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Prevalence of drug testing in the workplace

Drug testing continues to develop as a popular strategy to control substance abuse in the workplace; the incidence of testing is partially based on the type of worksite, characteristics of employees, and policies of the company

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Substance abuse has compelled many U.S. firms to create strategies that would help keep it out of the workplace. Some firms have sponsored elaborate and extensive programs to control alcohol and drug misuse.¹ However, these programs have tended to rely on a supervisor's, a coworker's, or an employee's judgment about the presence of substance abuse in another individual or themselves. In the 1980s, some firms began to adopt drug and alcohol testing as an objective strategy to detect and control substance abuse. Advocates of this approach assert that an employee's positive test results can be linked to impairments in job performance, safety risks, and absenteeism.²

While drug testing programs span many segments of society (including suspected criminal offenders and automobile operators), this article focuses on the prevalence and characteristics of drug testing programs in private-sector workplaces within the United States. First, we describe the proliferation of drug tests as evidenced in earlier studies. We then present our findings from a national telephone survey conducted in 1993, which estimated the prevalence and characteristics of testing programs, and descriptors of worksites most likely to implement them. We discuss the implementation of various types of programs (that is, preemployment, random, regular), the types of worksites that conduct such tests, and the employees who are eligible to be tested in those worksites. Research findings are discussed within the context of social policy and the findings of earlier research studies. Lastly, we offer some comments regarding the future of testing and its

integration with other workplace substance abuse control strategies.

Drug testing trends

Surveys of worksite respondents indicate a growing trend in the implementation of drug testing programs from the mid-1980s to the present. For example, one study finds that 18 percent of Fortune 500 companies tested their employees in 1985, but by 1991, the proportion had more than doubled to 40 percent.³ A survey conducted by the American Management Association in 1988 indicated increases in the testing of both applicants and current employees for drugs. Thirty-eight percent of all the organizations in the survey tested job applicants, compared with 28 percent of those in 1987; 36 percent tested current employees, compared with 28 percent in 1986.⁴ By 1991, 48 percent of Fortune 1000 firms engaged in some type of drug testing.⁵ Another study found that up to 63 percent of surveyed employers performed some type of testing in 1992.⁶ And, in a survey of 342 large firms (that is, firms that have more than 200 workers) in the State of Georgia, Terry Blum, and others report that 77 percent of the companies engaged in some type of drug testing between 1991 and 1992.⁷ In addition to these relatively small surveys, representative national surveys conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that 31.9 percent of worksites with more than 250 employees had drug testing programs in 1988, and by 1990, that proportion had increased to 45.9 percent.⁸ Even

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gram, and a drug education and awareness program.²³ Coordinated efforts to deal with alcohol and drug misuse in the workplace were far less common in corporations without drug testing programs. Similarly, one study found that 60 percent of companies with a drug testing program also had a comprehensive treatment and education program.²⁴ Another study reported that more than one-half of companies with drug testing programs also had Employee Assistance Programs.²⁵ Other research has indicated that organizations with drug testing programs are significantly more likely to also have Employee Assistance Programs than those without drug testing programs.²⁶

Results

Table 1 presents national estimates of drug and alcohol testing for worksites and employees by worksite size, type of industry, and region. (See appendix for a description of the

methodology used in this study.) Approximately 48 percent of all private worksites in the United States with 50 or more full-time employees conduct drug tests, and approximately 23 percent test employees for alcohol misuse. The prevalence of worksite drug testing increased approximately 32 percent (that is, from 16 percent to 48 percent) from the 1988 BLS survey to the period of our survey, 1992-93.²⁷

Worksite size. Table 1 also shows a positive relationship between worksite size and the prevalence of a drug or an alcohol testing program. Approximately 71 percent of worksites with more than 1,000 employees conduct drug tests and 42 percent test for alcohol misuse. In contrast, 40.2 percent of worksites with 50 to 99 employees conduct drug tests and 16.5 percent test for alcohol misuse.

Because of the relatively greater prevalence of drug and alcohol testing programs in larger worksites, most employees in the United States are in worksites with these programs. As

Table 1. National estimates of the prevalence of drug and alcohol testing among worksites and employees, by selected characteristics of the worksite, 1992-93

[In percent]

Characteristic	Worksites ¹			Employees		
	Total (In thousands)	Test for drug use	Test for alcohol use	Total (In thousands)	In worksites that test for drug use	In worksites that test for alcohol use
All worksites	162.8 (-)	48.4 (1.2)	23.0 (1.0)	41,127 (1,271)	62.3 (1.6)	32.7(2.1)
Worksites size						
50-99 employees	61.6 (1.7)	40.2 (2.1)	16.5 (1.6)	4,319 (124)	40.7 (2.2)	16.7 (1.6)
100-249 employees	66.0 (1.8)	48.2 (1.9)	22.9 (1.7)	9,612 (265)	48.9 (1.9)	23.2 (1.7)
250-999 employees	29.0 (.9)	61.4 (2.1)	32.7 (2.1)	12,520 (404)	62.8 (2.1)	33.5 (2.2)
1,000 employees or more	6.2 (.3)	70.9 (3.4)	42.1 (3.5)	14,675 (1,282)	77.1 (3.4)	43.0 (5.0)
Type of industry						
Manufacturing	54.0 (1.0)	60.2 (2.2)	28.3 (2.0)	14,058 (554)	73.5 (2.2)	37.5 (2.8)
Wholesale and retail	32.2 (1.1)	53.7 (3.3)	22.1 (2.7)	4,901 (236)	57.3 (3.0)	27.7 (3.2)
Communications, utilities, and transportation	13.5 (.8)	72.4 (3.3)	34.9 (3.0)	4,202 (435)	85.8 (2.6)	43.9 (5.3)
Finance, insurance, and real estate,	14.2 (0.5)	22.6 (2.1)	7.8 (1.3)	4,369 (563)	50.2 (6.7)	12.2 (3.1)
Mining and construction	5.6 (.4)	69.6 (4.1)	28.6 (3.5)	801 (49)	77.7 (3.2)	32.2 (3.1)
Services	43.3 (1.2)	27.9 (2.0)	17.4 (1.7)	12,796 (998)	47.5 (4.5)	32.7 (5.2)
Region						
Northeast	33.0 (1.5)	33.3 (2.4)	12.9 (1.7)	9,356 (617)	49.1 (3.6)	19.3 (2.6)
Midwest	40.7 (1.8)	50.3 (2.5)	24.0 (2.1)	10,190 (616)	62.4 (3.1)	34.4 (3.2)
South	59.1 (1.9)	56.3 (2.0)	26.3 (1.8)	14,986 (1,168)	71.8 (2.6)	36.9 (4.4)
West	30.0 (1.6)	46.8 (2.9)	26.0 (2.5)	6,594 (460)	59.4 (3.3)	39.7 (3.9)

¹ Worksites of private nonagricultural firms with more than 50 full-time employees at the time of survey.

NOTE: Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Table 4. Frequency of drug testing for worksites that test current employees, by characteristics of the worksite, 1992-93

Characteristic	Percent that test ¹ —	
	On regular basis	On random basis
All worksites with drug testing program ²	13.7 (1.4)	46.7 (2.0)
Worksite size		
50-99 employees	15.3 (2.6)	54.3 (4.1)
100-249 employees	12.8 (2.3)	46.4 (3.3)
250-999 employees	12.5 (2.3)	38.2 (3.3)
1,000 employees or more	14.6 (3.6)	38.0 (4.6)
Type of industry		
Manufacturing	11.6 (2.2)	35.9 (3.3)
Wholesale and retail	12.8 (3.5)	51.3 (5.4)
Communications, utilities, and transportation	15.9 (2.5)	76.1 (3.5)
Finance, insurance, and real estate	5.8 (4.2)	32.4 (7.2)
Mining and construction	20.7 (4.5)	55.1 (5.2)
Services	16.2 (3.6)	38.8 (4.5)
Region		
Northeast	14.7 (3.5)	45.4 (5.5)
Midwest	16.2 (2.8)	44.4 (4.0)
South	13.0 (2.1)	53.8 (3.1)
West	11.0 (3.1)	32.7 (4.4)

¹ Worksites that test only job applicants are not included in this table.
² Worksites of private nonagricultural firms with more than 50 full-time employees at the time of survey.

Note: Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Table 5. Department responsible for conducting drug tests, by worksite characteristics, 1992-93

[In percent]

Characteristic	Medical department	Personnel or human resources	Outside contractor	Other ¹
All worksites ²	10.6 (0.9)	6.4 (0.7)	78.9 (1.2)	3.7 (0.6)
Worksite size				
50-99 employees	5.0 (1.5)	3.0 (1.2)	86.9 (2.3)	4.7 (1.3)
100-249 employees	5.8 (1.2)	6.0 (1.2)	84.3 (1.9)	3.4 (1.0)
250-999 employees	19.7 (2.3)	10.8 (1.7)	66.6 (2.7)	2.6 (0.9)
1,000 employees or more	40.4 (3.8)	9.3 (2.1)	46.3 (4.0)	3.7 (1.8)
Type of industry				
Manufacturing	13.7 (1.6)	7.1 (1.4)	76.8 (2.1)	2.3 (0.8)
Wholesale and retail	3.6 (1.7)	3.0 (1.0)	91.2 (2.4)	2.1 (1.4)
Communications, utilities, and transportation	9.6 (1.7)	8.2 (1.6)	74.2 (2.7)	7.7 (1.6)
Finance, insurance, and real estate	7.5 (2.3)	5.0 (2.1)	85.0 (3.3)	(³)
Mining and construction	3.8 (1.5)	6.1 (1.8)	81.4 (3.1)	6.3 (1.8)
Services	15.9 (2.5)	7.8 (2.3)	69.0 (3.7)	6.2 (2.2)
Region				
Northeast	16.8 (3.2)	3.2 (1.1)	77.9 (3.5)	1.6 (.9)
Midwest	8.4 (1.5)	6.9 (1.5)	80.7 (2.3)	3.8 (1.0)
South	11.1 (1.4)	6.8 (1.1)	77.1 (2.0)	4.2 (1.1)
West	8.1 (1.8)	6.8 (2.1)	81.2 (3.0)	3.7 (1.4)

¹ Includes Employee Assistance Program, Safety Department, and Department Supervisor.

² Worksites of private nonagricultural firms with more than 50 full-time employees at the time of survey.

³ Insufficient sample size.

Note: Standard errors appear in parentheses.

Conclusion

Drug testing is widely implemented in worksites throughout the United States, and is partially based on the characteristics of the worksite, the characteristics of its employees, and the implementation of other strategies and policies to control substance misuse. Drug testing programs are continually added to worksite policies, as well as the proportion of the labor force subject to testing. Programs that test for illicit drug use are more than twice as prevalent as those that test for alcohol use. This is ironic, in that alcohol misuse is by far the more common personal problem related to impaired job performance.³⁰ However, testing for alcohol use is a more complex social and legal issue because *alcohol use per se* does not constitute a violation of law or company personnel policies.³¹

However, the results of this study confirm that drug testing continues to develop as a preferred strategy to control substance abuse in the workplace. Programs are most prevalent in larger worksites, those industries affected by drug test-

ing legislation, and those employing high risk or unionized labor forces. Random drug testing has emerged as the most common form of testing, and most often, all employees and applicants are now included in testing programs. Drug testing is commonly conducted by external firms, but larger worksites are significantly more likely than their smaller counterparts to conduct testing within their worksites. Proliferation of the number and scope of programs, coupled with the movement towards random testing suggests continued strengthening of the employers' dedication to systematically identify and intervene in cases of drug and, to a lesser degree, alcohol abuse at their worksites. Drug testing has joined with other programs and policies (such as Employee Assistance Programs, health promotion programs, and written drug and alcohol use policies) to form more comprehensive responses to workplace substance abuse. Additional research is recommended to further define the integration of strategies to control worksite substance abuse and to examine the outcomes and effectiveness of these efforts.