

# **Workplace Violence**

**Causes, Effects, and Prevention**

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***Louis Bevoc books...simple explanations of complex  
subjects***

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# *Introduction*

Modern society is not lawless, but the laws that are in place do not always prevent violence. Unfortunately, certain people believe violence is a solution to their problems...and some of that violence ends up occurring in workplaces.

Workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against employees, customers, regulatory personnel, or visitors. It usually occurs at workplaces, but it also occurs outside of workplaces due to work-related disputes, arguments, problems, or issues.

Millions of people have been affected by some form of workplace violence. Perpetrators can commit this crime randomly, but they are more likely to do it when the victim's job involves one or more of the following factors:

- Working alone
- Working late shifts
- Working in high-crime areas
- Driving a vehicle
- Serving the public
- Enforcing the law

Workplace violence can be committed by virtually anyone. However, it is usually committed by two distinct groups of people that include:

## *Employees*

These individuals work for the organization where the violence occurs. The perpetrator and victim usually know each other, and the crime can be planned in advance or it can be a spontaneous occurrence.

Please consider the following examples of planned and spontaneous workplace violence involving employees:

### *Planned*

A woman gets demoted from her job. She goes home very upset and thinks about the situation. Upon arriving at work the next day, she enters her supervisor's office and threatens to kill him if he does not reinstate her in her former position.

### *Spontaneous*

Two production workers get into an argument about the amount of work that each is doing. The argument becomes heated, and one of the workers physically assaults the other out of anger.

## *Intruders*

These individuals enter workplaces and commit violent acts. Typically, their presence is unauthorized, and the crime can be planned in advance or a spontaneous occurrence.

Please consider the following examples of planned and spontaneous workplace violence involving intruders:

*Planned*

A jealous husband finds out his wife is having an affair with one of her coworkers. He enters the workplace and physically assaults the employee involved with this spouse as a form of revenge.

*Spontaneous*

An armed robber enters a workplace with the intent of robbing a cashier. He does not plan to hurt anyone, but the cashier resists giving him the money, so he shoots her.

Keep in mind that the above groups are generalizations. People who are authorized to be at workplaces, are not employees, and are not intruders are perfectly capable of committing acts of workplace violence. These individuals fall under the “other people” group.

Please consider the following examples of other people who might commit violent acts in workplaces:

*Other people*

*Delivery people*

These individuals deliver people, products, or services to the workplace. They include truck drivers, cab drivers, and bus drivers.

*Government workers (local, state, and federal)*

These people visit workplaces to perform their jobs. They include sanitation workers, police officers, and inspectors.

*Public officials*

Public officials are mayors, senators, congressmen, and other politicians who go to workplaces for events including speeches, presentations, and award ceremonies.

*Salespeople*

These people go to workplaces to sell their goods or services.

*Outside services*

These individuals go to workplaces to perform their jobs. They include trainers, contractors (builders, designers, tradespeople, etc.), auditors, utility workers, laboratory technicians, pest control personnel, accountants, bankers, temporary personnel, computer technicians, and cleaning people.

### *Customers*

These individuals purchase the products or services of workplaces.

### *Visitors*

These individuals visit workplaces to see people, take tours, watch procedures, etc.

Now that you are aware of the wide variety of people that can be involved in workplace violence, it is easier to understand why it affects so many people. This leads us to examine the causes of workplace violence. However, before we move into the causes section, let's discuss some of the indicators that can signal the potential for workplace violence.

## *Indicators*

How do people know when someone is going to get violent in the workplace? This is a good question because everyone has different issues that upset them and trigger their breaking points. However, there are some fairly good indicators that violent behavior is possible. These include:

### *Negativity*

Employees with this trait constantly complain about unfair treatment from management. They believe they are always a victim of wrongdoing...regardless of the situation.

### *Blame*

These employees blame everyone else for their problems. Regardless of what happens, they never believe they are not at fault.

### *Refusal to follow rules*

These employees refuse to follow policies or procedures established by the organization. Sometimes this causes other problems before any type of workplace violence occurs. For example, these individuals might sexually harass a coworker regardless of the rules that forbid it.

### *Absenteeism*

Employees who continually miss time from work fall into this category. If they have not had an attendance issue in the past, this really throws up a red flag.

### *Alcohol or drug abuse*

Drugs and alcohol cause many different problems...and workplace violence is one of them. As people's drug or alcohol use increases, so does their likelihood of workplace violence.

### *Emotional outbursts*

Mood swings and paranoia are examples of emotional outbursts exhibited by employees who might commit acts of workplace violence. This indicator is typically more obvious than others and it scares coworkers.

### *Financial problems*

Financial problems can create stress that drives employees to take desperate measures....including committing violent acts in the workplace. Money has been called "the root of all evil," and it holds true to this definition when financially strapped employees become violent at work.

### *Outside interests*

Outside interests can provoke employees to commit violent acts. Websites, movies, cults, groups, music, and reading material are all examples that fall into this category.

### *Hygiene*

This includes employees who go for several days without showering, bathing, and combing their hair. In short, they are not clean and appear to have no interest in improving their hygiene.

### *Clothing*

Changes in clothing can be an indicator of workplace violence. Black clothes, trench coats, and military fatigues are all examples of the attire these workers might choose.

### *History*

History is a good indicator of workplace violence. Employees who have committed acts of violence in the past are likely to do it again.

Now that workplace violence indicators have been touched upon, let's move into the causes of this deviant behavior.

## *Causes*

Workplace violence has many different causes. The scope of this eBook does not allow all of these causes to be discussed, but some of the more important ones are listed below. Please note all of these are potential causes even though some might be more common than others.

### *Mental illness*

This is the first cause discussed because people who are mentally ill are not always in control of their behavior. Their mental state does not allow them to understand the significance of their actions...and those actions sometimes include becoming violent at work.

### *Family relationships*

Family relationships cause workplace violence due to some form of unhappiness at home. Employees' unhappiness spills over into the workplace, and they commit an act of violence.

Specific types of this cause include:

#### *Estranged marriages*

Employees who are not content with their marriages are sometimes unable to keep their unhappiness at home. Essentially, their marriage causes them to react violently in the workplace. These reactions can be in specific or general ways as shown below:

##### Specific violence

A work-related disagreement is the "straw that breaks the camel's back" due to the problems employees are experiencing with their spouses. In this case, one particular coworker is the target of the violence.

##### General violence

Workplace violence is these employees chosen method for dealing with the problems they are experiencing with their spouses. In this case, all workers are the target of the violence.

#### *Neglect*

Some employees who are neglected by their families take out their frustration or unhappiness at work in the form of violence. An example is a young male employee with parents who pay no attention to him. In this young man's mind, his parents do not care about him and he finds this very upsetting. His distress causes him to strike a coworker during a disagreement.

#### *Abuse*

Abuse differs from neglect because, instead of being ignored at home, these individuals are physically, mentally, or psychologically abused. An example is a young woman who



is constantly told she is "useless" and "no good" by her father. This upsets her, and she desperately wants to prove him wrong. When she does not receive a raise at work, she threatens her supervisor with physical harm.

## *Work relationships*

Work relationships occur when employees willingly or unwillingly get involved on personal levels. Sometimes both employees want the relationship, while other times the feelings are not mutual. Unfortunately, these situations can cause one or both of the involved parties to become violent at work.

The following types of work relationships explain this cause in more detail:

### *Romances*

Romances occur when two unmarried employees become involved on a personal and sexual level. Their breakups can cause problems...especially since they still have to see each other daily. The resulting emotional stress can lead some workers to behave in abnormal ways that can include becoming violent.

### *Affairs*

Affairs are a romance between two employees. However, in this case, one or both of the employees are married. Their marriage or marriages add another dimension of complexity to the situation because jealous spouses can get involved. If they do, workplace violence is something that might result.

### *Infatuation*

Infatuation occurs when employees are obsessed with coworkers. Unfortunately, the feelings of the coworkers garnering the attention are usually not mutual...and this causes problems. Sometimes sexual harassment occurs, but other times workplace violence results.

## *Revenge*

This occurs when people retaliate against others because they feel they have been treated wrongly. Vengeful employees can become violent, and that violence usually happens in the workplace.

Different types of revenge include:

### *Coworker*

This involves employees who direct their violence at coworkers they believe have wronged them. For example, an employee might say negative things about a coworker

to their mutual boss. The employee being bad-mouthed becomes upset and seeks revenge against the coworker who made the negative comments.

### *Supervisor*

This involves employees who direct their violence at supervisors they believe have wronged them. For example, a supervisor might deny a bonus to a worker who believes she deserves it. She becomes upset and seeks revenge against that supervisor.

### *Leadership*

This involves employees who direct their violence at management they believe have wronged them. For example, employees might be told they will no longer have health insurance. One worker becomes upset and seeks revenge against the leadership of the organization.

### *Organization*

This involves employees who direct their violence at workplaces they believe have wronged them. For example, an employee might get fired from his job. This upsets him because (1) he was fired, and (2) none of his coworkers supported him. His anger causes him to seek revenge against the entire workplace.

## *Alcohol and drugs*

This is one of the most interesting causes because alcohol and drugs function in a dual capacity...as an indicator and as a cause. It indicates employees might become violent, and it also causes them to do violent things. In short, alcohol and drugs are bad...and workers should refrain from being under the influence while on the job.

## *Stress*

Stress comes from many different aspects of employees' jobs including:

- Excessive workloads
- Insufficient resources
- Insufficient training
- Difficult deadlines
- Poor supervision
- Poor work-life balance
- Poor job security

The above list can include many other factors, but the point is that stress can push employees to their breaking points. When this happens, workplace violence can result.

## *Attention*

Believe it or not, some employees commit violent acts to be noticed. They might destroy office equipment, threaten a coworker, or physically assault another employee...all so people will notice who they are and take note of what they are capable of doing.

These individuals might appear to be mentally ill...and this might be true in some instances. However, mental illness is not always the cause of their violent behavior. Sometimes they are completely aware of their actions and their intent is to simply be noticed by making a statement.

Now that you understand some of the more common causes of workplace violence, let's move into the effects of this type of negative behavior.

## *Effects*

Workplace violence has many negative effects. These effects can be mental or physical, and often times they impact more people than the victim. Families and friends are also affected...especially if the violence is something as severe as homicide.

This section focuses on the effects of violence in the workplace from an employee and employer perspective. The scope of this eBook does not allow a discussion on the impact it has on people's families and friends. That analysis would require another book written by a licensed psychologist or psychiatrist. That being said, the specific effects of workplace violence on employees and employers are as follows:

### *Absenteeism*

Workplace violence impacts employees' attendance because they do not want to go to a job where they do not feel safe. This impacts organizations as follows:

#### *Employers*

Employers need to replace the absent employees or work will not get done. They can replace employees by increasing existing employees' workloads or by bringing in temporary workers.

Workers who have their workloads increased can get overwhelmed. In fact, these workloads can be so excessive that employees choose to stay home rather than go to work. Ironically, the absenteeism resulting from workloads is often an indirect consequence of the absenteeism that was an effect of workplace violence.

The other option to complete work involves bringing in temporary workers. This might sound like a good solution, but most people who have worked with temporary employees understand the challenges involved. Temporary workers need time and training since they are unfamiliar with the jobs they are taking over...and many times that time and training are simply not available.

In short, the absenteeism that results from workplace violence severely impacts employers. It prevents work from getting done, and it hinders organizations from accomplishing goals and objectives.

### *Employees*

Employees lose money because they are not on the job. They blame the management for lost wages because they do not feel safe at work.

Workers also start to pull away from their organizations as they become disengaged from their jobs. This damages workplace culture as employees lose touch with organizational values.

In short, the absenteeism that results from workplace violence impacts employees. It creates bitterness and prevents them from identifying with their organization.

### *Turnover*

Workplace violence creates uncomfortable situations for all employees...not just the unfortunate ones who were directly involved. Obviously, workers directly affected by the violent behavior suffer the most, but the act itself leaves an impression in the minds of all employees. In fact, some people are so impacted by it that they are no longer able to work for organizations where the violence transpired. When this happens, turnover is an effect of workplace violence.

### *Morale*

This effect is very common. Victims of workplace violence often lose morale at work...especially if they believe management did not do enough to stop the wrongful behavior. Lack of morale results in lower productivity, and this hurts the employee and the employer.

### *Trust*

Trust is critical in organizations, and it erodes quickly when employees experience workplace violence. Workers need to feel they are safe at work, and violence creates a feeling that is the exact opposite. The worst part about this effect is that once trust is lost, it is very difficult to restore.

### *Costs*

Unfortunately, there are many costs associated with workplace violence. Some are more obvious than others, but they all impact the bottom lines of organizations.

These costs include:

#### *Security*

Once violence occurs in a workplace, security needs to be improved. This means hiring security guards, installing cameras, or installing systems that restrict entrance. All of these are good ideas for the prevention of future violence, but they also cost money.

### *Disability*

Some employees go on mental or physical disability after episodes of workplace violence. This expense can be short-term or long-term depending on the severity of the situation.

### *Lawsuits*

Lawsuits often transpire after workplace violence. These can drag on for years and be very expensive...and that expense puts a burden on employers.

### *Productivity*

As noted earlier in this section, decreased morale leads to lower productivity. When this happens, organizations become less efficient, and the associated costs affect their bottom lines.

## *Prevention*

Fortunately, there are ways to prevent workplace violence. Some of the more significant methods are discussed below.

### *Hiring practices*

Effective hiring practices are the most important prevention method because, if done correctly, they stop problem people from becoming employees.

The following are three major checks that can be conducted to search for a history of workplace violence:

#### *Employer history*

It's always a good idea to call past employers to determine if potential employees have a history of workplace violence. It is illegal for employers to divulge certain facts about past employees, but workplace violence issues are something that most human resource people will share due to safety concerns. This allows organizations to find out if potential employees were terminated for workplace violence-related reasons.

#### *Criminal history*

This indicates past workplace violence issues that had legal implications. It also shows any type of problematic behavior that might be related.

### *Academic history*

Academic history is important because violence discovered by universities or colleges is often a permanent part of a student's file. Again, this is something that most people would not want a potential employer to know.

### *Training*

Training is likely the most time-consuming and expensive prevention method, but it pays off in the long run. Employees need to be educated about workplace violence so they clearly understand wrong behavior from right behavior, and this is best done using workforce training.

Training should start at orientation and be part of an ongoing process. It should also be two-fold, focusing on employees and supervision.

Specific types of training include:

#### *Orientation training*

This type of training starts as soon as an employee is hired. The goal of orientation training is to immediately establish acceptable and unacceptable employee behavior.

In terms of workplace violence, orientation training makes workers aware of the rules of prevention that are in place and the fact that employees are expected to follow them.

#### *Employee training*

Employees must be made aware that there is no tolerance for workplace violence. Any violations will be dealt with swiftly, and the punishment might include termination from the organization.

Employees must also be encouraged to report workplace violence that they witness to supervisors. They need to know that their reporting will be taken seriously and kept in complete confidence.

In short, the most important aspects of employee training are to (1) establish workplace violence rules with consequences for violation and (2) build trust that management will react appropriately to any report of violent acts.

#### *Supervisor training*

Supervisors need to understand that part of their jobs involves keeping employees happy. Happy employees find satisfaction in their jobs, and they are less likely to become violent.

Supervisors also need to be trained to listen to employee concerns and act accordingly. Their involvement is the key to stopping workplace violence from occurring.

## *Policies*

This is the easiest method of prevention because any organization can implement policies. Policies set a clear tone of what is expected of employees. They promote positive behavior, discourage any type of workplace violence, and outline discipline protocols for violating established rules.

These policies must be written, and the best way to introduce them is during employee training or meetings. Employee signatures indicate they understand the rules involving workplace violence, and they assure management that discipline can be taken without fear of future legal action.

## *Security*

Security is an excellent way to prevent workplace violence. As noted in the costs segment of the effects section, this can be expensive...but it can also prevent a tragedy from occurring.

Some ways to improve security include:

### *Guards*

Guards prevent unauthorized people from entering workplaces. Their presence forces intruders to work a lot harder to commit violent acts.

### *Swipe cards for entrance*

Swipe cards designate access to specific parts of buildings and grounds. Employees need to be authorized to enter certain areas, and this prevents them from being in places where they have no business.

### *Cameras*

Cameras monitor activities and provide a wealth of information about what is going on inside and outside of facilities. They prevent workplace violence from occurring, and they help convict perpetrators if something does happen.

## *Management involvement*

Management needs to be committed to workplace violence by actively encouraging employees to point out problems. If leaders do not prioritize workplace violence prevention, then employees will not sense seriousness and will not come forward with problems they observe.

To effectively be involved, management needs to:

### *Monitor the workplace*

Managers need to continually walk around the organization and ask employees about their perceptions of the workplace environment. This action entices employees to talk if they are witnessing unacceptable coworker actions or activities.

#### *Encourage employee involvement*

Managers must encourage employees to come forward when they witness any type of workplace violence. This can be done through personal meetings, phone calls, emails, or anonymous notes.

Employees also need to know that there is an open-door policy regarding workplace violence. They are always welcome to inform management of problems so management can react appropriately.

#### *Take swift action*

Managers who are made aware of workplace violence issues need to act swiftly to stop them and prevent future reoccurrences. This shows that they support their employees, and they want the workplace to be free of this wrongful behavior.

## *Summary*

Workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against employees, customers, regulatory personnel, or visitors. Unfortunately, millions of people have been affected by this deviant behavior....and some have even died as a consequence.

This eBook focuses on many aspects of workplace violence. First, it examines indicators including negativity, blame, alcohol and drug abuse, emotional outbursts, financial problems, outside interests, hygiene, clothing, and history. Next, it analyzes causes including mental illness, family relationships, work relationships, revenge, alcohol and drugs, stress, and attention. Then it evaluates effects including absenteeism, turnover, morale, trust, and costs. Last it suggests methods for prevention including hiring practices, training, policies, security, and management involvement. The text is written for easy reader comprehension, and examples are used throughout for better understanding.

Congratulations! You now understand more about workplace violence....an important aspect of organizational behavior.