcoholics. Generally, the longer a person remains in A.A., the better he or she does, which might suggest that the A.A. member must be exposed to all of A.A.’s principles over a period of time before it will have the positive effect on the member. There are many different theories as to how and why A.A. is effective. Like the studies as to its effectiveness, studies as to why and how it is effective are not conclusive.

Because detoxified alcohol-dependent individuals frequently relapse, the medical and psychological professions do not have a good record of curing alcoholism. According to one researcher, there are four factors that are commonly present in relapse prevention for most addictions. The four factors that prevent relapse are external
supervision, ritual dependency on a competing behaviour, new love relationship and deepened spirituality. Alcoholics Anonymous addresses these factors through its program and the Twelve Steps, which is one possible reason that A.A. is able to help its members recover and avoid relapsing. A.A. provides motivation from within and suggests that the member return again and again to meetings. The members are encouraged to ‘work the steps’ and to engage in service. This study says that these activities provide “external supervision.” However, the member has a choice in whether to submit to this supervision, which is why it works. The study also suggests that it is important to find a substitute dependency or a competing behaviour for the addiction – you cannot easily give up a habit without having another outlet to which one can turn. Alcoholics Anonymous provides a gratifying schedule of social and service activities in the presence of supportive and recovering alcoholics. The researcher has also found that “new love relationship,” are important to recovery, because “it seems important for ex-addicts to bond with people whom they have not hurt in the past and to whom they are not deeply emotionally in debt.” Through group meetings, A.A. provides its members with a resource that members can use to form new friendships with other ex-addicts who can offer the member understanding and empathy instead of pity. Additionally, the study says that it helps for alcoholics to bond with people who they can actively help. In A.A., an AA sponsor can promote relapse prevention better than some long-suffering family member whom the alcoholic has tortured for years. Finally, the fourth common feature in recovery is the discovery or rediscovery of spirituality. A.A. strongly emphasizes the importance of spirituality in the recovery process as discussed earlier.
Another study has also found that “helping behaviors” within 12-step programs are critical to sustaining sobriety. Alcoholism has been described as a disease of the ego with recovery requiring a shift toward thinking of one’s self “as part of something larger rather than the center.” In A.A., this is seen as a move away from self-centered fear toward helping other alcoholics. Peer helping thus is “a fundamental aspect of 12-step-oriented treatment. Alcoholics Anonymous’ emphasis on the importance of helping others is most clearly expressed in the Twelfth Step. A.A.’s emphasis on helping also provides the fuel for A.A. principles of sponsorship, lifelong meeting attendance, and volunteering for service positions. The most likely explanation as to why helping behaviors within 12-step programs are so important to sobriety is that helping other alcoholics within the community provides “helper therapy” in which the alcoholic who is giving support to a fellow sufferer benefits from the interaction. The helper therapy principle holds that by helping others, helpers are themselves helped. In fact, research has shown that in a 10-year follow-up of inpatients, 91% of those who were sponsors also were in remission. Another study of alcohol dependent patients found that the time they spent helping others (i.e. providing moral support, sharing experiences and giving advice about jobs, housing, and staying sober) as well as involvement in A.A. was associated with a higher rate of abstinence and less binge drinking six months later. Thus, A.A.’s emphasis on peer-helping and sponsorship is one possible factor in explaining why A.A. is effective.

Another researcher proposes two additional theories as to why A.A. is an effective intervention. First, the movement from active alcoholism to recovery is a major life transition that is complex and all-encompassing, and participation in A.A. helps 
individuals cope with this difficult, and oftentimes painful, transition.\textsuperscript{53} Second, participation in A.A. facilitates individual’s working through the loss and grief issues associated with recovery from alcoholism, including loss of alcohol itself, relationships, the ability to escape feelings, and assumptions around the world.\textsuperscript{54} Through practicing the steps and principles of the A.A. program, individuals take on new roles or re-establish old ones, form new relationships with others in recovery, and undergo profound changes in behavior.\textsuperscript{55} Basically, the A.A. program is aimed at not only helping individuals quit drinking, but also helping them find and adopt a whole new way of being.\textsuperscript{56}

Other studies have highlighted the importance of spirituality in the alcoholic’s recovery process. Spirituality in A.A. membership seems to play a role in promoting remission of alcoholic symptoms.\textsuperscript{57} In the Project MATCH study, subjects were evaluated there years after their initial treatment.\textsuperscript{58} Their scores on measures of spirituality within A.A. at that three-year point were predictive of a positive outcome at ten years.\textsuperscript{59} In fact, among those who attended A.A., the members who reported having a spiritual awakening were over three times more likely to be abstinent three years later than those who did not have such an awakening.\textsuperscript{60} Another study found that individuals who attend A.A. meetings regularly, are involved in sponsorship, read the A.A. literature, and are involved in prayer and meditation had higher levels of spirituality.\textsuperscript{61} Although many studies have found that spirituality plays a significant role in the A.A. recovery process, spirituality is such an amorphous concept that it is hard for researchers to determine the exact ways in which spirituality aids in the recovery process.

If we are to assume that Alcoholics Anonymous is in fact effective, then we ask why. There are many theories as to why Alcoholics Anonymous is effective, but no
decisive conclusions. Studies have highlighted the effect of spirituality, helping behaviors, and working through the loss and grief associated with recovery. The recurring theme in these theories is the importance of creating new relationships which in turn help the individual to establish a new identity.

III. Restorative Justice Principles in Alcoholics Anonymous

Although Alcoholics Anonymous is not normally the first thing that comes into one’s mind when thinking of restorative justice, it is an excellent example of one of the most pervasive restorative justice practices in our society. There are four requirements a practice must incorporate in order to be considered “restorative justice.” These requirements are as follows: (1) the offender must acknowledge wrongdoing; (2) the offender must accept accountability for example by making reparations to those he or she injured; (3) the offender must be willing to correct future behavior; (4) the offender’s community must be willing to pardon the offender and then to help reintegrate him or her back into the community.62 Perhaps unintentionally, Alcoholics Anonymous seems to successfully incorporate these restorative justice elements into its program. If we again assume it is effective, A.A. may be one of the best examples the restorative justice community has of a successful restorative justice practice, and may also help to explain why A.A. is so successful.

Before alcoholics can even begin their recovery in A.A., they must admit to their “innermost self” that they are alcoholics.63 Alcoholics Anonymous teaches that self-labeling in a supportive community of “recovering” offenders can speed reconciliation between the perpetrator and the larger community.64 Researchers have found that there are many “extended” meanings embedded in one’s self-identification as an alcoholic,
such as the assertion that despite one’s alcoholism, the A.A. member is “sober today and participating in A.A. to help his mental, spiritual and physical recovery.” Thus, a member’s recovery begins with their willingness to identify themselves as an alcoholic. In Alcoholics Anonymous, by identifying oneself as such, the alcoholic is not only able to reinterpret his life through the values of the A.A. community, but is also able to keep his former identity alive while at the same time acquiring a new identity as a recovering alcoholic.

As the alcoholic tells his or her story as an alcoholic, the speaker reaffirms his or her present persona, his or her identity as a recovering alcoholic, which entails membership within a community, while at the same time identifying a future self, the self the speaker promises to be. This narrative tradition has a long and successful history of inducing moral behavior and reintegrating “wrong-doers” into society. The A.A. “recovery narrative” permits all listeners to recognize their interconnectedness. Such narratives also enable the teller to normalize their experiences, assisting them in become accountable for the harm they have caused to others. The power of such narratives is a part of other restorative justice practices. For example, the Victim-Offender Mediation process is meant to open with each party telling their story, followed by a conversational narrative where each participant speaks with feeling, thereby personalizing victimization and loss. Thus, telling one’s story ultimately has the effect of connecting a member to the A.A. community while also helping them to take the first step towards accountability.

Another important A.A. concept is that an addict first must take responsibility for his or her own actions to being to recover. Thus from the beginning of the program, members must acknowledge their wrongdoings, not just by labeling and accepting
themselves as alcoholics, but also by taking a moral inventory of themselves. Steps Four through Nine, arranged in pairs, represent three tasks: moral inventory, continued self-surrender, and making amends. Each pair requires the alcoholic to alternate between private and more socially oriented work. In the Fourth Step, A.A. tells its members not only to acknowledge and take responsibility for their own past wrongdoing, but also tells the member to accept accountability for their wrongdoing by taking a moral inventory of their past actions. The Fourth Step is a “life review and an act of confession [where] the goal is ‘to get a perspective on [oneself], which is another way of saying that [the member is] gaining in humility.’” Many A.A. members are afraid to take this step because they it is hard for them to believe that they were the cause of their own problems. Interestingly the Fourth Step forces the alcoholic to look to the past wrongs that he or she has committed, but by doing this, the alcoholic is able to create a “new past in the present, changing the way he or she understands and experiences the past.” A.A. teaches that only after putting his faults down in “black and white,” admitting his wrongs honestly and becoming willing to set matters straight, does the alcoholic learn “tolerance, patience, and good will toward all men.” Next Step Five is in effect an act of confession in which the alcoholic shares the contents of the moral inventory he or she developed in Step Four with another human being.” Thus, the Fifth Step forces the individual member to reach out to another person to share his or her story – giving the member a feeling of connectedness a world outside himself or herself. As explained above, telling stories in A.A. helps alcoholics to better identify themselves as alcoholics, establish membership, and take the next step towards recovery. It takes two people to do a Fifth Step. As one alcoholic told a researcher during an interview, “the Fourth and Fifth Step resulted in a
new sense of identity.78 Thus, the A.A. member has come to the point in his continuing
recovery where he or she has acknowledged past wrongdoing and is willing to accept
accountability for those wrongs.

In Steps Eight and Nine, the A.A. member is to “make amends,” which in
restorative justice practice helps the offender to further accept accountability for his
wrongdoings. The A.A. member reviews his or her life while concentrating on the effect
that his or her past conduct has had on others.79 A.A. recognizes that alcoholism not only
affects the alcoholic, but also all those close to the alcoholic. By making amends, the
alcoholic is offering a gesture of goodwill aimed at restoring broken relationships. The
step also makes evident in the alcoholic’s conduct the transformation that constitutes
healing in A.A.80 A.A. encourages “full disclosure of [the alcoholic’s] wrongs in order to
have them demystified,” where they can then be “righted” by “making amends,” and then
the A.A. member can begin embarking on a more spiritual path which includes helping
others.81 Steps Eight and Nine are really more of a “reorientation of the alcoholic to the
world of social relations than a set of tasks to be carried out.”82 By the time the member
brings his “eighth step” list to his sponsor, member and sponsor have already built up
trust. The two of them agree upon the details of restitution. Although sometimes an
apology is appropriate, A.A. tells its members to attempt restitution with the people he or
she has harmed. Thus, if an alcoholic stole $20 to buy alcohol, then to make amends, the
alcoholic should pay back the $20. For many wrongs, making amends is direct and
simple.83 Money is paid back, even if it takes years. For those victims who are dead or
untraceable, amends must be indirect.84 So-called living amends are required under these
circumstances.85 Only when making amends could harm another person should a member
not make amends. A.A. teaches that what counts most for sobriety is a member’s willingness to make amends. The response of the “victim” does not matter, because the focus is on the member’s actions – no one else’s. Step Ten ensures that the member is willing to take action to correct future behavior. It states that the member should “continue to take personal inventory and when wrong promptly admit it.” Thus, the teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous continue to emphasize the importance of taking accountability for one’s actions and a willingness to continue to do so in the future—principles of restorative justice.

Restorative justice is a communitarian approach to wrongdoing. Once the offender has made amends and accepted accountability for his actions, then the offender’s community should be willing to reintegrate the offender back into the community. Alcoholics Anonymous’ communitarian approach is demonstrated through the program in two ways. Not only does the program allow the member to reestablish his or her relationship with the outside world, but it also provides a new community, the A.A. community, as a resource and support system for the member.

The 12-Step program emphasizes a fellowship of recovering persons where participants help each other in a variety of ways. Step Twelve speaks of carrying the message to other alcoholics. By requiring the alcoholic to engage with those still suffering from the same affliction, the Twelfth Step “represents the fullest point of incorporation into the moral community of Alcoholics Anonymous.” Successful Twelfth Step work is not determined by whether the recipient gets sober, but whether the giver stays sober. There are many ways to “carry the message.” Twelfth Step work is “a form of service to the community” – a community which the alcoholic is persuaded to
join in and engage. Participants also benefit when they take on service positions that help support A.A. meetings such as arranging chairs before meetings, making coffee, volunteering to be treasure. By helping others and carrying the message, the alcoholic reduces self-absorption and self-pity each time he or she shifts the focus from self to others. Often activism within the A.A. community will lead a member to also become involved in outside activities. Research has shown that involvement in their A.A. fellowship led members to outside-fellowship participation. For some, community activities outside the fellowship begin early in the member’s recovery process. For others, the progression is more gradual, revealing a process that involved development of organizational competence within the fellowship that slowly led to external participation. The Twelve Steps offer a belief system that involves reaching out to others and capitalizing on one’s strengths. Alcoholics Anonymous, thus, gives its members a connection with the outside community - helping to reintegrate them into functioning society.

A.A. is called a fellowship for good reason. It provides social activity that can be a good substitute for drinking. Members make new friends and learn new ways to cope with cravings. Listening to others helps members to realize that they are not alone in their troubles and enables them to correct false ideas about themselves. Individuals in the A.A. community are encompassed by feelings of liking, respect, and love. They feel accepted, often for the first time in their lives. A.A. provides a community to support and sustain the alcoholic. The “morality inducing” and community enhancing principles and practices of Alcoholics Anonymous are long-term and on-going. A recovering alcoholic’s first A.A. meeting, like the first of the twelve steps of recovery, begins a long
process of self-reflection, accountability, reparation, confession, contrition, amends and community service. At the first meeting, “older” members reach out in an effort to restore the “interpersonal bridge” that has been severed by years of shameful alcohol abuse – the newcomer is immediately accepted and supported by the A.A. community with very little reservation. Once the alcoholic begins to “work the steps,” he enters into a further process of moral education and social affiliation which “restores” him to a more or less ideal restorative community. In the same way that a community of peers can help an offender, so can a relationship with one of those peers. A.A. focuses on sponsorship. The A.A. experience teaches us that the best ally in the struggle to come to terms with a long history of misdeeds is another miscreant. This ability of recovering alcoholics to “reach” those searching for sobriety is well-recognized. As one researcher stated, “resocialization of the alcoholic requires the presence of ‘significant others with whom he must establish strongly affective identification’ leading to the formation of a partnership in significant conversation change.” As discussed above, sponsorship helps both the sponsor and the newcomer. Researchers have found that an A.A. sponsor can promote relapse prevention even better than family members. Although community involvement is already an important aspect of the restorative justice principles, the A.A. community is made up of members who understand each other because they have a shared experience. The idea of creating a community with people who understand and have shared the same experiences is something that other restorative justice practices should consider.

IV. Effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous
Research on the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous is controversial and subject to widely divergent interpretations.\textsuperscript{103} It is notoriously difficult to measure the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous. Attempts to assess the impact of A.A. are hampered by the requirement of anonymity for its members.\textsuperscript{104} Membership only requires a desire to stop drinking – there are no dues or fees. Some researchers take a skeptical view of A.A. because its solution is at least partly-spiritually based, not scientifically based. Because A.A. members choose whether or not to join the program, unless it is court-mandated, the members are self-selected, not randomly selected from the population of chronic alcoholics.\textsuperscript{105} This self-selection leads to two potential biases: (1) drinkers may already be motivated to stop drinking before they participate in A.A. and (2) A.A. may attract the most severe and difficult cases.\textsuperscript{106} Thus, it is important to keep these limitations in mind when considering any research on the effectiveness of alcoholics anonymous.

Recently, an article was published whose goal was to provide a focused review of the literature on A.A.’s effectiveness.\textsuperscript{107} The literature review organized the research on A.A.’s effectiveness according to six criterion required for establishing causation: (1) magnitude of effect; (2) dose response effect; (3) consistent effect; (4) temporally accurate effectives; (5) specific effects; (6) plausibility.\textsuperscript{108} Most of the evidence for A.A.’s effectiveness was strong.\textsuperscript{109} Rates of abstinence are about twice as high among those who attend A.A, and higher levels of attendance are related to higher rates of abstinence.\textsuperscript{110} Prior A.A. attendance is predictive of subsequent abstinence.\textsuperscript{111} However, the fifth criterion’s (“specific effects”) purpose is to rule out explanations other than A.A. exposure which might have led to abstinence.\textsuperscript{112} This addresses the concern that those
who attend A.A. are part of a select sample that would be sober without ever going to
A.A. Regarding these “specific effects,” the research is mixed. Two trials found a
positive effect for A.A., one trial found a negative effect for A.A., and one trial found a
null effect. Although the article does not come to a conclusion about whether A.A. is
effective, overall the results regarding A.A.’s effectiveness are positive.

A number of large field studies have shown that professionally treated patients
who also participate in A.A. benefit from this time they devote to the recovery process.
For example, in one study, a large sample of people entering ambulatory alcoholism
treatment for the first time from referral or detoxification centers were evaluated at
intervals over 16 years. Multi-variate analyses of the data indicated that longer
participation in A.A. makes a positive contribution to both alcohol and social function
outcomes independent of the quantity of treatment these patients experienced.
In
another large-scale study of alcohol-dependent male veterans treated as inpatients, their
A.A. attendance within the first year after admission was found to predict lower alcohol-
related problems at the 2-year follow-up. This effect was independent of their
previously measured motivation for change, suggesting that AA itself plays a causative
role in reducing drinking. Another study with an eight-year follow-up found that
patients who continue to participate for more than two years were drinking less with
fewer adverse consequences and were more likely to be abstinent. Patients who stayed
for only four months or less were doing no better than those who did no participate at all,
and patients who dropped out between the first and second years actually had more
drinking problems than nonparticipants.
Finally, Project Match, a controlled study, compared the effects of three treatments upon almost 2000 alcoholic patients. It revealed that during the first year A.A. alone was as effective as the two most effective professional alternatives: cognitive behavioural and motivational enhancement therapies. The Project Match follow-up also showed that regardless of the original treatment, the more A.A. meetings attended the better the outcome.

However, there are also many studies which have come to the conclusion that Alcoholics Anonymous is not effective in helping the alcoholic to stay sober. One study in 1979 found a correlation between A.A. and an increased rate of binge drinking. It found that after months of participating in A.A., the members were doing five times as much binge drinking as the control group that got no treatment at all. Although this study seems extreme, and some have questioned the methods used in performing the study, more recent criticisms of A.A. have been published. The Cochrane review recently did a survey of previous studies to assess the effectiveness of A.A. compared to other psychosocial intervention in reducing alcohol intake, achieving abstinence, and maintaining abstinence among other things. The review concluded that A.A. may help patients to accept treatment and keep patients in treatment more than alternative treatments, though the evidence for this is from one study that combined A.A. with other interventions, and the review states that it should not be regarded as conclusive. The authors of the review concluded that there is lack of experimental evidence on the effectiveness of A.A. and no experimental studies unequivocally demonstrated the effectiveness of A.A. approaches for reducing alcohol dependence or problems.
Thus, research on the effectiveness of Alcoholics Anonymous is not conclusive. However, most of the studies that concluded A.A. has either a neutral or a negative effect on an alcoholics’ recovery were done almost thirty years ago. After reviewing the more recent research, I believe that Alcoholics Anonymous plays a positive role in the recovery process of its members. It is not the answer for every alcoholic, nor does it claim to be. As are so many things in life, the more an A.A. member puts into it – such as taking on sponsorship roles and becoming a part of the A.A. community – the more A.A. will impact a member’s recovery process. And the longer the member continues to be involved in A.A., the more A.A. and its methods will help the member to recover. Thus, I have elected to write this paper with the assumption that A.A. is in fact an effective and positive aid in an alcoholic’s recovery process.

V. Conclusion

Surprisingly or not, Alcoholics Anonymous may be one of the best and most widely known examples of restorative justice. It provides its members with tools to successfully recover from alcoholism. According to Alcoholics Anonymous, members can only be successful when they choose to enter the program after admitting to themselves that they are alcoholics. Once members join the program, in order to recovery, they must acknowledge their wrongdoing, accept accountability for their action, and be willing to correct their future behavior. Alcoholics Anonymous then provides a community of other alcoholics and former alcoholics who are able to pardon the member and reintegrate the member into the A.A. community and into the larger community as a whole. In the future, principals taken from Alcoholics Anonymous should be studied and incorporated into other restorative justice models.
3 Id.
4 Id.
6 Id.
9 *This is A.A.: An Introduction to the A.A. Recovery Program*, supra note 4.
10 BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 28.
13 BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 30.
14 *This is A.A.: An Introduction to the A.A. Recovery Program*, supra note 4.
16 *44 Questions*, supra note 11.
17 Id.
18 Id.
20 Id.
21 Id.
22 BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 59.
23 Id. at 65.
24 Id. at 66 – 67.
25 Id. at 67.
26 Id. at 73 – 74.
27 Id. at 77.
28 Id. at 77 – 78.
29 Id. at 78 – 79.
30 Id. at 92.
31 Id. at 94.
33 Id.
34 Id.
35 Id.
39 Id. at 432.
40 Id.
41 Id.
42 Id.
43 Id.
44 Id.
45 Id.

BIG BOOK, supra note 6.


Pagano, supra note 45, at 48.

Kaskutas, supra note 47, at 1768.


Id.

Id.

Id.


Id.

Id.

Id.


BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 30.


Id.


Id.

Pynchon, supra note 65, at 316.


Swora, supra note 18, at 196.

Id. citing BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 48.

Id.

BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 83.


Swora, supra note 18, at 198.

Id. at 199.

Id. at 200.


Swora, supra note 18, at 200.

Pynchon, supra note 65, at 323.

Id.

Id.

23
The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, supra note 14.


Swora, supra note 18, at 204.

Id.

Id.

Id.


Id.

Id.

Streifel, supra note 52, at 78.

Wilcox, supra note 68, at 26, 29, 66.

Id. at 21.

Id. at 59.

Pynchon, supra note 65, at 320.

BIG BOOK, supra note 6, at 180


Vaillant, supra note 37, at 432.


Galanter, supra note 56, at 1515.


Keith Humphreys. Alcoholics Anonymous and 12-Step Alcoholism Treatment Programs. 25 Recent Developments in Alcoholism 711(2002).

Kaskutas, supra note 102, at 145.

Id.

Id.

Id.

Id. at 146-147.

Id.

Id. at 145.

Id.

Id.

Galanter, supra note 56, at 1515.


Id.


Id.

How Alcoholics Anonymous Works, supra note 36.

Id.


Id.

Id.

Id.


130 Id.
131 Id. at 2.