

Workplace Violence Awareness & Prevention

Workplace violence is a frightening problem facing companies today. While more and more information on the causes of violence and how to handle it is becoming known, there is often no reasonable rationale for this type of conduct and, despite everything we know or do, violent situations happen. No employer is immune from workplace violence and no employer can totally prevent it.

The cost to organizations is staggering. It is impossible to overstate the costs of workplace violence, because a single incident can have sweeping repercussions. There can be the immediate and profound loss of life or physical or psychological repercussions felt by the victim as well as the victim's family, friends, and co-workers; the loss of productivity and morale that sweeps through an organization after a violent incident; and the public relations impact on an employer when news of violence reaches the media.

Workplace violence affects other areas as well. The adverse impact on organizations and individuals is wide-ranging and can include:

- ▲ Temporary/Permanent Absence of Skilled Employee
- ▲ Psychological Damage
- ▲ Property Damage, Theft, and Sabotage
- ▲ Increased Security Costs
- ▲ Increased Workers' Compensation Costs

There are many theories about the causes of workplace violence. However, caution should be taken when profiling or stereotyping individuals or organizations since the presence of any of the factors related to these theories does not necessarily indicate a violent act will be carried out. Nevertheless, an incident can be the result of any one or a combination of these factors.

Remember – violence or threats of violence in all forms are unacceptable workplace behavior. It should not be tolerated and it should be dealt with appropriately.



What is workplace violence?

Workplace violence is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide. It can affect and involve employees, clients, customers and visitors. The impact of workplace violence can range from psychological issues to physical injury, or even death.

Homicide is currently the fourth-leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI). However it manifests itself, workplace violence is a major concern for employers and employees nationwide.

There are Four Types of Workplace Violence:

1. **Criminal Intent** – the perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business or its employees, and is usually committing a crime in conjunction with the violence (robbery, shoplifting, trespassing).
2. **Customer/Client** – non-employees that are allowed on-site for purchasing, deliveries, pick-ups, etc.
3. **Worker-on-Worker** – violence between coworkers is commonly referred to as lateral or horizontal violence. It includes bullying, and frequently manifests as verbal and emotional abuse that is unfair, offensive, vindictive, and/or humiliating though it can range all the way to homicide. Worker-on-worker violence is often directed at persons viewed as being “lower on the food chain” such as in a supervisor to supervisee though incidence of peer to peer violence is also common.

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4. **Personal Relationship** – the perpetrator has a relationship to the employee outside of work that spills over to the work environment. For example, the husband of an employee follows her to work, orders her home and threatens her, with implications for not only this employee but also for her coworkers.



Injury Data

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 20,870 workers in the private industry experienced trauma from nonfatal workplace violence in 2019. These incidents required days away from work.

Of those victims who experienced trauma from workplace violence:

- ▲ 68% were female
- ▲ 65% were age 25 to 54
- ▲ 21% required 31 or more days away from work to recover, and 20% involved 3 to 5 days away from work



Fatality Data

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 453 workers in private industry were workplace homicide victims in 2018.

Of those victims who died from workplace violence:

- ▲ 82% were male
- ▲ 47% were white
- ▲ 66% were age 25 to 54

How can workplace violence hazards be reduced?

In most workplaces where risk factors can be identified, the risk of assault can be prevented or minimized if employers take appropriate precautions. One of the best protections employers can offer their workers is to establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence. This policy should cover all workers, clients, visitors, contractors, and anyone else who may come in contact with company personnel.

By assessing their worksites, employers can identify methods for reducing the likelihood of incidents occurring. A well-written and implemented workplace

INDICATORS OF POTENTIAL VIOLENCE BY AN EMPLOYEE



Employees typically do not just “snap,” but display indicators of potentially violent behavior over time. If these behaviors are recognized, they can often be managed and treated. Potentially violent behaviors by an employee may include one or more of the following (this list of behaviors is not comprehensive, nor is it intended as a mechanism for diagnosing violent tendencies):

- Increased use of alcohol and/or illegal drugs
- Unexplained increase in absenteeism; vague physical complaints
- Noticeable decrease in attention to appearance and hygiene
- Depression / withdrawal
- Resistance and overreaction to changes in policy and procedures
- Repeated violations of company policies
- Increased severe mood swings
- Noticeably unstable, emotional responses
- Explosive outbursts of anger or rage without provocation
- Suicidal; comments about “putting things in order”
- Behavior which is suspect of paranoia, (“everybody is against me”)
- Increasingly talks of problems at home
- Escalation of domestic problems into the workplace; talk of severe financial problems
- Talk of previous incidents of violence
- Empathy with individuals committing violence
- Increase in unsolicited comments about firearms, other dangerous weapons and violent crimes

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

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violence prevention program and training can reduce the incidence of workplace violence.

This can be a separate workplace violence prevention program or can be incorporated into a safety and health program, employee handbook, or manual of standard operating procedures. It is critical to ensure that all workers know the policy and understand that all claims of workplace violence will be investigated and remedied promptly.

What can employers do to help protect these employees?

- ▲ Provide safety education for employees so they know what conduct is not acceptable, what to do if they witness or are subjected to workplace violence, and how to protect themselves.
- ▲ Secure the workplace. Where appropriate to the business, install video surveillance, extra lighting, and alarm systems and minimize access by outsiders through identification badges, electronic keys, and guards.
- ▲ Equip field staff with cellular phones and hand-held alarms or noise devices, and require them to prepare a daily work plan and keep a contact person informed of their location throughout the day.
- ▲ Keep employer provided vehicles properly maintained.
- ▲ Instruct employees not to enter any location where they feel unsafe. Introduce a “buddy system” or provide an escort service or police assistance in potentially dangerous situations or at night.

How can the employees protect themselves?

Nothing can guarantee that an employee will not become a victim of workplace violence. These steps, however, can help reduce the odds:

- ▲ Learn how to recognize, avoid, or diffuse potentially violent situations by attending personal safety training programs.
- ▲ Alert supervisors to any concerns about safety or security and report all incidents immediately in writing
- ▲ Avoid traveling alone into unfamiliar locations or situations whenever possible.
- ▲ Carry only minimal money and required identification into community settings.

A supervisor’s response is the key to dealing with threats of violence.

- ▲ Treat all employees fairly
- ▲ Investigate all threats
- ▲ Take them seriously
- ▲ Get information from all sides
- ▲ Don’t allow retaliation

What should employers do following an incident of workplace violence?

- ▲ Encourage employees to report and log all incidents and threats of workplace violence.
- ▲ Provide prompt medical evaluation and treatment after the incident.
- ▲ Report violent incidents to the local police promptly.
- ▲ Inform victims of their legal right to prosecute perpetrators.
- ▲ Discuss the circumstances of the incident with staff members. Encourage employees to share information about ways to avoid similar situations in the future.
- ▲ Offer stress debriefing sessions and post-traumatic counseling services to help workers recover from a violent incident.
- ▲ Investigate all violent incidents and threats, monitor trends in violent incidents by type or circumstance, and institute corrective actions.

TPM is always available to assist you with designing and implementing a Workplace Violence policy and plan. For assistance with a Workplace Violence policy, or to view a sample program, call 509-535-4646.

THREAT ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS



To assess workplace violence risk, the following questions are suggested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation when a report is made of threatening comments or behaviors by an employee. These questions should be asked to individuals familiar with the offender's behavior, both prior to and after any alleged threat or action.

They include:

- Why has the offender threatened, made comments which have been perceived by others as threatening, or has taken this action at this particular time? What is happening in his/her own life that has prompted this?
- What has been said to others, i.e. friends, colleagues, coworkers, etc., regarding what is troubling him?
- How does the offender view himself in relation to everyone else?
- Does he feel he has been wronged in some way?
- Does he accept responsibility for his own actions?
- How does the offender cope with disappointment, loss or failure?
- Does he blame others for his failures?
- How does the offender interact with coworkers?
- Does he feel he is being treated fairly by the company?
- Does he have problems with supervisors or management?
- Is he concerned with job practices and responsibilities?
- Has he received unfavorable performance reviews or been reprimanded by management?
- Is he experiencing personal problems such as divorce, death in the family, health problems, or other personal losses or issues?
- Is he experiencing financial problems, high personal debt, or bankruptcy?
- Is there evidence of substance abuse or mental illness/depression?
- Has he shown an interest in violence through movies, games, books, or magazines?
- Is he preoccupied with violent themes; interested in publicized violent events; or fascinated with and/or recently acquired weapons?
- Has the offender identified a specific target and communicated with others his thoughts or plans for violence?
- Is he obsessed with others or engaged in any stalking or surveillance activity?
- Has the offender spoken of homicide or suicide?
- Does he have a past criminal history or history of past violent behavior?
- Does the offender have a plan for what he would do?
- Does the plan make sense, is it reasonable, is it specific?
- Does the offender have the means, knowledge and wherewithal to carry out his plan?

Note: Perpetrators of workplace violence can be both men and women, however, for the purposes of the questions to be asked, he is used to refer to the offender.

Source: U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. *Workplace Violence: Issues in Response*. 2010.