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Exploring differences in the workplace violence experiences of young workers in middle and late adolescence in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Problem: Young workers, typically characterized as 15–24 years of age, are commonly employed in jobs where the risk of workplace violence is high. It is unknown how these young workers, at varying stages of development, might understand and respond to workplace violence differently. We set out to explore whether the experiences and understandings of young workers varied between those in middle (ages 15–17) and late (ages 18–24) adolescence. *Method:* Separate focus groups were conducted with working students ($n = 31$), ages 15–17 and ages 18–24, who had either experienced or witnessed workplace violence. A focus group guide was used to facilitate the sessions which were recorded, transcribed, and content analyzed for themes. *Results:* Those in the older group experienced more severe episodes of sexual harassment and physical assault, reported using formal mechanisms for reporting, and noticed an employer focus on customer satisfaction over employee safety, while the younger participants tended to report to their parents. Both groups reported negative effects of experiencing workplace violence including depression, anxiety, feelings of worthlessness, and spill over into personal life. *Discussion:* Findings suggest that young workers at different developmental stages may experience and respond to workplace violence differently. Further research is needed to see if these results are generalizable. *Summary:* It is imperative that we understand the distinct differences between these subsets of young workers and how they experience and respond to workplace violence in order to improve research, policy development, and prevention/intervention mechanisms. *Practical Applications:* Understanding that differences exist among young workers based on age due to developmental stage, lack of experience, education, and social awareness can enable employers, companies, policy makers, and researchers the opportunity to better address the issue of workplace violence in this population.

1. Introduction

Work is a common activity for adolescents in the United States. According to figures published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 21 million youths ages 16–24 were employed in the United States in July 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics [USDL BLS], 2018). In the United States, children ages 14 and 15 also work, yet the Bureau of Labor Statistics policy states that it does not "generally[1]" publish employment data on those under 16 years of age (USDL, 2006). Young workers are employed predominantly in leisure, hospitality, and retail industries (USDL BLS, 2018) where workplace violence (including threats, physical assault, and verbal abuse) is a common occurrence (Occupational Safety and Health Administration [OSHA], 2009; Ram, 2018). Work in these environments requires frequent interactions with customers, the handling of cash, and working late hours, all of which have been shown to contribute to increased risk of workplace violence (Schaffer, Casteel, & Kraus, 2002).

Internationally, the International Labor Organization (ILO) defines "young workers" as those between the ages of 15 and 24 years (ILO, 2018). In the United States and in many other developed countries, child labor laws are in place to protect minors (under age 18) from occupational hazards that could result in injury, illness, or death. The U.S. Secretary of Labor designates the jobs that are too dangerous for youth under age 18 to perform and, recognizing differences in the mental and physical capabilities between older and younger workers, prohibits minors from being

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[1] "In general, the BLS publishes labor force data only for people aged 16 and over, since those under 16 are limited in their labor market activities by compulsory schooling and child labor laws" (US Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2006. Design and Methodology. Current Population Survey. Technical Paper 66. https://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/tp-66.pdf).

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employed in these jobs (USDL, 2007, 2010). However, in the United States, young workers ages 18–24 are not protected by the child labor laws, (USDL, 2007, 2010)) leaving many concerned about their vulnerability. In the United States, however, they still have some protections in the form of regulations promulgated under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, including the "General Duty Clause" (OSHA, 1970, p.1).

In addition to the varying levels of protection young workers receive, there are cognitive, emotional, and social developmental differences that also need to be considered when examining their work experiences. Individuals may enter the workforce during middle adolescence, ages 15–17, which is a time when one begins to move away from one's parents in order to create one's own identity, friends become the main social group and are often seen as a safe haven for which to test new ideas, and decision-making skills are still developing (National Institute of Health, n.d.). This is also a time when youth are developing interpersonal skills and want to prove themselves as capable, reliable, and dependable workers who do not complain or cause trouble (Runyan, Schulman, & Ta, 2005; Tucker & Turner, 2013; Wegman & Davis, 1999).

Given their developmental stage and lack of previous experience, work environments can be more influential to those in middle adolescence as compared to those in late adolescence, also referred to as "emerging adulthood" defined by Arnett as the period between ages 18 and 25 (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Dupre, Inness, Connelly, & Barling, 2006; Runyan, Bowling, Schulman, & Gallagher, 2005). Therefore, it is important to understand how young workers at different stages of development approach work and its risks, including workplace violence. Little of the research on workplace violence, however, has focused on young workers under age 24 and studies comparing developmental subgroups of this population are rare (Keashly, 2012).

Existing studies show that young workers experience a range of workplace violence including bullying, verbal abuse, sexual harassment, threats, physical and sexual assault, and robbery (Fineran & Gruber, 2009; Good & Cooper, 2016; Rauscher, 2008; Smith, Gillespie, & Beery, 2015). In a survey of working high school students ages 14–17, one third of respondents reported experiencing some form of workplace violence including verbal threats, physical attacks, and sexual harassment (Rauscher, 2008). In another study of high school students ages 15–18, half indicated they had experienced at least one type of workplace violence including verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and attempted robbery and/or robbery, with one-third reporting they experienced more than one type of workplace violence (Smith et al., 2015). Perpetrators of workplace violence against young workers most commonly include customers and coworkers (Rauscher, 2008). Workplace violence is an often unreported phenomena, particularly among young workers due to the fear of reprisals, lack of training, lack of awareness, and normalization of violence (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Keashly, 2012; Smith et al., 2015), all of which make it difficult to ascertain how frequently workplace violence occurs in this population.

Experiencing or witnessing workplace violence can have long-term detrimental effects on a young worker's mental health and can spill over into other areas of life (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Keashly, 2012). Workers can experience anxiety, stress, difficulty sleeping, and worthlessness years after the initial workplace violence event (Boyd, 2002; Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Young workers who have experienced aggression on the job have reported lower job satisfaction, stressed family and peer relationships, difficulty with school and other extra-curricular activities, and the use of maladaptive strategies such as substance use to cope (Frone, 1999; Hoobler & Brass, 2006; Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2001). Because young workers at different developmental stages may understand and deal with their work experiences differently, we felt their workplace violence experiences warranted attention and thus, we examined them qualitatively in the present investigation.

2. Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of how young workers at different stages of development perceive their experience(s) with workplace violence and the impact that those experiences have had on their personal lives. To do so, we conducted a series of focus groups with both high school students ages 15–17 and college students ages 18–24.

Participants were recruited from local high schools and universities in West Virginia and Iowa via flyers and/or email. Participants were eligible if they had *experienced or witnessed* any of the following forms of violence while participating in paid work (not for family): verbal abuse, threats, physical attacks, sexual harassment or assault, or bullying. A focus group guide was used to ensure the consistency of the data collected across all focus groups. The guide solicited qualitative information from participants regarding their work history, perceptions of workplace violence, relationships with coworkers/coworkers as perpetrators of workplace violence, relationships with supervisors/supervisors as perpetrators of workplace violence, other perpetrators, the impact of workplace violence on employment and educational outcomes, the impact of workplace violence on mental health and social standing, reporting of workplace violence, workplace violence prevention and response training, barriers to using the training, and perceived risk factors for experiencing workplace violence.

Focus groups took place in the Spring and Summer of 2016. High school students ages 15–17 and college students ages 18–24 years were recruited to participate in separate focus groups. The content included in the focus group guide was derived from our review of the literature. Since the purpose of the focus groups was to determine the participants' factual experiences and behaviors, and the substance of their perspectives, and since we did not intend to develop a theory of their experiences or behaviors nor explore deeper subjective meaning of their experiences, we did not find it necessary to adopt a theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In addition, since the volume of data was manageable, we did not utilize a qualitative analysis software package. Analyses were done by two study team members independently reviewing focus group transcripts and notes, generating new notes, and rejoining to compare assessments. This approach led to the identification (by each researcher analyzing the data independently) and verification (by both researchers comparing their analyses) of similarities and differences in patterns of reported experiences and behaviors between age groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Institutional Review Boards at West Virginia University and the University of Iowa approved this study.

3. Results

Focus groups were conducted with a total of 31 students. Three were conducted with college students (ages 18–24), two at West Virginia University ($n = 8$ and $n = 5$) and one at the University of Iowa ($n = 8$); two were conducted with high school students (ages 15–17), one in West Virginia ($n = 5$) and one in Iowa ($n = 5$). Each focus group consisted of approximately equal numbers of males and females; participants were overwhelmingly white. The college students mainly worked in three industries: "food services and drinking places" (North American Industry Classification System [NAICS] code 72) (e.g., restaurant, donut shop), "retail trade" (NAICS code 44–45) (e.g., convenience store, clothing store), and

"arts, entertainment and recreation" (NAICS code 71) (e.g., pool, ski resort). Others worked in "agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting" (NAICS code 11) (e.g., farms), "educational services" (NAICS code 61) (e.g., university), "health care and social assistance" (NAICS code 62) (e.g., hospital) and in "manufacturing" (NAICS code 31–33) (e.g., factory). Among the high school students, nearly all worked in "retail trade" (NAICS code 44–45) (e.g., grocery store, clothing store) with the exception of two participants who worked in "health care and social assistance" (NAICS code 62) (e.g., daycare center) and "information" (e.g., movie theater).

The following themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of these young workers' experiences with workplace violence: (a) differences in the severity of sexual harassment and physical assault by age group; (b) negative impacts of workplace violence on mental health; (c) differences in reporting and retaliation for reporting by age group; and (d) the perceived lack of managerial support for victims of workplace violence.

3.1. Sexual harassment and physical assault

The study participants sometimes attributed their experiences of sexual harassment or physical assault to the customer-oriented nature of the work that they performed. One participant stated, "you are not really in a position to say 'no' to unwanted advances from customers because you are supposed to be nice and have good customer service." Other participants felt that accepting these types of behaviors from customers was implied because "they rely so much on tips" and "personal boundaries don't mean much." While participants in both age groups experienced some degree of sexual harassment or physical assault in the workplace, those in the older age group (18–24) tended to report a higher degree of severity of these types of workplace violence.

Participants in the younger age group (15–17) more often reported witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment that was verbal in nature. One participant indicated that she "worked with cooks who were middle-aged men who would ask for rides home, call me sweetie pie and honey..." and others said "pet names" were common. These younger participants also reported being touched inappropriately while on the job. The nature of touching involved more distal, less private areas of the body. Participants reported "he touched my earrings" and witnessing a coworker have a customer "grab their hand while giving change." Participants in the younger age group were also less involved in social media and did not report the use of social media as a means of experiencing workplace sexual harassment.

Participants in the older age group reported more severe experiences with sexual harassment in the workplace including the use of social media. Like those in the younger age group they also reported witnessing or experiencing inappropriate physical touching while on the job. However, unlike the younger participants, the older ones reported "inappropriate touch occurred multiple times a day" and occurred in more private areas of the body. An older participant reported that she was "standing on a stool to put up decorations...an old man (a customer) came up and put his hands under my shirt." Another reported "being asked all these sexual questions...then they started touching us, so I radioed my manager." These older participants also reported experiencing sexual harassment from management "who come up behind you and squeeze your sides or massage your back or something." In addition, the older participants described social media being used as a means for sexual harassment by "receiving pics of private areas posed in weird places at work, i.e. the grill" as well as "pics from the nude section of Twitter."

Most of the participants, in either age group, reported experiencing or witnessing some degree of physical aggression and/or assault while at work. The perpetrators of physical aggression were identified as customers, coworkers, and supervisors. Similar to sexual harassment, the participants in the younger age group reported less severe experiences than those in the older age group. One of the younger participants discussed customers as "slamming their gas pedals, throwing change at me as a way to express their anger and release their emotions for any kind of mistake I make." Another witnessed a manager "dump a cup on someone."

The participants in the older age group also experienced physical assault from management. Some of the incidents involving managers were similar in severity including managers "spraying people with a hose," "throwing a phone at another employee," and "throwing bagels that were not made right." Others were much more severe and involved injury to the worker. One of the older participants reported "my supervisor was mad at someone and he was slicing open bags and took the razor blade and cut my coworkers arm...one girl he knocked her hat off and pulled her hair." Another described a time his "manager whipped someone with an apron...it hit them in the eye." Physical assault from coworkers was described by one of the older participants as "more intentional bumping of shoulders." While most of the participants identified experiencing or witnessing physical assault in the workplace one of the older participants stated, "I don't think physical abuse is very common cause you can't get away with that or it's not as easy to get away with it like body language or verbal abuse."

3.2. Impacts on mental health

Many participants reported that experiencing workplace violence had a negative impact on their mental health and their ability to function outside the workplace. As one participant indicated, experiencing workplace violence "massively affects my mental health." Participants in both age groups reported feeling "depressed, anxious, and drained." One participant mentioned that "it makes you feel like you are worthless" a sentiment that was echoed by others in both age groups. Some participants reported physical manifestations of mental health symptoms including "getting physically sick," "occasionally getting panic attacks," and "having a breakdown." Experiencing violence while at work "spills over into personal life" as participants discussed "taking stress out on others," how experiencing workplace violence "changes how you treat others and your work ethic, even problem solving." The cognitive impacts were also indicated as participants noted they "didn't feel like sitting down and reading three chapters of this and writing this paper, I would just procrastinate a lot because I couldn't really focus," they "can't deal with assignments," and that "in class I can't focus." Some participants reported engaging in maladaptive coping strategies as one said, "stress leading to substance abuse happens." Another indicated that they "realized I also started smoking almost two days into my job and I had started smoking almost every single day...I am not a regular smoker...I am smoking because I am stressed."

3.3. Reporting practices

When it comes to reporting their experiences of violence in the workplace there were similarities and differences between the older and younger participants. Participants in both age groups indicated they had not reported at least one instance of workplace violence (which they had experienced or witnessed) to managers at their workplaces and some stated that they had a fear of reporting. While some did speak of reporting to managers, many described informing and discussing their experiences with various others. Participants in both age groups described experiences with retaliation from others in the workplace following reporting workplace violence to their employer.

Age was related to whom participants tended to discuss their experiences of workplace violence. Younger participants more often indicated discussing workplace violence with their parents. One participant reported telling "my mom" another indicated "I had to tell my parent because I didn't come home on time." The younger participants also discussed reporting events involving managers to other coworkers. One participant summarized it best for this group in the statement, "the only person I have ever spoken to about it is my peers, my parents, and the coworkers who have experienced the same thing." None of the older participants reported telling their parents about their workplace violence experiences.

Like their younger counterparts, those in the older age group reported their experiences "to coworkers." Unlike the younger participants, however, the older ones indicated that "if bad enough, [report] to manager" and one indicated they "called corporate." The older participants also discussed their perceptions with regard to how reports were handled differently by managers of different genders and how that impacted reporting: "women managers. . .know the microaggressions and things like that they can identify those a lot more easily than the males" and "women managers tend to be more aware of sexist or harassing things that go on."

Non-reporting and Fear of Reporting. Participants in both age groups discussed not reporting workplace violence events and some of the reasons why. In addition to fears of reporting, participants also had a perception that they would not be taken seriously if they reported an event. One participant cited, "the higher-ups care but they have to see it to believe it and will only believe workers of a certain position." This was confirmed by another participant who stated, "I was too scared to tell him (the customer) to stop or to tell a manager because I feel as though I am not taken seriously." Participants also talked about witnessing a lack of managerial follow-up after reporting. For example, one participant stated, "There have been multiple (employees) who have tried to tell the boss, and nothing happened." Some of the older participants felt that workplace violence was not up to the boss to manage because management "has five million other things to worry about. We are all adults." While others felt that management just didn't care because the "boss ignored it because he didn't want to deal with it."

Fear of Retaliation. Participants' fear of reporting comes from their experiencing or witnessing the backlash of reporting. Participants described manager's or supervisor's retaliation against employees in terms of economic withholding (i.e., holding pay or cutting hours), use of power, and the firing of workers. One participant talked about how her manager "held out on paying employees for a couple weeks or under paying" and another discussed how "the manager gave the worker only 4 hours of work that week instead of 30 as punishment." Many participants described how managers used the power of their position to retaliate against those who reported. This included "telling the host to put a server last on the list for tables," "always putting a worker on a register who hated working on a register," "moving a worker from upfront to back," and "getting in a worker's face and screaming at him." Participants also indicated that because there was high turnover in the jobs they held, managers didn't really care what happened to them. A participant stated, "You have a lot of people willing to apply and you have a stack of applications. So, everyone works like an average of 2 months and then quits. If someone has an issue, then the management just thinks they will quit, and will call in another person so it's not really a big deal to them if something bad happens." Some other participants felt differently, stating that managers might care but that the workplace was "short staffed because nobody wants to work there so there was lots of talk and no consequences. Management can't fire anybody for issues because there's not enough employees to do the work."

3.4. Lack of managerial support

A few participants indicated positive experiences with management. One participant reported that after discussing an event of workplace violence with the manager, the manager "didn't schedule those two coworkers together at the same time and offered time off to the victim." Another participant discussed how the manager "calmed her [a coworker] down. . .taking care of the girl" and yet another spoke of how management empowered her resolve a conflict with a different supervisor. The participant described this as telling the manager "I want to talk to her [the other supervisor] directly. I think showing her that I wasn't scared of her for being in a position of power showed her that I wasn't going to just be there and take this negativity from her [the other supervisor]."

In general, however, most of the participants felt that they did not receive much support from management and discussed management's lack of support for employees prior to, during, and after a workplace violence event. One participant discussed how this is an issue when management is not readily available, "Obviously you can't just ring a bell and say this person isn't happy or this person wants a price check. You can't get an immediate response so sometimes you are waiting three minutes for a supervisor to come over and in those three minutes anything can happen." During a workplace violence event many of the participants reported management siding with the customers. Participants described managers "whose priority is the people and they want them to be happy, so they come back." Another example a participant gave was when the "manager decided to do a price change for the customer and just wanted the customer to be happy." Following a workplace violence event, managers can respond in various ways. One participant gave an example of lack of follow through after reporting, "I think it's interesting that they try to take care of the situation by pretending to do something versus actually doing something about it. You know, in cases where someone is being sexually assaulted, I can't find any justification for even having a management team that handles a situation like this if you are just going to let it happen over and over again."

4. Discussion

Workplace violence is an occupational hazard with long standing effects that can spillover into life outside of the workplace. Young workers are predisposed to experiencing workplace violence given the nature of the jobs they hold. Similar to other studies, males and females in both age groups reported being sexually harassed or assaulted on the job (Fineran & Gruber, 2009). Unlike other studies, the older participants described sexual experiences with more severity than the younger ones. Some of the older participants reported working in bars, clubs, and restaurants where the provision of alcohol, and use of sexualized labor may be more prominent than in other jobs, which can encourage additional inappropriate customer interactions (Poulston, 2008; Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). Retail establishments rely on customers for business, therefore, companies may use various tactics with their employees such as displaying a certain image or attitude (e.g., flirting with customers) to elicit sales (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). Employees may become so cultured to these expectations that they

are unable to decipher between appropriate and inappropriate customer behaviors (Good & Cooper, 2016). As one participant said, "there are no personal boundaries, all the girls do it."

Older participants also reported experiencing more severe physical assaults than the younger ones. The younger participants had change and food items thrown at them whereas the older participants reported being physical injured as a result of the violent event. The physical assaults reported in this study mainly involved both a male perpetrator and a male victim. This coincides with Rauscher, 2008 findings that males experienced physical assault more than females. The younger participants in this study may not have reported physical assaults with such severity as the older ones because they are still emotionally developing and, in this stage, perceive anger and frustration as an acceptable way of coping with issues (Tucker & Loughlin, 2006).

Participants in both age groups reported that their experiences with workplace violence had a negative effect on their mental health. Some common effects that aligned with previous studies on adult and young workers were poor self-worth, anxiety, depression, feeling drained, withdrawal from work, and using maladaptive coping strategies such as smoking (Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Dionisi, Barling, & Dupre, 2012; Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008). Researchers have found that exposure to workplace violence, sexual harassment in particular, has led to withdrawal from school and poor academic performance (Fineran & Gruber, 2009). Our results are similar to other studies in that many of the participants voiced issues with concentrating and completing academic tasks. Exposure to workplace violence also impacts young workers self-efficacy up to 9 years post the incident, which can affect occupational performance and occupational engagement in the future (Mortimer & Staff, 2004; Lubbers, Loughlin, & Zweig, 2005).

The people to whom workplace violence was reported varied between the two age groups. Younger participants more commonly reported their experiences to their parents or coworkers, while the older participants more often reported their experiences to management as well as to people in higher levels of the corporation, typically when they felt the events were fairly severe. Consistent with at least one other study (McDonald, Bailey, Oliver, & Pini, 2007), we found that the younger participants often did not know the formal process for filing a grievance at their workplace. In addition, we saw that older participants voiced more concerns over the unjust treatment of both themselves as well as their coworkers, while the younger participants rarely reported concerns of workplace violence or unjust treatment regarding themselves or their coworkers.

When participants did report incidents of workplace violence it was commonly noted that "management did nothing" or "didn't care." This has been found to be common as many times managers themselves are also not aware of the procedures or policies surrounding workplace violence (Good & Cooper, 2016). This pushes the responsibility for dealing with the problem back onto the employee. The tendency of the employee, like most participants in our study, was to ignore the behavior, ask a colleague to intervene, or address the individual one-on-one (Good & Cooper, 2016). Participants in both age groups perceived a lack of managerial support for workplace violence prevention and intervention and dealt with these issues informally.

The differences in the workplace violence experiences of younger and older study participants, if verified by additional research, suggests changes in current training and prevention efforts should be considered. Both groups are still developing cognitively with the younger ones also still developing socially, physically, and emotionally; these developmental differences can contribute to perceived differences in workplace experiences and consequences (Arnett & Tanner, 2006; Dupre et al., 2006; Runyan et al., 2005). Training in workplace violence for these groups needs to be age appropriate as well as relevant to the jobs in which they work. It is evident in our results that differences exist in the severity of sexual and physical violence as well as the reporting of any type of workplace violence experience. The older participants tended to formally report issues of workplace violence, be more aware of and concerned about coworkers' experiences, and have a deeper understanding of their rights as workers. Treating members of these two age groups as undifferentiated and training them with the same materials, as is common practice, may not adequately prepare the younger workers to deal with violence or other hazards in the workplace.

5. Limitations

There are notable limitations in the study. First, this qualitative study consisted of five focus groups with a relatively small total of 31 participants. The small sample size, which may yield a lack of saturation, was less likely a potential problem regarding identified themes common to both age groups than for those that appeared to differ between groups. There may be additional differences between the younger and older participants that were not raised during the sessions; it is possible that the contrasts between age groups would not be so stark if more younger participants were included. In addition, there may be other important issues occurring among the young worker population such as extreme (and rare) cases of violence that were not captured here.

Nearly all of the participants were white; socioeconomic status of the participants may be higher than the general population of young workers, particularly for the participants attending college. Therefore, these findings may be devoid of other experiences of workplace violence that vary by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Despite these limitations, notable differences between older and younger participants were observed. Quantitative research needs to be conducted to see if these differences apply to the general population of young workers in the United States.

6. Conclusion

Results from this study indicate that there is variability in the workplace violence experiences of young workers at different developmental stages. Young workers in late adolescence (ages 18–24) reported experiencing more severe sexual and physical assaults in the workplace than their counterparts in middle adolescence (ages 15–17). Those in the older age group also reported formally communicating events of workplace violence to management, human resources, and corporate headquarters, whereas those in the younger group mostly reported such events to their parents and coworkers. The use of social media to proliferate and commit acts of sexual harassment was more prominent among those in the older age group. The older group also discussed the lack of managerial support and managers' focus on customer satisfaction versus employee safety, while the younger group did not communicate an awareness of these issues. It is important to note that the subgroups of young workers will not always experience workplace violence similarly nor should they always receive the same training due to differences in development, knowledge, and life experience. Because the employment experiences that young workers have can promote or inhibit their level of confidence in functioning in an area that will be a key part of their adult lives (Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006), there needs to be a further study comparing these subgroups of young workers.

7. Practical applications

The results of this study suggest that there are some key differences in the perceived experiences of workplace violence in young workers at various stages of development. This information is imperative for researchers, policy makers, and employers. Young workers may be viewed as an undifferentiated group by the general public, employers, and policymakers rather than as subgroups with distinct differences in their stages of development, life experiences, and knowledge. Understanding these unique differences can enable us to develop workplace violence training programs that are catered to the needs of the subsets of the young worker population. We may also be able to use this information to influence policy, as workers ages 15–17 are protected by child labor laws that indicate what is developmentally appropriate in terms of work, whereas workers ages 18–24 are still developing cognitively yet have no protections. We also know from this research that these workers are having negative experiences that can impact the remainder of their occupational careers. Therefore, further research on a larger scale that analyzes these two subgroups of young workers would be beneficial in addressing the needs of young workers.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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