

VIOLENCE AT WORK*

by

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The real image of violence ta work

The variety of behaviours which may be covered under the general rubric of violence at work is so large, the borderline with acceptable behaviours is often so vague, and the perception in different contexts and cultures of what constitutes violence is so diverse, that it becomes a significant challenge to both describe and define this phenomenon.

In practice violence in the workplace may include a wide range of behaviours, often continuing and overlapping, as exemplified in the following box. Those who in their working life have never experienced or witnessed one of these behaviours are likely to be a very small, lucky minority.



A variety of behaviours

- ◆ Homicide
- ◆ Rape
- ◆ Robbery
- ◆ Wounding
- ◆ Battering
- ◆ Physical attacks
- ◆ Kicking
- ◆ Biting
- ◆ Punching
- ◆ Spitting
- ◆ Scratching
- ◆ Squeezing, pinching
- ◆ Stalking
- ◆ Harassment, including sexual and racial
- ◆ Bullying
- ◆ Mobbing
- ◆ Victimizing
- ◆ Intimidation
- ◆ Threats
- ◆ Ostracism
- ◆ Leaving offensive messages
- ◆ Aggressive posturing
- ◆ Rude gestures
- ◆ Interfering with work tools and equipment
- ◆ Hostile behaviour
- ◆ Swearing
- ◆ Shouting
- ◆ Name-calling
- ◆ Innuendo
- ◆ Deliberate silence



Violence at work goes global

Workplace violence - be it physical or psychological - has gone global, crossing borders, work settings and occupational groups .

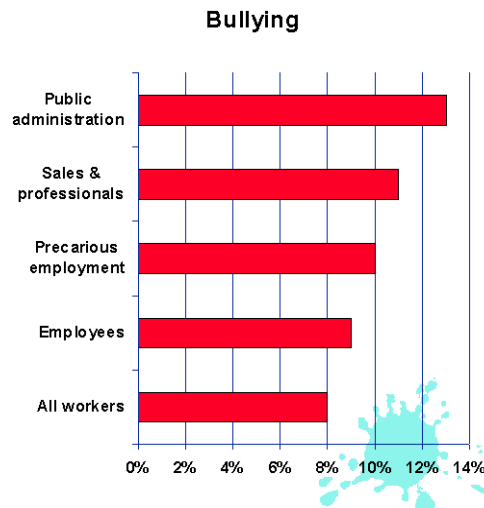
A 1996 European Union survey based on 15,800 interviews in its 15 member States showed that 4 per cent of workers (6 million) were subjected to physical violence in the preceding year; 2 per cent (3 million workers) to sexual harassment; and 8 per cent (12 million workers) to intimidation and bullying. Most important, the data show the close connection between precarious work, gender, young age and sectors at special risks. As shown in the following table a young woman with a precarious job in the hotel industry is likely to be many times more exposed to the risk of sexual harassment than the average worker.



Severity (European Union), 1996



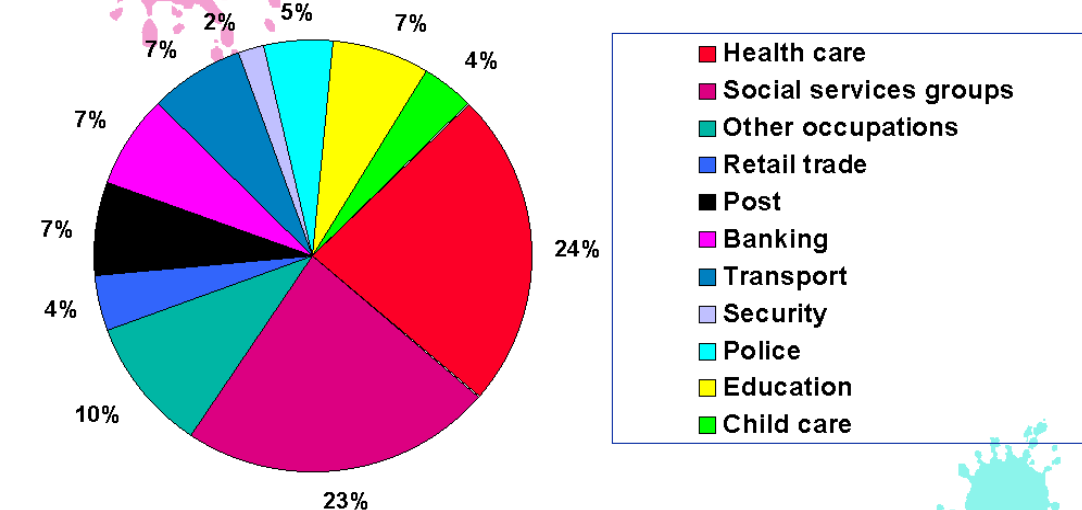
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In the United States, nearly a thousand Americans are murdered on the job each year and workplace homicide has become the leading cause of death for women and the second leading cause of death for men. According to a 1992-1996 National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) 3 "during each year, U.S. residents experienced more than 2 million violent victimizations while they were working or on duty. The most common type of workplace violent crime was simple assault with an estimated average of 1.4 million victimizations occurring each year. While at work U.S. residents also suffered 395,000 aggravated assaults, 50,000 rapes and sexual assaults, (and) 83,000 robberies."

Although no single occupation is in principle immune from violence at work, workplace violence is clustered in certain occupations. The following table show the occupations at major risk in Sweden.

Where it concentrates: Occupations at risk (Sweden)



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In the United Kingdom a 1995 survey conducted by the British Retail Consortium into crime in the retail sector found that more than 11,000 retail staff workers were victims of physical violence on the job in the 1994-95 financial year, and 350,000 suffered threats and verbal abuse.

In Japan a severe economic recession led to major corporate downsizing, shattering long-held assumptions about staying with one company for the duration of one's working life. The loss of lifetime job security and seniority systems has been accompanied by alleged bullying of white-collar workers. The Tokyo Managers' Union established a "bullying hot-line" which received more than 1,700 requests for consultations in two short periods in June and October of 1996. Stress was a common complaint of all callers, with many seeking urgent mental health treatment. Families whose members had committed or attempted suicide were among the callers.

Migration for work purposes has long been a feature of the Filipino employment market. According to data gathered in the Philippines, more than half of all overseas Filipino contract workers are women. Many are hired for domestic service and entertainment. Research has shown that these Filipino women workers are frequently and disproportionately affected by violence associated with their employment.

Psychological violence

Not all violence is physical. In recent years, new evidence has emerged of the impact and harm caused by non-physical, psychological violence. Such psychological violence includes bullying

and mobbing.

Workplace bullying is one of the fastest-growing forms of workplace violence. It constitutes offensive behaviour through vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees through such activities as making life difficult for those who have the potential to do the bully's job better, shouting at staff to get things done, insisting that the "bully's way is the right way", refusing to delegate because the bully feels no one else can be trusted, and punishing others by constant criticism or removing their responsibilities for being too competent.

Research carried out in the UK found that 53 per cent of employees had been victims of bullying at work and that 78 per cent had witnessed such behaviour. The impact on those concerned can be severe. A Finnish study on the effects of bullying on municipal employees indicated that 40 per cent of bullied workers felt "much" or "very much" stress, 49 per cent felt unusually tired on the job, and 30 per cent were nervous "often" or "constantly."

Ganging up or mobbing is a growing problem in Australia, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States. It involves ganging up on or "mobbing" a targeted employee and subjecting that person to psychological harassment. Mobbing includes constant negative remarks or criticisms, isolating a person from social contacts, and gossiping or spreading false information. In Sweden, it is estimated that mobbing is a factor in 10 to 15 per cent of suicides.

The new profile of violence at work which emerges is one which gives equal emphasis to physical and psychological behaviour, and one which gives full recognition to the significance of minor acts of violence.

The special risks of working alone

Automation, subcontracting, teleworking, networking and the "new" self-employment are leading to an increase around the world in the number of people working alone. Working alone is not automatically more dangerous than other employment, but does have its special situations.

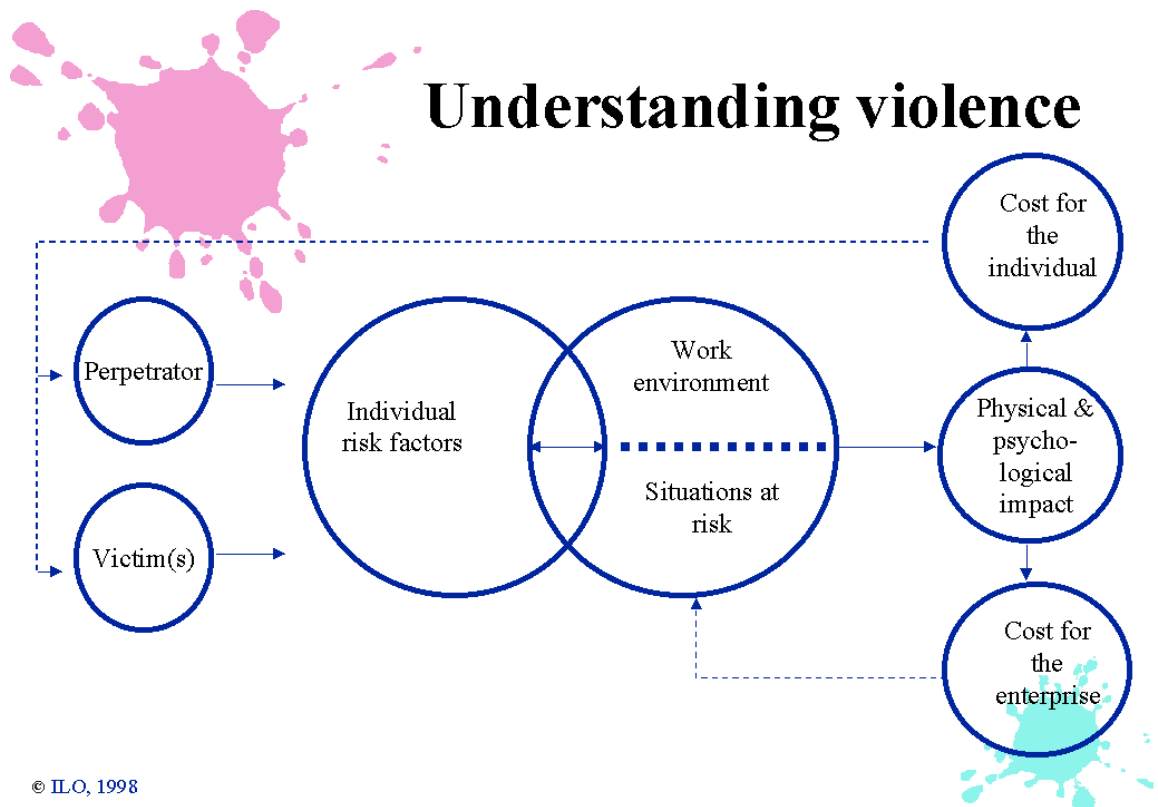
Workers working alone in small shops, gas stations and kiosks are often seen as "easy" targets by aggressors. In the United States, gas station workers rank fourth among the occupations most exposed to homicide. Cleaners, maintenance or repair staff and others who work alone outside normal hours are at special risk of suffering physical and sexual attacks. Of lone workers, taxi drivers in many places are at the greatest risk of violence. Night-time is the highest-risk driving period, and as in other occupations, customer intoxication appears to play a role in precipitating violence. A 1990 Australian study of taxi drivers disclosed that taxi drivers ran 28 times the risk of non-sexual assault and almost 67 times the rate of robbery compared to the community at large.

Causes and costs of violence in the workplace

Is the "disgruntled worker" the "every-man" of workplace violence? News reports of violent workplace incidents often stress acts of an individual: enraged, aggrieved, irritated or frustrated for one reason or another, either personal or professional, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

However that perception may be repeated in the media, a far more promising approach to workplace violence can be found in an "interactive" analysis of both individual and social risk factors. Workplace violence often stems from a combination of causes, including individual behaviour as well as the work environment, the conditions of work, the way in which co-workers interact, the way that customers or clients interact with workers, and the interaction between managers and workers.

The following table shows the complex interactions which generate violence at work.



What is the cost? Violence causes immediate and often long-term disruption to interpersonal relationships, the organization of work and the overall working environment.

Employers bear the direct cost of lost work and improved security measures. Indirect costs include reduced efficiency and productivity, loss in product quality, loss of company image and a reduction in the number of clients.

In the United States, the total costs of workplace violence to employers amounted to more than \$4 billion in 1992, according to a survey conducted by the National Safe Workplace Institute. In Canada, wage-loss claims by hospital workers from acts of violence and force have increased by 88 per cent since 1985, according to the British Columbia Workers Compensation Board. In Germany, the direct cost of psychological violence in an enterprise of 1,000 workers has been calculated at US \$112,000 (200,000 DM) per year, along with \$56,000 of indirect costs.

Tackling violence at work now

There is growing recognition that in confronting violence a comprehensive approach is required. Instead of searching for a single solution good for any problem and situation, the full range of causes which generate violence should be analysed and a variety of intervention strategies adopted. The response to workplace violence is too frequently limited, episodic and ill-defined.

There is also growing awareness that violence at work is not merely an episodic, individual problem but a structural, strategic problem rooted in wider social, economic, organizational and cultural factors. There is also growing recognition that violence at work is detrimental to the functionality of the workplace, and any action taken against such violence is an integral part of the organizational development of a sound enterprise.

Consequently response should be addressed to tackle the causes, rather than the effects of violence at work . In this respect the importance of a preventive, systematic and targeted approach to violence at work , is increasingly stressed.

Some early intervention measures which can produce more permanent results include:

- Disseminating information about positive examples of innovative legislation, guidance and practice in this area, to act as multipliers for other anti-violence initiatives.
- Encouraging anti-violence programmes, particularly at enterprise level, specifically addressed to combatting violence at work.
- Assisting governments, employers and workers organizations to develop effective policies against violence at work.
- Assisting in the elaboration of training programmes for managers, workers and government

officials dealing with or exposed to violence at work.

- Assisting in the elaboration of procedures to enhance the reporting of violent incidents.
- Assisting in coordinating different anti-violence initiatives at different levels into organized strategies and plans.

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