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◆ **WSJ NEWS EXCLUSIVE** | MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

Positive Marijuana Tests Are Up Among U.S. Workers

Percentage of job seekers, employees shown to be using the drug climbs as legalization expands



Seventeen states have passed marijuana-legalization measures, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

PHOTO: BRUCE BENNETT/GETTY IMAGES

By [Matt Grossman](#)

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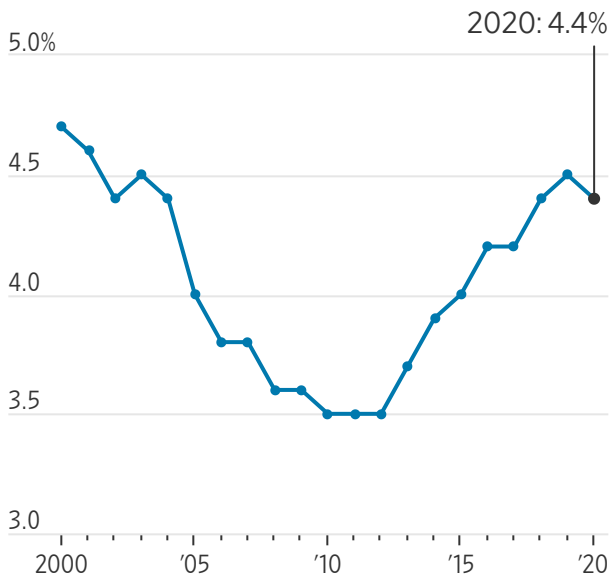
The coronavirus pandemic shook up the U.S. employment picture last year, but one trend persisted: a rising share of workers who test positive for marijuana.

The proportion of U.S. workers who tested positive for marijuana in urine climbed higher in 2020 while the overall share of positive drug tests plateaued last year, according to [Quest Diagnostics Inc.](#), [DGX +1.38%](#) ▲ one of the largest drug-testing laboratories in the U.S. About 2.7% of the approximately seven million drug tests Quest conducted on behalf of employers came back positive for marijuana—up from 2.5% in 2019 and 2% in 2016.

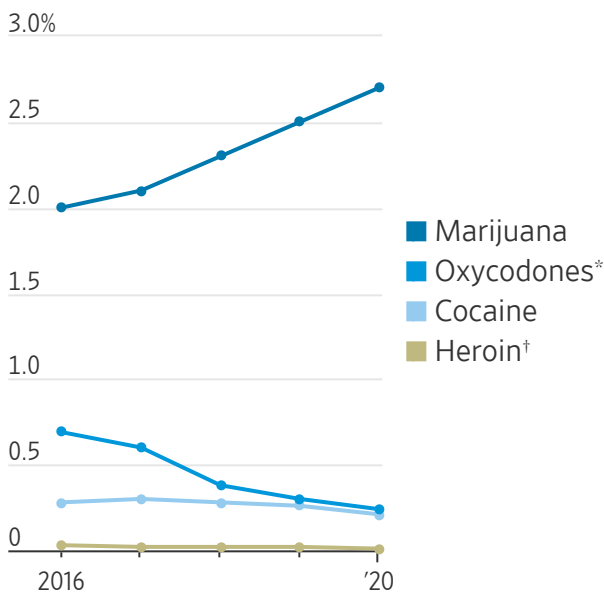
On the Rise

The percentage of U.S. workers testing positive for marijuana continues to climb but has slipped for other drugs.

U.S. workforce drug positivity rate



U.S. workforce positivity rates, by category



*Includes Oxycontin and similar drugs; data only for general U.S. workforce through 2018 †Heroin use is indicated by the presence of the 6-acetylmorphine (6-AM) metabolite

Source: Quest Diagnostics

Overall, the percentage of working Americans testing positive for any drug was 4.4%, little changed from 2019, when the rate of positive urine-based drug tests hit its highest level in 16 years. Though federal and state data indicate drug overdoses and abuse have

risen during the pandemic, Quest officials say that isn't captured in their data because many overdose victims likely weren't subject to workplace drug testing last year.

Drug tests often occur for new-hire candidates, as part of random-testing programs or following an accident or suspicions of drug use.

Positive marijuana tests have climbed among American workers as more states have allowed marijuana for medical and recreational use in recent years. Seventeen states have passed legalization measures, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures —including, most recently, New York, New Jersey, Virginia and Arizona.

Along the way, the shifting legal backdrop and changing cultural attitudes have prompted some employers to stop testing for it while others have quit factoring it into hiring decisions. Some businesses say testing policies promote accountability, although many take a more lenient stance toward marijuana than toward other drugs.

“We haven't really seen a sea change in the overall testing rate, but we've been seeing changes in the degree to which marijuana is included in the testing panels,” said Dr. Barry Sample, Quest's senior director for science and technology.



The shifting legal backdrop and changing cultural attitudes have prompted some employers to stop testing for marijuana.

PHOTO: EDDIE MOORE/ZUMA PRESS

 WHAT'S NEWS

Rise in Marijuana Use Prompts Employers to Adapt



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Some employers are dropping marijuana testing to more easily recruit workers. Hospitality Ventures Management Group, which operates primarily Marriott- and Hilton-branded hotels in 17 states, used to test job candidates seeking salaried positions for a standard panel of several drugs. While opening a Colorado property in 2015, it stopped screening for marijuana nationwide, making it a more competitive employer, said Susan M. Sanders, the company's chief human resources officer.

“It was part of the practical nature of wanting to be an attractive employer in that downtown Denver market,” she said. Ideally, marijuana can be “part of what people do when they're not working that isn't going to carry over into the workday.” Colorado legalized recreational marijuana in 2012.

‘Drug testing does not make or break your ability to find good people.’

— Taste of Texas restaurant co-owner Edd Hendee

Among hospitality- and restaurant-industry workers who were tested for drugs last year, 6.3% were positive for marijuana—one of the highest rates for any industry, according to

the Quest data.

Now, as the hospitality sector emerges from the pandemic, and many restaurants and bars are struggling to fill a surge in open positions, more are easing drug-testing requirements, said Matthew Rodgers, chief executive of the Restaurant Zone LLC, a company that helps restaurants find staff.

“Post-Covid, the supply of candidates in the market is really in stress,” he said. Some candidates, he added, are backing away from job opportunities after being told a prospective employer requires a drug test.

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Do you support the legalization of marijuana? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

Others have lost job offers because of a positive test. Kellie Ward, 24 years old, said she uses marijuana recreationally at home in Nevada, which legalized recreational use in 2017. Though she was recently offered a job as a barista and bartender at an assisted-living facility across the state line in Utah, she said the offer was rescinded after she failed the marijuana test.

Some business owners say they continue to test for marijuana and other drugs because having the testing policy discourages lying and theft and encourages workplace safety. “Drug testing does not make or break your ability to find good people,” said Edd Hendee, co-owner of the Taste of Texas restaurant in Houston.

Companies in safety-sensitive industries have less flexibility because on-the-job testing is mandated by law. Within the trucking industry, a federal database launched last year also makes it harder for truck drivers—who are subject to U.S. Transportation Department-mandated drug and alcohol testing—to hide past positive tests from prospective employers.

While a potential boon to safety, the new database has significantly contributed to a hiring crunch, said Avery Vise, a trucking analyst at FTR Transportation Intelligence. Since its launch, nearly 70,000 truck drivers have been added to the database for positive tests, and the majority of those drivers haven’t completed the steps necessary to return to work, Mr. Vise said.

The greater scrutiny of truck drivers' drug and alcohol use has hit trucking companies just as the pandemic's strain on logistics networks has also contributed to a tight labor market in the sector, he said.

Write to Matt Grossman at matt.grossman@wsj.com

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