

Newsroom

Contact Media Services: (240) 276-2130

SAMHSA NEWS RELEASE

Date: 7/16/2007

Media Contact: SAMHSA Press

Telephone: 240-276-2130

Nationwide Survey Shows Most Illicit Drug Users and Heavy Alcohol Users Are in the Workplace and May Pose Special Problems

Most of the nation's approximately 16.4 million current illicit drug users and approximately 15 million heavy alcohol users hold full-time jobs, according to a new study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

The study, Worker Substance Use and Workplace Policies and Programs, shows that substance use can pose significant risks to workers' health and productivity. The report also says that workers who use illicit drugs are less likely than nonusers to be employed by companies that have drug or alcohol testing policies and programs.

"Substance abuse is a serious problem for the health, wellbeing and productivity of everyone in the workplace," said SAMHSA Administrator Terry Cline, Ph.D. "One important way SAMHSA is addressing this public health risk is with 1-800-Workplace (1-800-967-5752), a helpline for employees and businesses dealing with problems related to substance abuse. The helpline provides advice on programs that can make a dramatic difference to everyone in the workplace – programs such as substance abuse policy development, supervisor and employee substance abuse education, employee assistance, and drug testing."

Director of National Drug Control Policy John Walters said, "Employees who use drugs miss work more often, are less healthy, and are more prone to harming themselves and others in the workplace. We hope that employers will take note of this report and consider implementing workplace drug testing policies that can help prevent drug use before it starts, help identify drug-using employees who need drug treatment services and also reduce employers' liability from drug-related workplace accidents."

The report says the highest rates of current illicit drug use were among food service workers (17.4 percent) and construction workers (15.1 percent). Highest rates of current heavy alcohol use were found among construction, mining, excavation and drilling workers (17.8 percent), and installation, maintenance, and repair workers (14.7 percent).

Illicit drug use and heavy alcohol use are associated with higher levels of absenteeism and frequent job changes, the report said. For example, nearly twice as many current illicit drug users skipped one or more days of work in the past month compared with workers who did not abuse drugs. Drug users were also far more likely to report missing two or more work days in the past month due to illness or injury compared with workers who did not abuse drugs.

"The high rates of drug and alcohol use in hazardous industries is cause for concern," said Elena Carr, drug policy coordinator at the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). "Clearly businesses can ill-afford the

risk of having workers operating meat slicers, backhoes, or other dangerous equipment while under the influence of alcohol or drugs, which is one reason why DOL helps employers and employees work together to proactively prevent such safety hazards."

Substance users also had far higher job turnover rates. Among full-time workers who reported current illicit drug use, 12.3 percent said they had worked for three or more employers in the past year, compared with 5.1 percent of non-abusing workers.

Another major finding was that current drug users were more likely to work for employers who did not conduct drug or alcohol testing programs. Nearly a third of current illicit drug users said they would be less likely to work for employers who conducted random drug testing.

Overall, approximately 30 percent of the full-time work force reported that random drug testing took place in their current employment setting. Workers in the transportation and material-moving (62.9 percent) and protective services (61.8 percent) occupational categories were the most likely to report working for employers who conducted random testing. Workers in legal occupations and arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupational categories (10 percent) were the least likely to report working for employers who tested for illicit drug or alcohol use on a random basis.

According to the study, unemployed people had higher percentages of current illicit drug use and heavy alcohol use than those with full-time, part-time or other employment statuses. But because full-time workers constitute about two thirds of the 18-64-year-old population, the actual number of those using drugs was higher among the full-time workers.

The study is based on data collected during 2002, 2003, and 2004 from a nationally representative sample of 128,000 persons, ages 18 to 64, who participated in SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Illicit drug use is defined in the survey as use of marijuana/hashish, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, or inhalants, or prescription psychotherapeutics used non-medicinally. Current heavy alcohol use was defined as drinking five or more drinks on the same occasion on five or more days in the past 30 days. The survey also identified whether respondents had a substance use disorder, meaning drug or alcohol dependence or abuse, based on standard diagnostic criteria.

The study showed that an annual average of approximately 9.4 million current illicit drug users, (including 7.3 million current marijuana users) and 10.1 million heavy alcohol users were employed full-time in 2002-2004. Among full-time workers using these substances, 3 million met criteria for illicit drug dependence or abuse, and 10.5 million were dependent on or abused alcohol.

The full report is available at <http://oas.samhsa.gov/work2k7/toc.cfm> . Copies of the full report are available for free from SAMHSA's Health Information Network at 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727). Request inventory number SMA -07-4273. For related publications and information, visit <http://www.samhsa.gov>

Related SAMHSA link

<http://www.workplace.samhsa.gov/> is SAMHSA's Division of Workplace Programs, which offers information on 1-800-Workplace and how to set up Drug-Free Workplace Programs for Federal agencies as well as private industry.

Related DOL link

<http://www.dol.gov/workingpartners> is DOL's Working Partners for an Alcohol- and Drug-Free Workplace Web site, which provides tools and resources to help employers and employees work

together to develop drug-free workplace programs that protect worker safety and health.

SAMHSA is a public health agency within the Department of Health and Human Services. The agency is responsible for improving the accountability, capacity and effectiveness of the nation's substance abuse prevention, addictions treatment, and mental health services delivery system.

Page Last Updated: 7/16/2007