

PROFILE 9

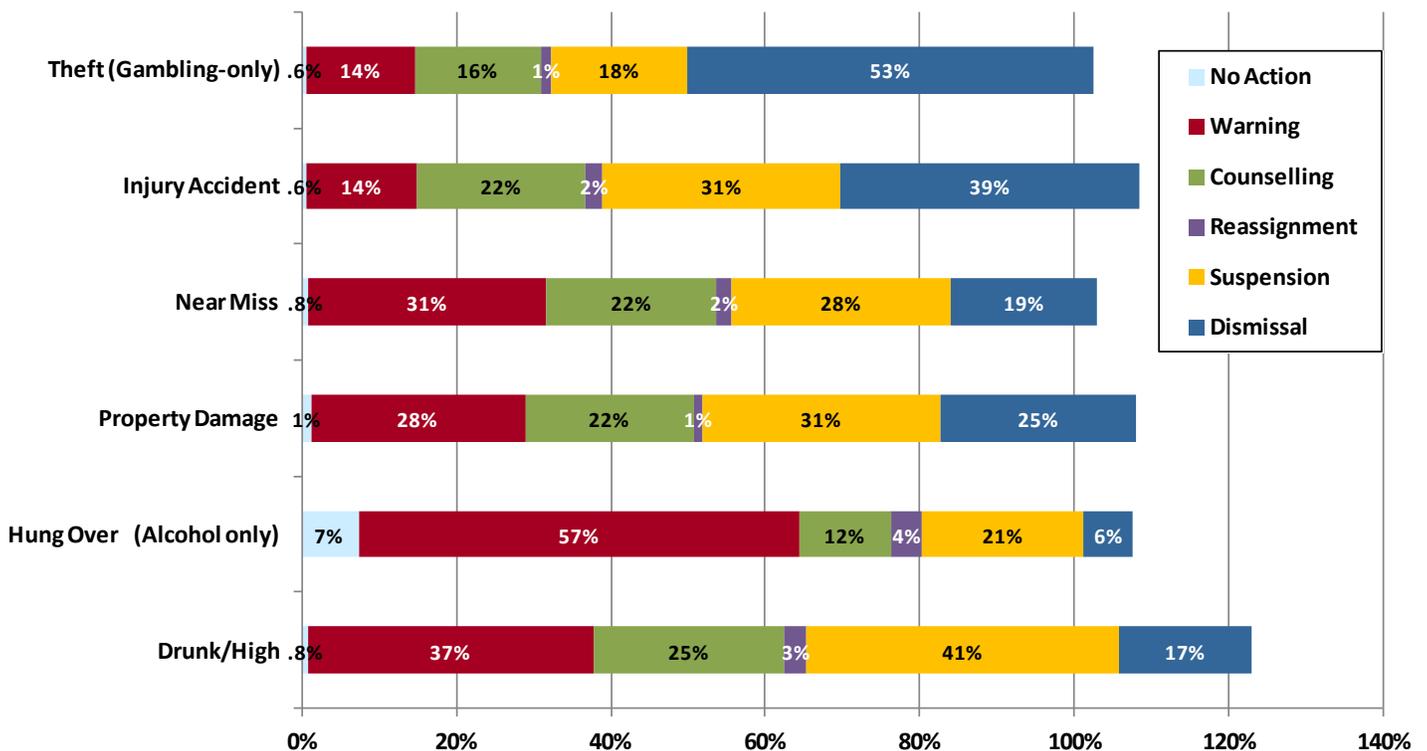
Substance Testing and Responses to Workplace Incidents Involving Drugs and Alcohol

Three population-based surveys conducted in 1992, 2002 and 2009, examined the prevalence of addiction and mental health problems throughout Alberta’s workforce. In 2009, *The Alberta Survey of Addictive Behaviours and Mental Health in the Workforce* assessed 2817 employed adults. This profile highlights employer responses to drug and alcohol related incidents and their practice of substance use testing in the workplace.

How do employers respond to incidents involving drugs and alcohol?

Figure 1 displays the most likely response(s) that organizations would implement if faced with an employee incident involving substance use or gambling. Overall, responses varied as a function of the type of incident; however, notably very few employers would take no action on substance use or gambling related problems in their workforce. The most frequent responses to incidents involving theft or injury were suspension or dismissal. Near misses and property damage elicited a greater range of responses including a warning, suspension, dismissal or counselling. If an employee came to work hung over or under the influence of a substance (i.e., drunk or high), most organizations would render a warning or suspension.

Figure 1: Employers Responses to Incidents in the Workplace Involving Alcohol or Other Drugs

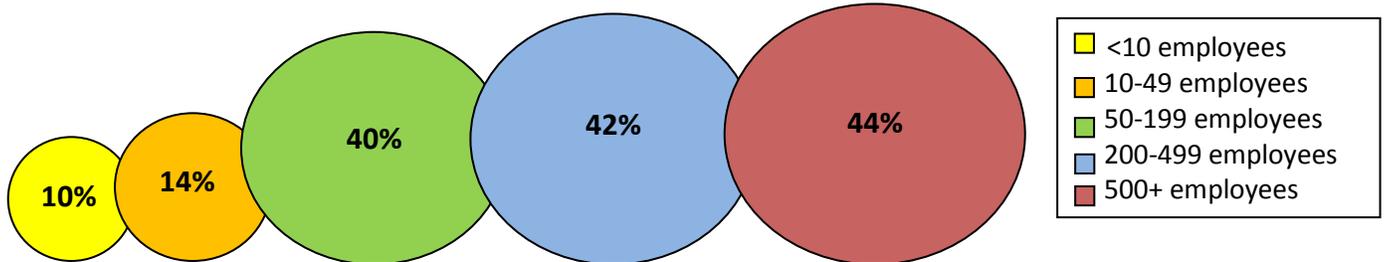


Note: Response categories were not mutually exclusive; therefore more than one response to workplace incidents involving alcohol or other drugs could be selected by employers.

How common is drug and alcohol testing in Alberta's workforce?

To discourage the use of alcohol and other drugs in the workplace, 24% of employers on average had a substance use testing program for their employees. The use of such protocols differed as a function of company size, whereby larger organizations were more likely to implement testing than smaller ones (see Figure 2). Of the employers with mandated substance screening, the majority felt these initiatives were effective in reducing workplace problems due to alcohol (79%) and drugs (87%).

Figure 2: Use of drug and alcohol testing according to organization size



How concerned are employers with the impact of substance use and gambling?

Neither employees nor employers perceived a serious impact of addictive behaviours. Gambling was widely accepted, with 93% of employers and 89% of employees citing no serious impact. Additionally, there appeared to be a lack of concern for the effects of drugs (not very serious = 84%) and alcohol (not very serious = 79-80%) on the workplace. However, when asked to rate their concern with respect to selected outcomes, 16-19% of employers expressed very significant concerns about employee safety, organization reputation and image, and public safety.

Summary

- The majority of employers responded to substance use and gambling related issues in the workplace; however, the sternness of their responses varied by the type of incident.
- Less than half of all organizations, even larger ones, had drug and alcohol testing programs for their staff. Of those who did, most felt that their efforts had successfully reduced the frequency of related incidents.
- The lack of concern for the effects of gambling, drugs and alcohol was troublesome, and suggests a need for enhanced education regarding the functional life impacts of these issues.

Drug and alcohol testing has been debated in terms of human rights, but has been deemed permissible if employers use the information gained to support employees in getting help. Employers should be encouraged to ensure that counselling is made available for those employees that are tested and require treatment. Also, promoting and providing counselling services to all employees, prior to testing positive for substance use, could be an effective prevention strategy. On the whole, these results suggest a need for greater awareness and education around substance use and problem gambling in the workplace.

For a link to the full report, *The Alberta Survey of Addictive Behaviours and Mental Health in the Workforce: 2009*, visit: <http://ihe.ca/publications/library/2011/the-alberta-survey-of-addictive-behaviours-and-mental-health-in-the-workforce-2009/>

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