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GREATER SHARE OF U.S. WORKERS TESTING POSITIVE FOR ILLICIT DRUGS

Detection of illicit drugs increased slightly both for general and 'safety-sensitive' workforce

By Lauren Weber
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The share of U.S. workers testing positive for illicit drug use reached its highest level in a decade, according to data from millions of workplace drug tests administered by Quest Diagnostics Inc., one of the nation's largest medical-screening laboratories.

Detection of illicit drugs – from marijuana to heroin to methamphetamine – increased slightly both for the general workforce and the "safety-sensitive" workforce, which includes millions of truck drivers, pilots, ship captains, subway engineers, and other transportation workers. Employers are required to test those individuals at random, as well as in specific situations such as after accidents occur.

Overall, 4% of worker drug tests were positive in 2015. Among safety-sensitive workers, positive tests rose to 1.8% from 1.7%. In the general workforce, positive tests rose to 4.8% from 4.7%.

Some of the positive results are later discarded if a worker produces a doctor's prescription for a legal drug. However, the majority reflect illicit use, driven by increases in detection of amphetamines, cocaine and heroin, according to the Quest data.

In 2015, positive results from workers tested by Quest rose for the third year in a row following decades of declines.

The data, which is based on more than 9.5 million urine tests, mostly echoes broader statistics gathered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which surveys Americans about drug use every year. The agency found that in 2014, the year of the most recent completed survey, about 10% of Americans over age 12 had used an illicit drug in the prior 30 days, the highest share since at least 2002.

Quest publishes data going back to 1988, when 13.6% of U.S. workers' drug tests came back positive. That year, Ronald Reagan signed the Drug-Free Workplace Act and soon after federal rules began mandating drug checks for safety-sensitive workers. Testing also became more broadly accepted as a workplace practice even for non-transportation jobs, particularly as a pre-employment screen.

The share of positive tests declined to a low of 3.5% in 2010 and stayed at that level until 2012, when it began to rise. The increases overlap with legislation in Colorado and Washington, where voters approved initiatives allowing the recreational use of marijuana in 2012. Since then, more than 20 other states have legalized that drug in some form.

Marijuana "remains America's favorite illegal drug," said Barry Sample, director of science and technology for Quest's employer solutions business. Nearly half of all workplace positive tests are for marijuana, with the number holding steady from 2014.

While states that have legalized some form of the drug exhibit higher marijuana positivity rates, the numbers didn't increase in Colorado and Washington from 2014, said Dr. Sample.

"We've heard concerns from some employers [in those states] about the difficulty in identifying and hiring workers that will pass the drug test primarily because of marijuana positives, but when we look at our macro picture, our data doesn't necessarily bear that out," he said.

More troubling was an increase in detection of heroin. While the numbers are relatively small – less than one-tenth of 1% of all drug tests – heroin positives increased 146% in the general workforce between 2011 and 2015 and 84% in the safety-sensitive workforce.

Heroin use has increased in part because of a crackdown on abuse of prescription opiates such as hydrocodone, said Dr. Sample. Drug users turn to heroin when it is "more difficult or expensive to obtain extra prescriptions from physicians, or buy diverted pharmaceutical products" illegally, he said.

On the other side of that coin, Quest found that detection of the two most common prescription opiates – hydrocodone and hydromorphone – fell steeply in 2015.