

Workplace Violence



Please route to:

- Owner
- General manager
- Sales manager
- Service manager
- Office manager

Workplace violence continues to pose a significant threat to American workers. According to OSHA, there are more than 2 million reported cases of threats, verbal abuse and physical assaults in the U.S. every year. Just as alarming is that one-quarter of workplace violence incidents go unreported.¹

In a [2019 SHRM survey](#), about one-fourth of American workers said their current workplace had been the scene of at least one incident of workplace violence.² And studies conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) show that homicide is the third leading cause of occupational death.³

Violence can happen in any industry and can come from outside the company, or from within. Understanding the risk, taking it seriously and putting policies in place to address it are the best first steps and employer can take to help minimize the threat.

Understanding the problem

According to the FBI, violence in the workplace falls into four broad categories:

Type I:

Violent acts by criminals who have no connection within the workplace but enter to commit robbery or another crime.

Type II:

Violence directed at employees by customers, clients, or anyone else with whom the organization performs services.

Type III:

Violence against coworkers, supervisors, or managers by a present or former employee.

Type IV:

Violence committed in the workplace by someone who doesn't work there but has a personal relationship with an employee – an abusive spouse or domestic partner for example.

Are you at risk?

National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health | NIOSH (NIOSH) has identified common risk factors that contribute to an increased risk for retail establishments:

- Contact with the public
- Exchange of money
- Working late night or early morning hours
- Working in high-crime areas

If your business is subject to any of these factors, your company may be at increased risk for violence in the workplace.

Prevention measures

The best way to prevent a violent event in the workplace is to take steps to reduce the risk. A formal plan should include employee awareness and education, employee screening, physical security of the premises, and strong management controls. Let's begin with employee screening and education.

Employee screening

- Conduct background checks as allowed by state and federal laws.
- Adopt a “drug free” workplace and initiate a drug testing program. Investigating the background of potential employees is a vital component regarding the lessening of the risk for workplace violence.
- Check with your local law enforcement agency regarding what to look for as far as at-risk behavior or warning signs.

Employee education

- Make sure all employees are aware of what type of behavior is not acceptable in the workplace. Examples include verbal abuse of coworkers, harassing e-mails or telephone calls, excessive displays of temper or aggressive outbursts
- Train employees to recognize violent behavior patterns or warning signs, such as an inability to handle criticism, or making jokes about violent acts

Employee education (continued)

- Discuss ways to protect oneself and coworkers, including use of the “buddy system”. In addition, employees should know exactly what to do in the event of an emergency, who to contact and when
- Document the content of training and keep records of the individuals who attended the sessions

Employee behavior assessment

Assessing employee behavior is another key element in reducing the potential of workplace violence. The following information appears in Appendix D of the Minnesota Department of Labor & Industry, “Workplace Violence, A Comprehensive Guide for Employers and Employees”.

Five warning signs of escalating behavior and suggested responses

Confusion – Behavior characterized by bewilderment or distraction. Unsure or uncertain of the next course of action.

- Listen to concerns
- Ask clarifying questions
- Provide factual information

Frustration – Behavior characterized by reaction or resistance to information. Impatience. Feeling a sense of defeat in the attempt of accomplishment. May try to bait you.

- See steps above
- Consider relocating to quiet location or setting
- Offer reassurance
- Make a sincere attempt to clarify concerns

Blame – Placing responsibility for problems on everyone else. Accusing or holding you responsible. Finding fault or error with the action of others. They may place blame directly on you. Crossing over to potentially hazardous behavior.

- See steps above
- Disengage and bring second party into the discussion
- Use teamwork approach
- Draw back to facts
- Use probing questions
- Create “yes” momentum

Anger (judgment call required) – Characterized by a visible change in body posture and disposition. Actions include pounding fists, pointing fingers, shouting or screaming. This signals very risky behavior.

- Use venting techniques
- Do not offer solutions
- Do not argue
- Prepare to evacuate or isolate
- Contact supervisor and/or security

Hostility (judgment call required) – Physical actions or threats which appear imminent. Acts of physical harm or property damage. Out-of-control behavior signals that they have crossed the line.

- Disengage and evacuate
- Attempt to isolate person if it can be done safely
- Alert supervisor and contact security immediately

Hiring and firing policies

- Hiring the best people available is a good long-term investment.
- Conduct criminal/civil background checks and drug screen all job applicants. **Note: the information gathered must be kept confidential.**
- Termination policies should be well defined, clearly understood by employees and adhered to by management.
- Implement an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). There are many vendors that provide this service.
- The EAP should include a “1-800” telephone number for employees to seek assistance with harassment, substance abuse, domestic violence, or other issues.

Protecting the workplace

- Minimize outsider access to the work environment
- Secure and/or limit money kept on-site
- Should you be considering allowing employees to carry weapons, review the laws in your state regarding concealed weapons

Physical security

- Improve visibility from inside and outside the business. Large windows unobstructed by shrubs, trees or signs allow employees to see outside activity and local police to see inside.
- Exterior lighting is important. A well-lit building makes it difficult for a perpetrator to enter or leave undetected during the workday or after hours.
- Install video surveillance equipment and post signs announcing that it is in use. A closed-circuit TV monitoring the cash register area should be installed.
- Use door detectors to announce to employees that someone is entering the business.
- Put height markers on exit doors to help employees and other witnesses provide a better description of perpetrators.
- Keep all doors used for deliveries, taking out trash, etc. locked when not in use. Public doors should be kept locked until business hours begin and immediately after closing.

Management controls

- Implement a Zero Tolerance Program for workplace violence. The definition of workplace violence should include acts of assault, aggression, threats, and intimidation.
- Develop and implement a crisis response plan, including procedures for dealing with the four types of workplace violence events described above.
- Train employees and management to identify, be alert to, and promptly report warning signs of potential violence.
- Obtain area crime reports from the local police department to monitor crime trends.
- Increase staffing during late-night hours in high-crime areas.
- Check exterior lights, closed-circuit surveillance equipment, locks, doors, and windows on a regular basis.
- Don't forget to train parts drivers, sales staff who conduct test rides, couriers and other delivery personnel about threats, safety precautions and response procedures specific to their duties.

Conclusion

Workplace violence is a major concern for businesses of all sizes, from large corporations to small family run businesses. Risk of violent acts and threats of violence can be reduced with the implementation of a comprehensive, written workplace violence prevention program. Violence prevention activities should become part of everyday work and management should remain vigilant in reviewing and sharing policies and resources with all employees on a regular basis.

Resources

1. <https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/osha3153.pdf>
2. Society of Human Resource Managers <https://www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/employee-relations/Pages/Workplace-Violence-May-Jump-During-Return-to-Work.aspx>
[https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/SHRM Workplace Violence 2019.pdf](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/SHRM-Workplace-Violence-2019.pdf)
3. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)



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