

## Research Note

### Violence in the Workplace

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#### Keywords:

**Abstract** – This research note defines workplace violence and discusses ways to identify early warning signs. Identifying early warning signs of violent acts can help prepare workers and allow them to report concerns before it becomes too late. This note also discusses ways that employers and employees can protect themselves from workplace violence.

## Introduction

A little less than a month ago, the United States witnessed the very tragic events that took place in the suburban town of Newton, Connecticut, in which a 20-year old gunman entered and opened fire in an elementary school killing 26 people.<sup>1</sup> The age of the victims ranged from 6 to 56 years old, including 20 students, the school principal, psychologist, teacher and substitute teacher.<sup>2</sup> This traumatic event takes place just five years after the Virginia Tech shootings where a student killed 33 people across campus, known as the deadliest campus shooting in U.S. history.<sup>3</sup> In the aftermath of these events, very controversial issues have been intensely debated. The hottest topic among politicians and legislative parties is gun control in the United States. While lawmakers are determining regulations around gun accessibility, we will take a closer look at a different topic that these deadly events touch on: violence in the workplace.

During the Connecticut shooting, one teacher, Victoria Soto, bravely guided her students into a closet and tried to shield them from the assailant.<sup>4</sup> Soto will forever be remembered as a hero that gave her life to protect her students. However, it goes without saying that no one should ever have to make that kind of decision, especially at work.

Soto, along with other faculty members of Sandy Hook Elementary School, came into work that day not expecting to face a life or death situation. This is the expectation we should all have as employees. Despite this expectation, many Americans may not have confidence that employers are keeping them safe at work. In a nationwide phone survey conducted by David Michaelson and Company results revealed that 34 percent, of the 1,030 adults asked, go to work afraid.<sup>5</sup> Based on these statistics, it is apparent that workplace violence is a concern that needs to be addressed. At the very least employees should be aware of what workplace violence looks like, how to identify the early warning signs that may lead to workplace violence and how to protect against it.

## **What is Workplace Violence?**

Workplace violence does not only refer to fatal or life threatening occurrences. In fact, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) includes physical violence, harassment, intimidation, and other threatening behaviors in its' definition of workplace violence.<sup>6</sup> This means that workplace violence can range from a manager verbally abusing an employee to a visitor or employee committing murder. According to OSHA, homicide is the "fourth-leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the United States."<sup>7</sup> However, there are many

other nonfatal occupational injuries that take place. A special report released in March 2011 by the United States Department of Justice states that in 2009 approximately 572,000 nonfatal violent incidents occurred at the workplace.<sup>8</sup> These nonfatal violent crimes include rape, sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault. Since 1993, nonfatal violent crimes have declined drastically. In 1993, nonfatal workplace violence occurrences were at 16 per 1,000 employed persons.<sup>9</sup> By 2009, that rate dropped to 4 per 1,000 employed persons.<sup>10</sup> In that same year, there were 521 workplace homicides.<sup>11</sup> As you can see, most workplace violence incidents are nonfatal. Furthermore, it is wise to assume that some nonfatal workplace violence occurrences are not reported. This can be due to a variety of reasons. Reasons to not report may include lack of proof, fear of retaliation, or even a lack of awareness that the situation is considered workplace violence. In any case, it is important to understand workplace violence, both fatal and nonfatal. The first step to protection is being able to recognize the early warning signs that workplace violence may occur.

## **Warning Signs of Workplace Violence**

Although we can never be 100 percent safe in the workplace, or anywhere for that matter, there are early warning signs that can help

us identify tensions that may lead to violent acts in the workplace.

Michael Staver, a corporate and executive coach and former psychologist in a mental hospital, describes violence escalation into three stages: a trigger event, emotion escalation, and finally the violent act.<sup>12</sup> According to Staver, these stages can occur very rapidly or take a longer time to develop.<sup>13</sup> The following are Staver's early warning signs to look for:

1. **“Excessive complaining or whining”** – this may be a sign that an employee has experienced a trigger event, even more so if the worker is usually even-tempered.<sup>14</sup>
2. **“Withdrawal”** – Someone that avoids social contact and becomes isolated could signal having a difficult time handling a certain situation at home or work.<sup>15</sup>
3. **“Variation from typical behavior”** – Take notice of co-workers that are usually extroverted that suddenly become reserved and unsocial; and vice versa, look for introverts that suddenly become extroverts.<sup>16</sup>
4. **“Obsessive thought patterns or conversations”** – Do not dismiss the signs if an employee is constantly raving about how life is not fair and how they deserve more.<sup>17</sup>

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5. **“Dramatic and unreasonable demands”** – Being impatient and requesting immediate assistance on situations that take awhile to handle.<sup>18</sup>
6. **“Personal insults”** – Angry outbursts and verbally abusive co-workers could indicate that a deeper tension is developing.<sup>19</sup>
7. **“Threats”** – Finally, the most dangerous and apparent sign is when an employee makes verbal threats to harm someone.<sup>20</sup>

Of course this list is not all-inclusive, nor does it mean if an employee demonstrates these behaviors that he or she will commit a violent act. However, Staver’s early warning signs does provide us with a way of being alert at the workplace and also helps us identify something may be wrong before it becomes too late.

## **How to Protect Against Workplace Violence?**

The first step to being protected against any kind of violence is being aware and alert. In addition to learning the early warning signs, OSHA has a helpful worksheet, on its “Workplace Violence” website, that gives employers tips on best practices for protecting employees.

The worksheet also gives tips for employees on how to protect themselves.

For employers:

1. Provide safety training and education to employees.<sup>21</sup>
2. Make sure the workplace is secure with video surveillance, alarm systems, security badges, and security guards.<sup>22</sup>
3. Provide employees with cellular devices or allow them to bring devices from home to use in case of an emergency.<sup>23</sup>

For employees:

1. Communicate with managers and human resources when safety concerns arise. Make sure to report any incidents immediately.<sup>24</sup>
2. Refrain from entering locations where you feel unsafe or go with another co-worker if this situation is unavoidable.<sup>25</sup>

Many companies use a variety of the tips described above. Retail stores may have security guards roaming the store or walking around outside the premises to deter unwanted visitors. Large corporations,

such as Boeing and Microsoft, require employees to use badge readers to enter buildings. Along with this, companies will regularly remind employees to watch out for “tailgaters”. Tailgaters are people that pretend to be employees and access a secure building by following an actual employee through the doors. Tailgaters will also take advantage of an employee’s good nature by asking them to hold the door for them thus never actually having to use a badge to enter the building. This is not only dangerous to the company but also dangerous to employees, as someone could be entering the building to commit a violent act. The best solution to this problem is to remind employees to always ask for a badge and making sure the door is closed behind them.

In addition to OSHA’s guidelines, employers can offer health evaluations and stress management services that can help detect and manage risk factors before a violent act happens. Another way to be protected is keeping open communications with employees and managers. Employees must be confident enough to voice concerns and report any incidents to managers. Finally, to keep the workplace safe you can also require background checks on all employees before they are hired. Employers can discover pertinent information on potential



employees such as any violent crimes on their record, especially crimes involving domestic violence.

### **Conclusion**

Workplace violence refers to both fatal and nonfatal violent crimes. This includes but not limited to homicide, sexual assault, armed robbery, verbal abuse and aggravated assault. Most workplace violence is of the nonfatal nature, however, due to the severity of fatal incidents we focus more on these situations. It is important for employers and employees to be aware of the early warning signs of workplace violence in order to protect themselves as well as others. There are useful guidelines that some companies are already using in order to keep the work environment safe. Although, there is no such thing as a 100 percent safe work environment, we can take certain steps and precautions to keep ourselves as safe as possible.

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