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Workplace drug testing finds cocaine, marijuana use at 12-year high

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Employees increasingly are testing positive for marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamines at work, driving the rates of positive drug tests in the United States to the highest level in 12 years.

Quest Diagnostics, a leading lab services company based in Madison, N.J., on Tuesday released its annual analysis of more than 10 million workforce drug test results nationwide.

It showed that 4.2 percent of drug tests came back positive last year, up from 4 percent the year before and the highest rate since 2004, when it was 4.5 percent.

Illinois' positive drug test rate matched the national average, though employees' drugs of choice vary widely in different parts of the state.

Cocaine is big in Chicago's south suburbs while opiates dominate at the southern end of Illinois, according to a local breakdown based on the first three digits of the ZIP codes. Heroin is concentrated around Rockford.

Marijuana, the most common drug for which workers test positive, has a steady presence throughout much of northern and central Illinois but leads to a particularly high positive rate in Sangamon County, home of the state capital.

The rate of positive drug tests in the nation's workforce remains far lower than the nearly 14 percent positive rate the United States faced when Quest started the annual report in 1988.

But after declining for more than two decades, the rate of positive results has been climbing since 2012.

"It's pretty alarming," said Dr. David Fletcher, a medical review officer and founder of SafeWorks Illinois in Champaign, which analyzes drug tests for employers and was not involved in the analysis. Quest's statistics reflect what he sees in his practice, he said.

Driving the increase are positive tests for marijuana, which hit 2 percent last year after growing steadily from about 1.6 percent in 2012. For workers federally mandated to be tested because they hold safety-sensitive positions, such as pilots and bus and truck drivers, positive marijuana tests grew from 0.73 percent to 0.78 percent.

Fletcher believes people have become more casual about marijuana use as more states have legalized it for medical or recreational purposes. That includes some employers who he says aren't following their own drug policies as they become more tolerant of workers' drug usage.

"We still see some employers who say, 'We wouldn't have any workers if we tested for marijuana,'" Fletcher said.

Colorado and Washington, the first states to legalize recreational marijuana, have seen particularly large increases in positive test results and now exceed the national average, but they still lag far behind Oregon, which has the highest rate of positive marijuana tests at 3.9 percent. It is followed by Vermont and Maine.

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Illinois has nearly double the national rate of positive heroin tests – 0.55 percent versus 0.028 percent – and the rate is even higher south of Chicago around Will and Kankakee counties. The rate of positive heroin tests is highest around Rockford, where it exceeds 0.12 percent.

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