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WORKPLACE VIOLENCE AND BULLYING, INTERVENTIONS FOR

Workplace violence encompasses a broad array of physical and nonphysical behaviors intended to harm individuals while they are on the job. The workplace is considered any location where an employee performs a work-related task or duty. Acts of violence such as physical assaults or threatening behaviors represent a significant health and safety risk to workers. The Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that around 1.7 million workers in the United States are the victims of workplace assaults, and that homicide is now the fourth leading cause of death while on the job.

Workplace bullying refers to situations where employees are subjected to frequent, persistent mistreatment that includes overtly aggressive or hostile behaviors (e.g., being pushed or being yelled at) as well as more covert or passive acts such as being ignored, being undermined, being lied to, belittling, exclusion or social isolation, withholding information, and sabotage.

Several factors have been shown to be associated with workplace violence, including contact with the public, exchanging money, working at night, transporting passengers, delivering goods or services, working alone or in small numbers, and working with potentially violent or unstable individuals. Workplace bullying has been shown to be associated with poor organizational climate, lack of organizational justice, role conflict, high workload, interpersonal conflicts, lack of social support, and leadership style. Workers in health care, law enforcement, retail trades, as well as social and other service professions are particularly at risk for workplace violence and bullying.

Interventions for Workplace Violence

General workplace violence prevention programs may include written company policies, multidisciplinary teams to develop prevention strategies, and training explicitly on workplace violence. Specific prevention strategies for workplace violence can be categorized as environmental, administrative, and behavioral interventions.

Environmental designs geared at preventing workplace violence include cash-control and

cash-handling policies (locked drop safes, maintaining small amounts of cash, and posting signs saying that there is limited cash); physically separating the worker from customers/clients (barriers, bullet-resistant partitions or enclosures, and increasing height and depth of counters or workspace between worker and customer); increasing visibility and lighting; entry and exit control; surveillance cameras; alarms; keycard access systems; trouble lights; personal protective equipment; and geographic locating devices for mobile workers such as law enforcement officers and taxi drivers.

Administrative controls include adequate staffing, work practices (escorting visitors or clients/customers/patients), utilization of security personnel and screening, opening and closing procedures, money drop or pickup procedures, restricting hours of operation, and implementing policies and procedures for threat assessment and reporting.

Behavioral interventions include training employees on risk awareness, conflict resolution, de-escalation techniques, interpersonal skills and communication, dealing with potentially aggressive persons, use of protective measures or equipment, and proper restraint and takedown methods for law enforcement personnel.

Secondary and tertiary interventions for the aftermath of a violent incident may include Psychological First Aid (PFA), Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or community mental health resources, training on coping strategies and stress management, as well as the use of human resources (HR) or occupational health and wellness services (OHS).

Interventions for Workplace Bullying

Similar to the above approaches for workplace violence, it has been suggested that both supervisors and employees receive training in conflict management, de-escalation techniques, and specific awareness training for workplace bullying. On an organizational level, it has been recommended that organizational policies, roles and responsibilities, and guidelines for appropriate and acceptable behavior be clearly stated and communicated throughout all levels of the organization. Some researchers have suggested that workplace bullying can be prevented by creating a climate that fosters and encourages openness, respect, and tolerance of diversity, and

that management practices should promote fair treatment and respect for all employees.

Secondary and tertiary interventions that might mitigate the adverse effects of workplace bullying include training on coping strategies, stress management, Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) or outside mental health resources, utilizing the formal complaint or grievance system, use of human resource (HR) professionals, occupational health and wellness programs, or using informal response teams.

Evaluative Research

Although there has been a great deal of surveillance research on workplace violence and bullying, it is important to note that there are still relatively few evaluative studies of intervention effectiveness, and the work that has been done has concentrated on specific occupations and industries. Moreover, general prevention strategies developed in one context may or may not transfer to different occupational settings or environments. Systematic intervention evaluation remains a significant research need.

Paula L. Grubb

Note: The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

See also Bullying; Psychological/Emotional Abuse; Workplace Violence, Training and Education; Workplace Violence, United States

Further Readings

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Web Sites

- International Labour Organization (ILO): <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/violence>
- National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH): <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/violence>
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA): <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/workplaceviolence>