

Workplaces and Substance Use: Safety-Sensitive Positions

Summary

- About 1 in 5 (20%) workers and 2 in 5 managers (35%) in safety-sensitive positions reported consuming alcohol or other drugs within two hours before work, during work, or being hungover, intoxicated¹ or feeling high while at work.
- About 1 in 5 (19%) workers and managers in safety-sensitive positions thought that it was generally acceptable by their work culture to drink alcohol or use cannabis before or during work.
- About 2 in 5 (43%) managers in safety-sensitive positions² did not feel adequately trained to intervene with a worker who they thought might be working impaired.
- To reduce workplace substance use risks, it is essential for employers to provide regular education, reduce stigma, change work culture, update policies, and offer appropriate supports and training.
- The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) can provide employers and partners with resources, guidance, training, and tailored services for managing workplace and substance use risks as well as help employers introduce protective factors to reduce use.

The Issue

Forming part of a workplace series, this brief provides key context, data, and suggestions on improving substance use health for employers and other partners (e.g., unions, associations, health professionals) from industries with safety-sensitive positions.

Where we work, the type of work we do and the workplace culture surrounding us can have a significant impact on our well-being, including substance use. Workplace risk and protective factors that impact substance use health³ can affect people who work in any job (Frone, 2006; European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2022).

¹ Note that the original survey language used “drunk” to be readily understood by a broad range of participants.

² Safety-sensitive positions pose potential physical risks to self, co-workers, the public or the environment (e.g., operating heavy machinery, working in hazardous environments, performing medical procedures on patients).

³ Like mental health, substance use occurs along a spectrum and includes no use, beneficial use, lower risk use, up to a substance use disorder (Community Addictions Peer Support Association, n.d.).



For people working in safety-sensitive positions, risks for using substances can be higher due to the physical and mental impacts of this type of work (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2023; Public Health Ontario, 2022).

For employers, contractors, unions and other partners, lost productivity due to injuries, absences and disabilities related to substance use in Canada cost \$22.4 billion in 2020 (Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms, 2024).

Understanding the context of substance use among workers, managers, and safety-sensitive positions is key to improving protective factors and worker health and safety.

The Study



We conducted a national study (that involved a survey, focus groups and interviews) of workers and managers from various industries, including natural resources industries, construction, education, health care, accommodations and food services, retail, recreation and entertainment, legal services, and government agencies.

Overall, we surveyed 1,120 people spanning five regions in Canada: The Atlantic provinces (7%), Quebec (30%), Ontario (34%), the Prairies (16%) and British Columbia (13%, including the Yukon and Northwest Territories, due to small numbers).

We additionally conducted focus groups with 130 people working in these industries and interviewed 16 people with lived and living experience of substance use issues.

In this brief, we present information on 387 workers and 195 managers from our survey who worked in safety-sensitive positions, as well as insights from individuals in these positions from the focus groups and interviews.

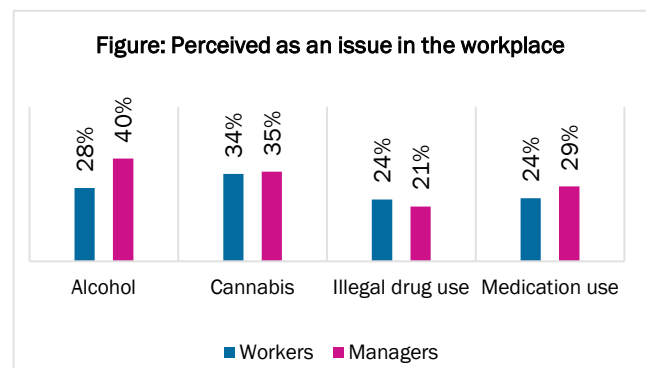
Key Findings

Extent of Substance Use

About 1 in 5 (20%) workers and 2 in 5 managers (35%) in safety-sensitive positions reported consuming alcohol or other drugs within two hours before work, during work, or being hungover, intoxicated or feeling high while at work.

Additionally, between 21% and 40% of workers and managers thought that substance use in general was an issue in their workplace (refer to the figure).

These results indicate that there is a need for better workplace prevention, education and supports for substance use.



Risk and Protective Factors

There are different risk and protective factors in the workplace that can influence substance use among workers and managers. Appropriately addressing these factors can benefit workers and workplaces.



The following are some of the most common risk and protective factors raised by participants in safety-sensitive positions:

1. **Workplace culture:** About 1 in 5 (19%) participants thought that it was generally acceptable by their work culture to consume alcohol or cannabis before or during work.
2. **Stigma:** About 3 in 5 (56%) participants felt that they could safely and confidentially tell their managers if they were experiencing alcohol or drug use issues without fear of discrimination, stigmatization or discipline. Among participants who reported consuming alcohol or drugs before or during work, about half (51%) said they usually worked and tried to hide their use.

“In my opinion, it's all based on the stigma and stereotypes about people with substance use disorder, so that anybody who has that diagnosis is an automatic risk to workplace safety, which is just not true.” (Participant)

3. **Return to work acceptance:** About 4 in 5 participants felt comfortable if a co-worker returned to the same work duties as before (83%) or modified duties (82%) after receiving treatment for a substance use disorder.

“Ten years ago, we did let go a number of people on a regular basis for substance [use disorder] ... that was it... Recently, we had a girl who was having problems... she is back at work now. She's going through a program. She's very open about it. She's sharing... People are getting involved and people are understanding that it's not always just about partying.” (Participant)

4. **Physical injury and pain:** For some individuals working in physically demanding jobs, substances were used to smooth over or manage the strain and injury caused by their work.

Existing Policies and Training

- **Policies:** About 7 in 10 (72%) managers said policies exist on alcohol and other substances (it was not possible to assess the policies' quality). However, workers often deal with multiple and sometimes competing policies between unions, associations, regulators and employers.
- **Training:** About 2 in 5 (43%) managers did not feel adequately trained to intervene with a worker who they think might be working impaired. Among participants who reported being adequately trained, it was not possible to determine whether their training was appropriate for managing substance use-related situations (e.g., hiring, managing substance use incidents, return to work procedures).



Implications and Recommendations

Although workers and managers in safety-sensitive positions face various workplace risks that can contribute to substance use, **there are several opportunities to improve protective factors to reduce the risks.**

Risks related to stigma, workplace culture, managing injuries and pain, a toughness culture, and unclear policies, can be changed to improve worker well-being, safety and productivity.

Recommendations include:



1. Assessing substance use health-related needs at your workplace,
2. Educating and training workers and managers with evidence-based information on substance use health,
3. Developing clear, comprehensive policies and best practices tailored to your organizational needs,
4. Establishing trusted individuals for disclosure or peer support options,
5. Providing alternatives to substances when celebrating or socializing,
6. Offering supports to manage health and well-being, and
7. Offering resources for accessible, confidential and diverse supports.
 - Consult substance use resources available at <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/get-help-with-substance-use.html>

“[...If] someone had a problem, I would be happy to help ... and have a discussion with them, even if it’s not my job. It would make me happy ... to know that I helped them.” (Participant)

CCSA Services to Support Implementation

To help your organization work on these recommendations, CCSA can provide training, resources, guidance, and tailored services on managing workplace and substance use health risk and protective factors. For more information about the study, training and how-to resources, email us at workplace@ccsa.ca.

References

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About CCSA

CCSA was created by Parliament to provide national leadership to address substance use in Canada. A trusted counsel, we provide national guidance to decision makers by harnessing the power of research, curating knowledge and bringing together diverse perspectives.

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