

Breaking New Ground

Public Health Takes on Workplace Violence

By Brigette Settles Scott, MA and Kerrita McClaughlyn
Closing the Gap, Violence Prevention - Who's Responsible? • January/February 2002

The threat of violence occurring in the workplace is a daily risk that many Americans face. A large number of recent immigrants and other racial and ethnic groups traditionally hold jobs in industries that are plagued by incidents of violence in the workplace.

The problem is particularly acute for taxicab drivers, convenience store clerks and other retail workers, security guards, and others working in industries with high percentages of minority workers. These deaths often go unnoticed or are not chronicled in the media as often as other more sensational acts of co-worker violence such as the February 2001 shooting at the diesel engine plant in Chicago, or the December 2001 shooting at an Indiana factory

Workplace Violence At-A-Glance

Its most extreme form, homicide, is the third leading cause of fatal occupational injury in the United States. According to the *National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI), 2000*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 677 workplace homicides in 2000, accounting for 11 percent of the total 5,915 fatal work injuries in the United States. Of the 677 workplace homicides, 11 percent of the offenders were a co-worker, former co-worker, or a customer of the victim.

CFOI reported that people in sales occupations experienced a high number of workplace homicides—53 percent of a total 386 deaths. In 2000, there were 70 taxi driver/chauffeur work-related deaths, of which 60 percent were homicides. Of the 142 police, detective, and supervisor deaths in 2000, 35 percent were homicides.

Homicide is not the only act of violence to occur in the workplace. Between 1993 and 1999, an average of 1.7 million non-fatal violent acts were committed against persons who were at work or on duty, according to the *Violence in the Workplace National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 1993-1999*, published in December 2001.

NCVS further reports that the most common types of non-fatal workplace violent crimes include simple and aggravated assaults, rapes and sexual assaults, and robberies.

From 1993 to 1999, law enforcement personnel were victimized while at work or on duty at the highest average rate of 261 per 1,000 persons—the highest rate of the occupations examined. Mental health professionals followed with a workplace victimization rate of 68.2 per 1,000 persons, and retail sales personnel saw a rate of 20 per 1,000 persons.

Who's at Risk?

According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), workers are most at risk if their jobs involve routine contact with the public or exchange of money. Workers are also at increased risk in situations such as working alone or in small numbers, working very late or very early hours, or working in high crime areas. Other factors include, having a mobile workplace such as a taxicab or police cruiser, working with unstable or volatile persons in health care, social services, or criminal justice settings, guarding valuable property or possessions and working in community-based settings.

The Need for More Public Health Involvement

Prevention efforts have largely focused on creating a safe working environment—and less on the implications workplace violence presents to the overall health care field. Recognizing the need to increase public health's role in the prevention of workplace violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention funded a workshop in April 2000 that brought together representatives of industry, labor, academia, and government to identify areas within workplace violence that are not well understood.

As a result of the workshop, a report was released in February 2001, *Workplace Violence - A Report to the Nation*, by the University of Iowa's Injury Prevention Research Center, that identifies workplace

violence as a significant public health problem, and stresses the need for research in this area. Moreover, the report also states that although workplace violence causes millions of injuries and billions of dollars in costs, our understanding of workplace violence is still in its infancy. Additional research—particularly in areas of data collection and intervention—is critically needed in order to reduce the toll workplace violence has on American workers.

<i>Fatal Occupational Injuries by Worker Characteristics and Event or Exposure, 2000</i>	Total Number of Fatalities	Transportation Incidents-%	Objects/Equipment-%	Assaults/Violent Acts-%
	5,915	43.5	17.0	15.7
White	4,240	46.7	17.0	12.8
Black/African American	574	42.2	17.4	23.0
Hispanic/Latino	815	33.1	18.8	15.8
American Indian/Alaska Native	33	42.4	--	15.2
Asian	171	21.1	7.6	56.7
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	14	--	--	35.7
Other races or not reported	68	35.3	16.2	29.4

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Categories not shown are falls, exposure to harmful substances, and fires and explosions. Dashes indicate no data reported or data that did not meet publication criteria



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“We have been viewing the problem of workplace violence too narrowly, and in so doing, we’ve not been able to get on top of it. It’s not just a crime issue, or a private industry issue, or a labor issue. It’s a much broader public health problem,” said Dr. James Merchant, Dean of the University of Iowa’s College of Public Health in a press statement.

Dr. David Banks, Adjunct Associate Professor of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the University of Maryland University College adds that the public health sector, including specialists such as nurses, are uniquely qualified to help prevent workplace violence in their institutions by observing predictors such as stressful work conditions.

“Public health professionals such as health educators can also do a great deal to stem the effects of workplace violence by providing holistic and other health services helping survivors deal with the aftermath of the issue,” he said.

Workplaces in both the public and private sector can greatly benefit from workplace violence preparation. Benefits range from preservation of life to cost reduction. They include: risk reduction, improved employee morale, increased feelings of security, enhanced supervisory skills, early identification of issues, business cost reduction, improved capability to resolve conflicts in positive manner, and reduced legal liability.

“It’s important for us to remember that workplace violence occurs in a variety of settings and is not limited to any particular profession, economic, or racial/ethnic group. All the data show that it affects folks across the board and is not related to race or socioeconomic status,” said Dr. Banks.

For more information on workplace violence, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh> or call 800-35-NIOSH (800-356-4674). ❖



Workplace Resources

Dealing with Workplace Violence: A Guide for Agency Planners, a handbook developed by the Office of Personnel Management and the Interagency Working Group on Violence in the Workplace, is the result of a cooperative effort of many Federal agencies sharing their expertise in preventing and dealing with workplace violence. It is intended to assist those who are responsible for establishing workplace violence initiatives at their agencies.

For more information, go to <http://www.opm.gov/workplac/>

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) provides a comprehensive Web site that includes information on workplace violence such as reports and fact sheets, alerts on how to prevent homicide in the workplace, risk factors and prevention strategies, and links to other sites providing information on violence.

For more information, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.htm>

The National Institute for the Prevention of Workplace Violence educates employers, unions, and employees about the growing threat of violence in the workplace and how to effectively deal with it. It focuses on preventative efforts and prepares clients to respond appropriately should an incident of violence occur. It also provides facts and figures on workplace violence and studies and guides, including “A Supervisor’s Guide for Responding to Violence, Threats, or Any Inappropriate Behaviors.”

For more information, go to <http://www.workplaceviolence911.com>

The National Workplace Resource Center on Domestic Violence, a program of the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPPF), is a collaboration between the FVPPF, employers and unions across the nation. Through the project, employers and unions offer information to employees and union members, develop workplace policies, and strive to ensure that workplaces

across America are supportive of the special needs of employees who are facing domestic violence.

Project materials include *Domestic Violence: A Union Issue*, *A Workplace Training Kit for Unions* and its companion video, *Domestic Violence: Unions Respond*. Both provide unions with tools to educate their members about domestic violence and to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Developed by FVPPF, the Kit includes comprehensive training outlines and materials designed to facilitate training sessions that increase awareness about domestic violence in the workplace and educate union leaders and members about how to successfully address the problem.

For more information, go to <http://endabuse.org/programs/workplace/>

Violence in the Workplace, 1993-99, a special report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, was released in December 2001. Report looks at the following issues:

- Trends in workplace violence;
- Occupational differences in victimization rates (police officers experienced workplace violent crime at rates higher than all other occupations—261 per 1,000 persons);
- Racial and ethnic differences (the workplace violent crime rate for whites—13 per 1,000 in the workforce—was 25 percent higher than the black rate of 10 per 1,000 and 59 percent higher than the rate of 8 per 1,000 for other races);
- Victimization in various job locations (private sector and Federal employees were victimized at similar rates); and
- Weaponry used (more than 80% of all workplace homicides were committed with a firearm).

For more information on workplace violence, go to <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/vw99.pdf>

