



Occupational Health
Clinics for Ontario
Workers Inc.

Centres de santé
des travailleurs (ses)
de l'Ontario Inc.

Sudbury Clinic
1300 Paris St.,
Suite 4
Sudbury, Ontario P3E 3A3
Tel: (705) 523-2330
Fax: (705) 523-2606
1-800-461-7120
E-mail: sudbury@ohcow.on.ca
Website: www.ohcow.on.ca

VIOLENCE – A new way of thinking

If someone asked if there is a risk of violence in your workplace, what would you say?

You probably associate violence with several high risk jobs – police officers, convenience store clerks, and taxi cab drivers and not with your own workplace. You may also think of violence as only involving physical assaults. However, these are not always the case. When it comes to violence in the workplace, there is a new wave of thinking, which may surprise many workers.

Workplace violence frequently gains media attention when it results in death; however, fatalities are only the tip of the iceberg. Violence in the workplace seems to be gaining attention in the field of health and safety. This is not because it is a new hazard; it is a result of its broadening definition.



Dictionary definitions for violence include those acts which, “intend to cause or is causing of injury to persons, animals, or (in limited cases) property,” (Wikipedia, 2005). behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill (Oxford, 2005).

The term violence no longer only applies to those physical attacks that we commonly think of, however, also includes any act in which a worker is threatened or intimidated in their employment. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS, 2005) has reported workplace violence to include the following:

- **Physical attacks** (hitting, shoving, pushing or kicking)
- **Verbal abuse** (swearing, insults or condescending language)
- **Threatening behaviour** (shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects)
- **Verbal or written threats** (any expression of an intent to inflict harm)
- **Harassment** (any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome)

Examples: rumours, swearing, anger-related incidents, rape, theft, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, physical assaults, psychological trauma, arson and murder.

EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE:

Workplace violence can obviously result in physical injuries, from mild to severe injury and can even be fatal. However, there are other adverse effects that can result from exposure to violence, including psychological trauma. Variations of psychological trauma can include self doubt, depression, fear, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), loss of sleep, irritability, affected social relationships, decreased productivity at work and increased absenteeism (AFSCME, 1998 and CCOHS, 2005).

There are also increased costs to an organization that result from increased absenteeism, decreased morale and negative public image. Friends and family members are likely also affected from workplace violence.

OCCUPATIONS AT RISK:

Anyone can become the victim of workplace violence, but the risks are much greater in certain situations, including working:

- with the public
- with those that are under the influence of medication, drugs or alcohol or have a history of violence or certain psychotic diagnoses
- in workplace which allow an unrestricted movement of public
- when understaffed or alone, late at night
- when handling money, drugs, valuables
- in an enforcement capacity
- in workplaces delivering services, education, advice, care
- where alcohol is served

There are certain occupations that are at an increased risk, including:

- Health care workers
- Enforcement officers
- Correctional officers
- Teachers
- Retail employees (including gas station and convenience store attendants)
- Social service workers (NIOSH, 1996, AFSCME, 1998, CCOHS, 2005)

Prevention

Employers should ensure that they have an established a violence policy in their workplace, outlining management's commitment and procedures for dealing with violence-related issues.

Others methods of prevention should include focus on the following:

- **Workplace design** (ensuring adequate lighting, security systems and electronic surveillance, restricting access)

- **Administrative/Organizational practices** (staffing levels, schedules of work, procedures for reporting violence and identifying high-risk people, training workers in conflict resolution and self-defense)

Employers and Joint Health and Safety Committees should ensure the implementation and compliance of a **Violence Prevention Program** (accessing risks in your workplace, identifying hazards, establishing procedures for handling violence, establishing support services)

Mistakes that commonly occur include:

- Not taking threats seriously.
- Believing that it won't happen in your workplace.
- Ignoring warning signs.
- Not providing appropriate counseling.
- Not enforcing disciplinary procedures.
- Not enforcing policy and program.

It is time for employers and workplaces to realize that *any* type of violence can occur in *any* type of workplace. By implementing procedures to identify and control the hazards, we can work towards minimizing the risk of violence in our workplaces.

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