Violence at work

Introduction

The Agency is producing a series of fact sheets to help tackle work-related stress (WRS) and some of its key triggers. This fact sheet gives information and suggestions for those seeking to take practical action to tackle violence at work. Violence at work is a significant cause of WRS. The further information section at the end of the fact sheet gives details on Agency sources of assistance, including other fact sheets. Prevention of violence at work is one of the objectives in the Communication from the European Commission (¹) on the new strategy on health and safety at work.

What is violence at work?

This fact sheet covers 'external' violence; bullying is dealt with in Fact Sheet 23.

The concept of 'external' workplace violence generally covers insults, threats, or physical or psychological aggression exerted by people from *outside* the organisation, including customers and clients, against a person at work that endangers their health, safety or well-being. There may be a racial or sexual dimension to the violence.

Aggressive or violent acts take the form of:

• Uncivil behaviour - lack of respect for others;
• Physical or verbal aggression - intention to injure;
• Assault - intention to harm the other person.

Who is affected?

Results from an EU Survey show that 4% of the working population report that they have been victims of actual physical violence from people outside the workplace (²). Many more will have suffered from threats and insults or other forms of psychological aggression outside the workplace.

Risky environments are largely concentrated in the service sector, and particularly organisations in the health, transport, retail, catering, financial and education sectors. Contact with 'customers' or clients increases the risk of being faced with violence. The healthcare sector is often referred to in EU countries as one of the most affected. The retail sector is also a large 'at risk' group.

These occupations are examples of those especially at risk of violence: nurses and other healthcare workers, taxi drivers, bus drivers,

employees performing repairs in the customer's home, service stations staff, cashiers, security guards, messengers, police officers, parking inspectors, prison guards, social workers and social housing managers.

> Violence has gradually spread from enterprises handling high value goods for example banks and pharmacies, to organisations 'symbolically' representing society such as urban transport systems and public services, while recently, new unexpected 'targets' like fire officers and doctors on night duty have appeared. Service sector workers are often at risk for example nurses, doctors, teachers, restaurant and bar workers etc

What are the risk factors?

Specific acts of violence may be unpredictable, but the likely situations where violence can occur are not.

It is possible to identify the most common risk factors for workers:

• Handling of goods, cash and valuables;
• Lone work;
• Inspection, control and general 'authority' functions;
• Contact with some clients - from people asking for a loan, to patients with a history of violence or illnesses known to be associated with violence, to people under the influence of alcohol or drugs;
• Poorly managed organisations as this can increase aggression in customers: examples include invoicing errors, product not corresponding to what was advertised, or inadequate stocks and staff resources.

What are the effects?

The consequences for the individual vary greatly, ranging from demotivation and reduced pride in performing one's job, to stress (even for the indirect victim, the witness of the violent act or incident), and injury to physical or psychological health. Post traumatic symptoms like fear, phobias and sleeping difficulties can happen. In extreme cases, post traumatic stress disorder can occur.

In general, the vulnerability of each individual varies depending on the context in which violence occurs and the personal characteristics of the victim. For cases of physical violence, the facts are quite easy to establish. It is harder to predict how the potential victim will react to repeated acts of psychological violence.

Violence also has an impact on the organisation because people who work in an environment of fear and resentment cannot give their best. The negative effects on the organisation will be reflected in increased absenteeism, decreasing motivation, reduced productivity, deterioration of labour relations and recruitment difficulties.

Legislation

The European Commission has introduced measures to ensure the safety and health of workers. The 1989 Council Directive (89/391) contains the basic provisions for health and safety at work and it makes employers responsible for making sure employees do not suffer harm through work, including violence at work. Member States have all implemented this Directive through legislation and some in addition have developed guidance on preventing violence at

(¹) Communication from the Commission – Adapting to change in work and society; a new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002-2006. European Commission. 2002. http://europe.osha.eu.int/systems/strategies/future/#270
(²) Third European survey on working conditions 2000. European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions 2000. Luxembourg, 2001. http://www.eurofound.ie /publications/EF0121.htm

work. Following the approach in the Directive, to eliminate or reduce violence at work, employers in consultation with workers and their representatives should:

• Aim to prevent violence at work;
• Assess the risks of violence at work;
• Take adequate action to prevent the harm.

Guidance on applying risk assessment and prevention to WRS is given in Fact Sheet 22; this will help with workplace violence too.

How to prevent violence at work?

Prevention of harm takes place at two levels. At the first level, the aim is basically to *prevent* acts of violence from occurring, or at least to reduce them. At the second level, if the act of violence has

Minimising harm after violent incidents

It is important to have well-known procedures to be followed in the case of any violent incident. The basic aim is to prevent further harm and limit the damage suffered.

In this framework it is important:

• Not to leave the worker who has been a victim of violence, or witnessed an act of violence, alone in the hours following the events;
• That senior management should become involved, be sympathetic and support the victim;
• To provide the victim with psychological support immediately and later on in the event of post-traumatic stress, i.e. debriefing, counselling, etc.;

Preventive actions	Examples
Workplace environment	• Consideration of physical security measures, for example, entry locks, screens, adequate lighting, reception desks, emergency exits, installation of video surveillance systems, alarm systems, coded doors, elimination or limitation of no-exit areas and objects which could serve as projectiles; • Provision of better seating, décor, regular information about delays etc.
Work organisation and job design	• Regular removal of cash and valuables; using non-cash alternatives; • Queue management and shortening; • Sufficient staff; • Opening hours adapted to the customers; • Check visitors' credentials; • Accompanying staff where necessary; • Avoiding lone work and where this is not possible, keeping in touch with lone workers; • Improved reception and public information etc.
Staff training and information	• To recognise unacceptable behaviour and the early signs of aggression; • How to manage difficult situations with customers; • To follow procedures set up to protect employees such as to apply security instructions, to ensure adequate communication, to act to reduce a person's aggression, to identify clients with a history of violence; • To manage the stress inherent in the situation in order to control emotional reactions.

occurred, *support* is required for the person who has experienced the incident. This support should seek to minimise the harmful effects of the incident and prevent any guilty feelings that may appear in the victim after an act of aggression, which may prevent the victim from making a complaint.

Before the violent act

The aim is to prevent violence through identifying hazards, assessing risks and taking preventive action where necessary. The way work is organised and the environment in which it takes place should be considered. Staff training and information is another aspect to prevention.

Depending on the activity, the measures taken will be adapted to the circumstances.

Some examples of measures that have been taken:

• Hospital wards: training in skills to deal with violent patients;
• Banks: replacement of counters with automated teller machines (ATMs) and ensuring confidentiality where appropriate;
• Post offices: setting up 'queue guides' for better queue management;
• Shops: use of a pneumatic station to transfer money regularly from the cash registers;
• Health and transport sectors: the use of 'zero tolerance' campaigns where it is made clear to all that no act of violence on staff will be tolerated and that action will be taken against any perpetrator.

• To provide the victim with support for administrative and legal procedures (reporting, legal action, etc.);
• To inform the other workers to avoid spreading rumours;
• To review risk assessments to identify what additional measures are necessary.

The incident should be fully investigated, with a 'no blame' environment for the victim. The facts should be recorded, including incidents of a psychological nature, and an assessment made of how the incident happened in order to be able to improve prevention measures.

Further information

Further information on work-related psychosocial issues, including stress and bullying, is available at http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/ This source is being continually updated and developed. Other fact sheets in this series are available here.

The Agency's website is http://agency.osha.eu.int

Guidance on work-related stress 'Spice of Life – or Kiss of Death?'. Employment & Social Affairs. Health and safety at work, European Commission, 1999
http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/h&s/publicat/pubintro_en.htm