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NIOSH Urges Immediate Action to Prevent Workplace Homicide

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During one week, an owner of a pawn shop, a convenience store clerk, a psychologist, two sanitation managers, a tavern owner, a fisherman, a cook, two cab drivers, a co-owner of a furniture store, a restaurant manager, a maintenance supervisor, a video store owner, and a postal carrier were all victims of workplace homicide. According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), an average of fifteen people are murdered at work each week in this country.

Workplace homicide is a serious public health problem that demands our attention. During the last decade, 1980-1989, NIOSH documented 7,603 homicides in U.S. workplaces, for a rate of 0.7 per 100,000 workers. Homicide was the leading cause of occupational death for women, and the third leading cause of death for all workers during this period. "The time has come to take action to prevent these tragic crimes," said NIOSH Acting Director Richard A. Lemen. "We may not have all the answers at this point, but we do know that there are protective measures that may help end these senseless deaths."

NIOSH has just released an Alert which identifies occupations and workplaces at high-risk for homicide and proposes possible prevention measures. The document reveals that during the ten-year period examined, taxicab establishments had the highest rate of occupational homicide—nearly 40 times the national average and more than three times the rate of liquor stores, which had the next highest rate.

Although the method of data collection—relying on death certificates—does not provide information on the reasons for workplace killings, the high-risk workplaces and occupations identified suggest that robbery is a primary motive. Additionally, some homicides are caused by disgruntled workers and clients or by domestic violence that spills into the workplace.

Guns were by far the most frequently used weapon in these crimes, accounting for 75% of workplace homicide deaths. Knives and other types of cutting and piercing instruments were used in only 14% of all homicides.

All workers must be protected from violence. NIOSH urges employers and workers to immediately develop and implement prevention strategies on the basis of available information. Each employer should evaluate factors or situations that might put workers at risk, and carefully consider necessary intervention efforts. The NIOSH Alert presents a number of prevention measures which may save lives.

Who is at Greatest Risk?

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Workplaces with the highest rates of homicide per 100,000 workers include taxicab establishments (26.9), liquor stores (8.0), gas stations (5.6), detective/protective services (5.0), justice/public order establishments (3.4), hotel/motels (1.5), and eating/drinking places (1.5).

Occupations with the highest rates of homicide per 100,000 workers are taxicab drivers/chauffeurs (15.1), law enforcement officers (9.3), hotel clerks (5.1), gas station workers (4.5), security guards (3.6), stock handlers/baggers (3.1), store owners/managers (2.8), and bartenders (2.1).

Race

During the period 1980-89, 75% of occupational homicide victims were white, 19% black, and 6% of other races. Blacks, however, had the highest rate per 100,000 workers (1.4). The rates for both blacks and other races (1.6) were more than twice the rate for white workers (0.6).

Gender

The homicide rate for males was three times that of females (1.0 per 100,000 workers compared with 0.3). Although eighty percent of all occupational homicide victims were male, homicide was the leading cause of occupational injury death for women, accounting for 41% of such deaths. Homicide accounted for 10% of occupational injury deaths among men.

Age

Nearly half of the homicides occurred among workers aged 25 to 44, yet workers aged 65 and older had the highest rate of occupational homicide (2.0 per 100,000 workers).

What are the Risk Factors?

The following factors may increase workers' risk of homicide: exchange of money with the public, working alone or in small numbers, working late at night or early morning hours, working in high-crime areas, guarding valuable property or possessions, and working in community settings.

How Can Homicide Be Prevented?

Because the workplaces and occupations at greatest risk vary, no single set of prevention strategies will apply to all workers. Employers in the high-risk establishments and occupations should consider these measures to identify prevention efforts that will be effective in their workplaces.

- Make high-risk areas visible to more people.
- Install good external lighting.
- Use drop safes to minimize cash on hand.
- Carry small amounts of cash.
- Post signs announcing that limited cash is on hand.
- Install silent alarms.
- Install surveillance cameras.
- Increase the number of staff on duty.
- Provide training in conflict resolution and nonviolent response.
- Instruct workers to avoid resistance during a robbery.
- Provide bulletproof barriers or enclosures.
- Have police check on workers routinely.
- Close establishments during high-risk hours (late at night and early in the morning).

To request the Homicide Alert (Publication No. 93-109) or other occupational safety and health concerns, call toll free: 1-800-35-NIOSH.