

Drug Abuse & Workforce Demographics

Illegal Drug Use in the Workforce

Current employment status is highly correlated with rates of illicit drug use, according to results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use & Health. Of adults over age 18 who reported current illicit drug use (at least once in the past month)—74.6% were employed, either full or part-time. This number represents more than 12.4 million individuals. An estimated 17.4% of unemployed adults (age 18 and older) were current illicit drug users in 2002, compared with 8.2% of full-time employed adults and 10.5% among part-time employed adults.¹

Alcohol Use in the Workforce

Rates of current alcohol use were 61.8 percent for full-time employed adults aged 18 or older in 2002 compared with 57.9 percent of their unemployed peers. However, the patterns were different for binge and heavy alcohol use; rates were higher for unemployed persons (34.7 and 13.3 percent, respectively, for binge and heavy use) than for full-time employed persons (29.0 and 8.4 percent, respectively).²

Many more employees drink to a lesser degree. A common misconception is that alcoholics are responsible for most alcohol-related workplace problems. Casual drinkers, in aggregate, account for far more incidents of absenteeism, tardiness, and poor quality of work than the alcohol dependent. A Harvard School of Public Health Corporate Alcohol Study found that the majority of alcohol-related work performance problems (60%) are associated with nondependent drinkers—people who may occasionally drink too much and who constitute 80% of all drinkers.³

Employed Adults

Among employed adults, the highest rates of current drug use and heavy drinking are reported by white, non-Hispanic males, 18–25 years old, with less than a high school education.⁴ By industry, significantly higher rates of current drug use were reported by those employed in construction and mining (12.3%); wholesale and retail (10.8%); service—business and repairs (9%); and finance, insurance, real estate, and other services (7.7%).⁵

Working Youth

About one-half of young adults ages 16–17 work during the year. Those working more than 20 hours per week are at high risk for substance abuse and injury.⁶ The youth labor force (aged 16 to 24) is projected to increase

by 3.4 million between 2000 and 2010, more than 10 times the increase of the 1980–90 period.⁷

Drug Testing

A 2001 survey by the American Management Association (AMA) found that 67% of employers conduct tests for illegal or controlled substances compared to 81% of employers in 1996. The companies surveyed by the AMA conduct workplace testing for use in pre-employment drug screening, to test employees for fitness for duty, and reassignment.⁸

According to the most recent results of the Quest Drug Test Index©, the U.S. workforce positive drug test results have declined nationwide, from a high of 13.6% in 1988 to a low of 4.4% for 2002. However, the drug positivity rate increased to 4.5% in 2003 from 4.4% a year earlier for the combined U.S workforce.⁹

Further data from the Quest Drug Testing Index© reveal marijuana is by far the most common substance identified in workplace positive test results (55.0%), while cocaine positives made up 13.8% of positive results in 2003, down from 15.8% in 1999. Positive test results for amphetamines have increased from 4.3% in 1999 to 9.0% in 2003.¹⁰

Sources

¹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings](#), September 2003.

² Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [Results from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings](#), September 2003.

³ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism & the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, [Study on Worksite Prevention of Alcohol Problems and its Dissemination](#), 1998.

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [Worker Drug Use and Workplace Policies and Programs: Results from the 1994 and 1997 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse](#), September 1999.

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [The NHSDA Report: Substance Use, Dependence or Abuse among Full-Time Workers](#), September 2002.

⁶ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Workplace Managed Care by Fax*, Volume 1, Issue 8: Protecting Youth at Work, July 1998.

⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics, [Labor force projections to 2010: steady growth and changing composition](#), November 2001.

⁸ American Management Association, [2001 AMA Survey on Workplace Testing: Medical Testing, Summary of Key Findings](#) (PDF), 2001.

⁹ Quest Diagnostics, [Increased Use of Amphetamines Linked to Rising Workplace Drug Use, According to Quest Diagnostics' 2003 Drug Testing Index](#), July 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid.