

FACE INVESTIGATION

SUBJECT: Youth Restaurant Cashier Shot to Death During Attempted Robbery

SUMMARY: A 16-year-old female restaurant cashier (the victim) died when she was shot in the head during an armed robbery attempt. The victim was the daughter of the co-owners of the small Asian food restaurant where the incident occurred. She worked there when not attending high school, and assisted with most of the business activities including food preparation, receiving customers' food orders, and tending the cash register. At the time of the incident, she was standing behind the service counter, near the cash register. Her father was in the back of the restaurant, out of view of the customer area, and her mother was standing next to her. A man entered the restaurant, went directly to the counter, then pointed a handgun at the victim's head and demanded money. Almost immediately after the demand, the gun fired in the victim's face. She collapsed to the floor, and the assailant ran from the building. When he heard the gunfire, the victim's father pushed the button to notify the security company while the victim's mother called for emergency services. The EMS and police responded. The victim was transported by ambulance to the hospital, where she was pronounced dead. The FACE investigator concluded that, to prevent similar occurrences, employers should :

! **develop and implement violence prevention programs in each workplace.**

! **arrange appropriate treatment for victimized employees.**

INTRODUCTION:

On December 10, 1999, a 16-year-old female cashier died when she was shot in the course of a robbery attempt at her family's restaurant. The Wisconsin FACE field investigator learned of the incident through the newspaper on December 14, 1999. In March, 2000, the field investigator contacted the police department and initiated the investigation. The FACE investigator reviewed the death certificate and the coroner and police reports. The phone for the restaurant was disconnected, with no forwarding information, so the co-owners could not be contacted to set up an interview. The investigator visited the location of the incident, and observed that the building which had housed the restaurant was converted to another business.

This incident occurred at an Asian restaurant and food store operated by the victim's family. The family owned the business for four years prior to the incident, and did not employ non-family workers. The owners had experienced one previous armed robbery three years before the incident, with no arrests in that case. About a month before the incident, two men tried to steal the television set from the customer service counter, but the victim's father stopped the robbery in progress. The victim had participated in the restaurant activities on a part-time basis since it opened. It is unknown where she received training for her work duties. She was a 10th grade high school student at the time of her death.

INVESTIGATION:

The business in this incident was a small restaurant, primarily designed for take-out orders. It was located in a busy commercial neighborhood, with fast-food restaurants, a beauty salon, gas station and convenience stores nearby. A small parking lot was available in the front for customers. The front of the building had

windows that faced west (to the street) and entry doors were located on the north and south sides of the building. Chimes sounded whenever one of the doors was opened. There were two tables with chairs for dine-in customers in the lobby area. A customer service counter spanned the rear of the lobby. Food orders were taken and delivered at the service counter, which also held the cash register. Kitchen facilities were situated behind the counter area. A silent alarm button was available in the kitchen, to call the security company in an emergency. In the front of the lobby, a camera was mounted high and directed at the counter area. However, the camera did not work. The lobby/dining area was fully lit with ceiling fixtures.

At about 1:15 on the afternoon of the incident, the victim was working with her parents at the restaurant. She was standing behind the counter, next to her mother, while they watched the television on the counter. Her father was in the back kitchen area, preparing food. The only additional person in the restaurant was a customer who was eating at a table. A man wearing a bandana over his face entered the lobby through the south door, and stopped in front of the cash register. He pointed a handgun at the victim, who was standing behind the register, and demanded money from the cash drawer. Before the victim or her mother could make any response, the gun fired, striking the victim in the face. The victim collapsed to the floor, and the assailant ran from the building. When he heard the gunfire, the victim's father pushed the alarm button to notify the security company while the victim's mother phoned for emergency services. The EMS and police responded within four minutes. The victim was transported by ambulance to the hospital, where she was pronounced dead. Following the shooting, police interviewed surrounding businesses and residences to find clues to the identity of the assailant. Three individuals were arrested over two months later, after police received information from an informant. Two were convicted of murder. They were also convicted of multiple counts of robbery with use of force for robberies committed before and after the fatality occurred.

CAUSE OF DEATH: The death certificate listed the cause of death as cerebral lacerations and contusions as a consequence of gunshot wound to the head.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

Recommendation #1: Employers should develop and implement violence prevention programs in each workplace.

Discussion: Workplace violence is a serious safety hazard in many workplaces. Homicide is the leading cause of death to female American workers, and the second leading cause for all workers. It is the leading cause of death for workers under 18 years of age. Homicides in convenience and other grocery stores, eating and drinking places, and gasoline service stations constitute the largest share of homicides in retail establishments. Occupationally, salescounter clerks have the 4th highest risk for homicide among retail jobs. Robbery appears to be the predominant motive for workplace homicides, and guns account for 3/4 of the weapons used. Employers can reduce the risk to workers by constructing violence prevention programs tailored to meet the specific needs of their workplaces. An effective approach includes five key components.

- ! *Management commitment and employee involvement.* Management can show this through policy that disapproves of violence-related activities, taking all violent incidents seriously, having

a comprehensive security plan with assigned and accountable responsibility, promptly report and track violent incidents, working with landlords, lessees, law enforcement agencies to improve security, and involving employees and their representatives in all aspects of the program.

- ! *Worksite analysis.* Factors which may increase a retail worker's risk for workplace assault include contact with the public, exchange of money, delivery of passengers, goods or services, working alone or in small numbers, working late-night or early morning hours, and working in high-crime areas. A worksite hazard analysis that includes a review of records and past experiences, an initial worksite inspection, and periodic safety audits will be useful in finding existing and potential hazards for workplace violence.
- ! *Hazard prevention and control.* Engineering and administrative controls can help reduce violence-related risks. Visibility from the street, and within the retail establishment can be improved by keeping windows unobstructed, keeping shelves at a low level, and using mirrors to increase the viewing area. Adequate lighting, both in the building and also in the parking lot, will make the business less appealing to a potential robber. A drop safe, along with a posted sign will inform potential robbers that the amount of cash on hand is limited. Surveillance cameras, door detectors, silent alarms, buzzers (for controlled access), and physical barriers such as bullet-resistant enclosures may reduce the risk to employees. Administrative controls to reduce hazards include maintaining lighting, locks, and security cameras in operating order, minimizing the amount of cash on-hand, establishing a communication system for emergencies, keeping doors locked before and after business hours.
- ! *Safety and health training.* All employees, including management, should receive training on the potential hazards in the establishment, and methods to control the hazards. Training may include an overview of the potential risk of assault, cash handling rules, security measures and engineering controls, behavioral strategies to defuse tense situations, specific instructions on how to respond to a robbery, and emergency action procedures.
- ! *Evaluation.* Employers may find employee injury records, incident reports of violent acts or threats, recommendations of police advisors or employees, and notes of safety meetings are helpful in monitoring and evaluating the violence prevention program.

Note: Examples of strategies that were implemented by this employer include: reporting a previous attempted robbery to the police when it occurred, providing a clear view from the street of the customer service area and cash register, use of a service counter to separate the workers from the public, adequate interior lighting, video surveillance equipment, a silent security alarm. It is unknown what other prevention and control measures might also have been in place.

Recommendation #2: Employers should arrange appropriate treatment for victimized employees.

Discussion: Post-incident response and evaluation are important parts of an effective violence prevention program. In addition to physical injuries, victims and witnesses may suffer psychological trauma, fear of returning to work, feelings of incompetence, guilt, and powerlessness. Post-incident counseling can reduce the psychological trauma and stress caused by the incident. Critical stress management resources can provide care tailored to the individual victim or the organization's needs. Other post-incident responses should include prompt and appropriate medical care, notification of authorities, securing the premises, and preparation of an incident report.

Note: The owners of this business did not re-open the restaurant after their daughter's death.

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