

The Enemy is Not Us: Unexpected Workplace Violence Trends

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According to the Department of Justice, an average of 20 workers are murdered and 18,000 assaulted in U.S. workplaces each week.¹ Government employees fall victim to 37 percent of workplace violence incidents despite the fact that they made up only 16 percent of the U.S. workforce between 1992 and 1996.² Using insights gained from a survey of 868 full-time employees of a Midwestern municipal government, we explore the intersection of a multitude of violent behaviors including verbal threats, yelling, physical intimidation, hitting/pushing/shoving, and sexual harassment and assault. Our analysis illuminates two important trends: (1) larger organizational norms may play a critical role in the acceptance of workplace aggression and violence, and (2) customers are more likely to be perpetrators of violence and aggressive acts than are co-workers and supervisors.

Almost 80 percent of workplace killings occur when strangers come onto the premises, usually to commit a crime.

—Eugene Rugala, supervisory special agent, FBI National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime at Quantico, VA³

Even with heightened workplace security concerns brought about by September 2001's catastrophic events, most employers remain unprepared to deal with violent episodes in the workplace.

—Robert J. Grossman, contributing editor, *HR Magazine*⁴

Workplace violence has been identified as the most important security threat to American workplaces. In *The Violence-Prone Workplace*, Denenberg and Braverman tell a grim story of eruptions of murder, mayhem, anger and hostility—everyday occurrences in the offices, factories, and stores of the American workplace. Unsettling events such as the 1991 Michigan postal massacre by a discharged employee and the 1998 death of a Nevada supervisor intentionally crushed by 100-ton piece of heavy equipment following a denied workers' compensation claim, have weighed heavily on the minds of managers and the productivity of firms in recent years.⁵ Outsourcing, downsizing, automation, reduced tax revenues, budgetary shortfalls, and increased demands for public services have contributed to acts of violence, personal distress, interpersonal conflict, and retaliation on the job.

A variety of costs amass from workplace violence. While the human pain and suffering are tantamount, also costly are lost dollars and productivity. Workplace injuries stemming from on-the-job violence cost organizations \$202 billion yearly.⁶ And the effects translate into millions of lost workdays and tens of millions of dollars in lost wages annually.⁷ Costs to employers include restoring property, extending psychological care for employees, heightening security, and oftentimes repairing a battered public image. Further, research suggests that the stress and strain associated with workplace violence and aggression is strongly associated with high turnover, reduced productivity, and lower employee commitment.

The profusion of training seminars, books, videos, general media attention, TV documentaries, and consultancies designed to help public managers understand the causes and ramifications of workplace violence attest to the fact that organizations are becoming increasingly concerned with violence prevention and management. In fact, a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that 45 percent of managers who responded were concerned about the likelihood of a violent episode at their workplace.⁸ Yet we believe that for many organizations, ignorance abounds as to who are likely targets, who is perpetrating the violence, and whether or not the organization can do anything to stop it. While many organizations are incorporating "zero tolerance" to violence policies, very little has been written about whether these are effectual in the quest to keep employees safe. Using the findings from a survey of municipal government employees, we highlight the prevalence of these issues within one organization. We surveyed approximately 900 employees representing 50 categories of workers, including police and fire officers, administrative and clerical workers, code enforcers, sanitation workers, public service workers and child care workers (see Table 1). Departmental categories included administrative services, public works, finance, law, public safety, general services and social services. We asked these workers about the extent to which they experienced and observed verbal, physical, and sexual violence on the job and the details surrounding these events. Our survey data and the narrative comments of our respondents reveal these employees' experiences of fear and safety in the work environment.

Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Gender:	Male	65%
	Female	35%
Average Age:	41	
Ethnicity:	White	83%
	Black, Non-Hispanic	14%
	Hispanic	1%
	Asian	.5%
	Native American	.5%
	Other	2%

Education:	High School Degree/GED	18%
	Some College	27%
	Associate's Degree	12%
	4-Year Degree or Greater	44%
Type of Work:	Public Safety Workers	45%
	Public Works	15%
	Social Services	9%
	Administrative Services	14%
	Finance	4%
	General Services	11%
	Law	2%
	Boundary Spanner	60%
	Non-boundary Spanner	40%
	Supervisory Position	33%
	Standard 8:00 – 5:00 Shift	77%
Length of Service:	Up to 6 years	42%
	6 – 20 years	44%
	Over 20 years	14%

As the U.S. Department of Labor reports, government workers are no strangers to violence. While they comprised just 16 percent of the workforce between 1992 and 1996, government employees fell victim to 37 percent of the violent incidents in U.S. workplaces.⁹

It is undisputed that men and women who work in government buildings experience assault at a greater rate than do private sector employees. In fact, previous research has demonstrated that women who work in state facilities are eight times more likely to be injured than women working for private organizations. Furthermore, those working for local governments are 5.5 times more likely than those working in the private sector to be attacked on the job.¹⁰

Cultures of Violence

Recent research has highlighted the social implications of violence. In a variety of contexts such as marital and dating relationships as well as interpersonal work relationships, individuals tend to learn violent behavior from others. Violent responses can be thought of as “infectious” in workplaces and other social situations. Andersson and Pearson have called attention to a phenomenon they call “downward incivility spirals” in the workplace, whereby violence tends to be the result of patterns of escalating negative interactions between individuals.¹¹ For instance, what starts out as two coworkers exchanging rude or inappropriate comments could eventually escalate into physical violence.

We feel organizational cultures are likely to play a role in workplace violence. Cultures serve to create a degree of order in social life. Recurring patterns of behaviors form organizational cultures to which people become attached and accustomed. These behaviors become “norms” which determine appropriate organizational behav-

ior. Yet norms, while enforced and socially sanctioned, are not always positive for organizational members. Cultures can be dysfunctional in that they, for example, may make people unwilling to change behaviors which they are at odds with, or oppress members of certain groups to the advantage of others.

Aggressive organizational cultures can result from a variety of circumstances. First, as Neuman and Baron point out, in many organizations, members believe that aggression is just "part of the job."¹² For example, in a study of New York state workers, the majority of those working in jails and healthcare reported violence to be everyday occurrences and not particularly worthy of report. Our sample includes similar occupational categories to those studied in the New York sample. Second, some organizational cultures, including but not limited to the occupations mentioned above, are simply more contentious than others. Some public organizations or departments therein promote an ultra-competitive "every person for themselves" environment en route to enhanced employee productivity. Many managers are quick to point out that supervisor behavior which may be grounds for an emotional abuse charge in one organization may be taught in training classes to the supervisors of another organization.

Unfortunately an organizational climate characterized by job stress from authoritarian managers, negative personalities, and work overload is not uncommon, and in such climates stressors easily translate into violence risk factors. Whereas organizational cultures which foster mutual respect, trust, and open communication can help reduce the threat of violence and provide employees with strategies for dealing with problems and issues as they arise, employee perceptions of poor treatment, discrimination, and disinterest in their well-being can become fodder for escalating tension, stress, and aggressive actions.¹³ Third, researchers have attributed aggressive cultures to a simple lack of managerial discipline. That is, some managers are lax and in essence allow a hostile work environment to exist. Because of conflict avoidance, improper management training and the like, verbal and sexual harassment and intimidation may occur without reprimand.

Boundary Spanners

Traditionally, those individuals who work with vulnerable (e.g., emotionally disturbed, poverty-stricken) populations, work late hours and handle money report the most violence in their workplaces. We suggest that *boundary spanners* in organizations be added to this list of occupations that are at risk for workplace violence.

"Boundary spanners" is the term used to describe occupations and job titles that bridge the gap between organizational members (management, coworkers) and outsiders (customers, suppliers, etc.). These workers are subject to two distinct demands. They experience pressure from management, co-workers, and organizational policies, while also dealing with stress due to the uncertainty of the external environment. Boundary spanners not only represent the organization to outsiders, but also serve to protect and buffer it from outside forces. Providing customer service in this way is sometimes at an employee's own expense—the expense of personal safety and psychological well-being. Boundary spanners protect the policies and integrity of the organization while placating difficult customers and attempting to protect the self from mental and physical harm.

Methodology

To test, in an exploratory fashion, the hypothesis that there are “cultures of violence,” in our first research question we looked at whether the incidence of various types of violence surveyed in our sample would be positively related. Specifically, we hypothesized that first, reports of all types of observed violence—verbal, physical, and sexual—would be positively correlated, and second, that reports of all types of experienced violence—verbal, physical, and sexual—would be positively correlated. Third, again flowing from the idea of aggressive cultures, we hypothesized that the observation of various types of violence would be positively related to the experience of that same type of violence.

The second research question explored boundary spanners' risk for workplace violence. That is, we hypothesized a positive relationship between occupations high in public contact and those workers' observation and experience of multiple types of violence. Further, we hypothesized that employees in high public contact jobs, compared to employees in low public contact jobs, would report a higher prevalence of observed and experienced violence.

Data were collected in early spring 2001 via a survey of full-time employees of a Midwestern municipal government. Specifically, all employees ($n=2,428$) received a copy of the “Workplace Violence Survey” in their paycheck envelopes, along with a letter requesting their participation from the municipality's Mayor and Chief Financial Officer. Participants were given three weeks to complete the survey and to return it to the researchers in the provided pre-addressed, postage-paid envelope. Included with the survey were researcher phone numbers for assistance or questions pertaining to the survey instrument. Extra surveys were made available to employees at staff meetings and at designated places within their divisions. Follow-up postcard reminders were enclosed in paycheck envelopes two weeks later. In addition, flyers reminding participants to complete the survey were posted in key government buildings, and advertisements were included in weekly employee newsletters and division memos repeatedly during the three-week period. Eight-hundred seventy-six surveys were returned, of which 868 were complete and contained usable data. The response rate of 35 percent, though limited, was higher than most employee surveys conducted in this organization. That is, over the last five years, employee surveys at this organization resulted in less than a 10 percent response rate. Data were coded and analyzed via SPSS statistical software. Open-ended comments from the questionnaire were coded into a Microsoft Word document by question.

Key Measures

Incidents of violence were measured by asking employees (via individual question) whether they had been verbally threatened, yelled at, physically intimidated, hit/pushed/shoved, sexually harassed, or sexually assaulted by a superior, coworker, or citizen (customer). This same series of questions was then repeated, but employees were asked whether they had ever *witnessed* any of these events happening to a coworker. Employees were asked whether the incident occurred “ever,” “in the past

year," "and/or in the past month." Bi-variate (yes/no) variables were created to indicate whether or not a violent incident had been witnessed or observed in the last year. Furthermore, another set of variables was created to determine whether employees experienced or witnessed any forms of verbal, physical, or sexual violence [in the last year] by collapsing the questions relevant to each category into one variable. For instance, experiencing verbally threatening behavior and being yelled at were combined into one variable, "experienced verbal abuse." The same was done for physical and sexual experiences, as well as for witnessing the three forms of violence. In preparation for the bi-variate analyses, a variable, *boundary spanner*, was created. Employees working in departments that require high customer contact were coded as "boundary spanners," and those departments requiring little, minimal, or no customer contact were categorized as non-boundary spanners. A human resource department employee worked in conjunction with one of the researchers to provide advice on which departments embodied boundary spanning.

Sample

Among the 868 participants, 65 percent were male and 83 percent identified as white. Non-white employees identified as black, non-Hispanic (13.5 percent), Hispanic (one percent), Asian (0.5 percent), Native American (0.5 percent) and two percent as other. Employees' mean age was 41. Eighteen percent of respondents graduated from high school or earned a GED, 26.5 percent had some college, 11.5 percent had an associate's degree, and 43.5 percent had a four-year degree or more. Forty-two percent of employees had worked for the organization for five years or less, 44 percent had been employed with the firm for between six and 20 years, and 14 percent of employees had worked there for more than 20 years. Seventy-seven percent of employees worked standard 8 a.m.-5 p.m. schedules, with the remaining employees working a variety of non-standard schedules. Thirty-three percent of respondents were in supervisory positions. Sixty percent of the participants worked in departments that were categorized as boundary spanning, and 40 percent worked in non-boundary spanning areas. (See Table 1)

Findings

Any person can walk in off the street and do harm to people in this building any time of the day.¹⁴

Almost half of the municipal government workers we surveyed reported experiencing some type of verbal harassment or abuse in the past year, with 15 percent of workers reporting being physically harassed or abused. Five percent of employees reported being victims of sexual harassment or abuse (See Figure 2). Moreover, because witnesses to violence who are not themselves victims can still become intimidated, uncomfortable, anxious, and depressed, employees were asked about their observations of workplace violence. In a similar pattern of findings, 31 percent witnessed verbal harassment or abuse, 15 percent physical, and four percent sexual. (See Figure 3)

Figure 2. Types of Abuse Experienced by Employees

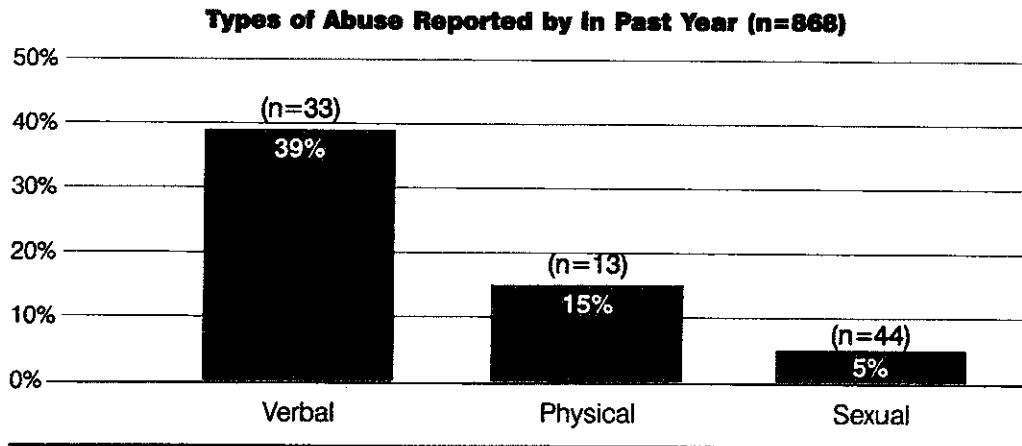
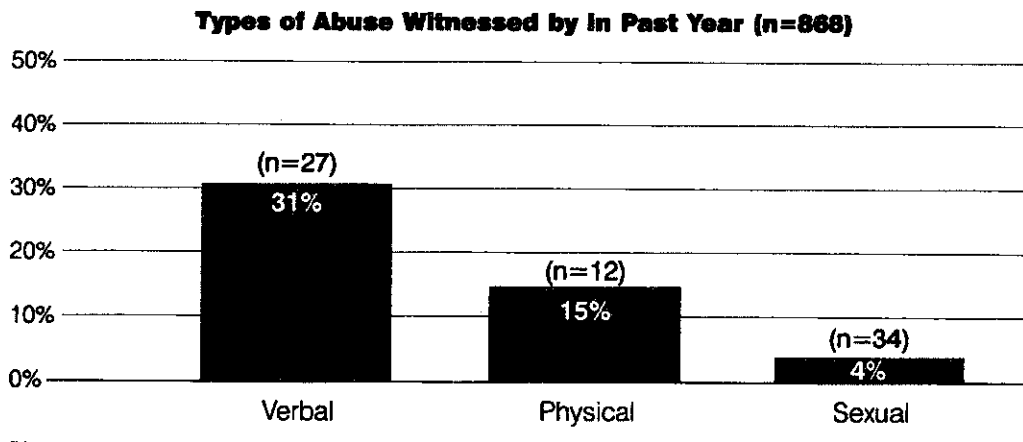


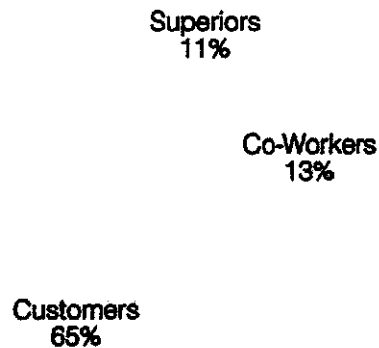
Figure 3. Types of Abuse Witnessed by Employees



[I most fear] the possibility of violence by clients and their extended family.

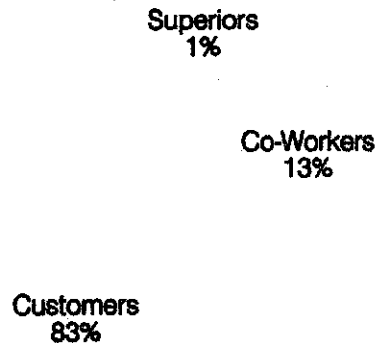
Because we were interested in learning not only who was affected and in what way, but in understanding more about the aggressors, we asked respondents about the person who instigated the violence. While superiors, coworkers, and customers instigated all types of violence, customers were more likely to be the perpetrator in two of the three classifications (verbal and physical, but not sexual), while both superiors and coworkers experienced and observed reports. For example, of those employees who experienced verbal threats, 65 percent of those threats were made by customers. To a much lesser extent (13 percent and 11 percent, respectively), employees were verbally threatened by coworkers and superiors. See Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4. Perpetrators of Verbally Threatening Behavior (n=337)*



* Percentages do not add up to 100%. The figure represents only one of the two forms of verbal abuse measured.

Figure 5. Perpetrators of Physically Intimidating Behavior (n=131)



In contrast, superiors and coworkers were more likely than customers to be the perpetrators of *sexual* misconduct. For instance, among employees who had experienced some form of sexual abuse at work over the past year, superiors were identified as the perpetrator of sexual assault in 83 percent of the cases, coworkers in 16 percent of the cases, and customers in one percent of the occurrences.

To test the first set of hypotheses regarding the intersections of various types of violence, that is, aggressive cultures, we performed a series of correlation analyses. Regarding observations of violence, we found that verbal, physical, and sexual observations were highly significantly correlated. For example, witnessing any form of verbal abuse was correlated with witnessing any form of physical abuse ($r = .557, p < .001$) and sexual abuse ($r = .246, p < .001$). Likewise, witnessing any form of physical abuse was correlated with witnessing any form of sexual abuse ($r = .267, p < .001$).

We documented a similar pattern of findings in regard to the experience of workplace violence. That is, various experiences of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse were highly significantly correlated. For example, experiences of verbal threats and physical intimidation were significantly related ($r = .456, p < .001$) as were verbal threats and being hit/pushed/shoved ($r = .308, p < .001$). Additionally, being yelled at correlated with being physical intimidated ($r = .454, p < .001$) and being hit/pushed/shoved ($r = .170, p < .001$). Experiences of verbal abuse were correlated with experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Specific correlations included: verbal threats and sexual harassment ($r = .201, p < .001$), yelled at and sexual harassment ($r = .221, p < .001$), and yelled at and sexual assault ($r = .080, p < .05$). Finally, experiences of physical abuse were correlated with experiences of sexual abuse. For example, experiencing physical intimidation was correlated with sexual harassment ($r = .227, p < .001$) and sexual assault ($r = .086, p < .01$). In total, support was found for this set of hypotheses. See Table 6 for correlations among the general categories of violence.

Additionally, we tested whether there were canonical correlations between the set of observed and the set of experienced variables to further implicate culture in the prevalence of workplace violence. Observed and experienced violence variables were highly correlated. The data revealed the following correlations for *observations* and *experiences* of: verbal abuse ($r = .533, p < .001$); physical abuse ($r = .550, p < .001$); and sexual abuse ($r = .278, p < .001$).

Table 6. Correlation Matrix: Relationships between Various Forms of Violence & Boundary Spanning

		boundary spanner	experienced verbal abuse in past year	experienced physical abuse in past year	experienced sexual abuse in past year	witnessed verbal abuse in past year	witnessed physical abuse in past year	witnessed any sexual abuse in past year
boundary spanner	Pearson Correlation	1.000						
	N	868						
experienced verbal abuse in past year	Pearson Correlation	.097(**)	1.000					
	N	864	864					
experienced physical abuse in past year	Pearson Correlation	.084(*)	.443(**)	1.000				
	N	864	864	864				
experienced sexual abuse in past year	Pearson Correlation	.080(*)	.138(**)	.210(**)	1.000			
	N	863	863	863	863			
witnessed verbal abuse in past year	Pearson Correlation	.074(*)	.533(**)	.415(**)	.171(**)	1.000		
	N	857	855	855	854	857		
witnessed physical abuse in past year	Pearson Correlation	.096(**)	.367(**)	.550(**)	.243(**)	.557(**)	1.000	
	N	857	855	855	854	857	857	857
witnessed sexual abuse in past year	Pearson Correlation	.029	.130(**)	.179(**)	.278(**)	.246(**)	.267(**)	1.000
	N	857	855	855	854	857	857	857

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

To test the second set of hypotheses—that high public contact occupations would positively relate to the observation and experience of multiple types of violence—we again ran a series of correlation analyses. We found that employees in high public contact jobs were more likely to experience various forms of violence than employees in jobs with minimal or no contact with the public. See Table 6 for correlation results. To further explore this hypothesis, cross tabulation procedures were conducted to determine whether employees categorized as boundary spanners observed or experienced a higher prevalence of various forms of verbal, physical, and sexual violence. We found that employees in departments that required higher public contact were more likely to witness verbal and physical abuse than employees with minimal or no employee contact. Specifically, 35 percent of boundary spanners witnessed verbal abuse and 18 percent witnessed physical abuse within the past year, compared to 28 percent and 11 percent of non-boundary spanners, respectively. There were no differences between the two groups pertaining to sexual violence. Further, compared to non-boundary spanners, boundary spanners were more likely to experience sexual harassment ($\chi^2(1, N=863), p<.05$), verbal threats ($\chi^2(1, N=864), p<.001$), and hit/push/shoving behaviors ($\chi^2(1, N=864), p<.001$). (See Table 7)

This pattern of variation between boundary spanners and non-boundary spanners continued to emerge when we utilized more conservative measures of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse experiences. That is, cross tabulation procedures were employed using the *combined* measures (e.g., verbal = verbally threatened plus yelled at) of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Employees in boundary spanning jobs were more likely to experience verbal (43 percent vs. 33 percent), physical (18 percent vs. 11 percent), and sexual incidences (7 percent vs. 3 percent) than were their non-boundary spanner counterparts, ($\chi^2(1, N=864), p<.001$; $\chi^2(1, N=864), p<.001$; $\chi^2(1, N=863), p<.05$, respectively). These findings support our hypothesis that employees who bridge the gap between the internal demands of their organizations and the external pressures from customers are more at risk when it comes to experiencing various forms of violence.

Table 7. Cross-Tabulations of Violence & Boundary Spanners

	Boundary Spanners		Non-Boundary Spanners
Witnessed Verbal Abuse	35%	N=857 ***	28%
Witnessed Physical Abuse	18%	N=857 *	11%
Witnessed Sexual Abuse	4%	N=857 n.s.	3%
Experienced Verbal Threats	36%	N=864 ***	22%
Experienced Being Yelled At	31%	N=864 n.s.	26.5%
Experienced Physical Intimidation	15%	N=864 n.s.	11%
Experienced Being Hit/Pushed/Shoved	11%	N=864 ***	2%
Experienced Sexual Harassment	5.5%	N=864 *	3%
Experienced Sexual Assault Yes	1%	N=864 n.s.	0%

n.s. = not a significant difference; * = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .001$

Discussion

In this section we discuss the implications of our findings and provide, where appropriate, additional textual responses from survey respondents. The findings in sum indicate strong relationships among many of the various types of violence and aggression. Specifically, where employees reported more subtle forms of aggression such as verbal abuse or intimidation, they also reported being the victim of or observing victims being hit, pushed, or shoved. The relationships between reports of all types of verbal and physical harassment and abuse were significant.

The nature of our job means that we deal with angry clients and parents. There is nothing to prevent them from walking into our office and doing harm to a probation officer.

There is an air of negativity and one person in particular seems ready to blow.

And, overwhelmingly, those individuals involved in high public contact occupations were more likely to both observe and experience verbal harassment and abuse.

[We bear the brunt of] the strong feelings residents hold regarding various government actions/policies.

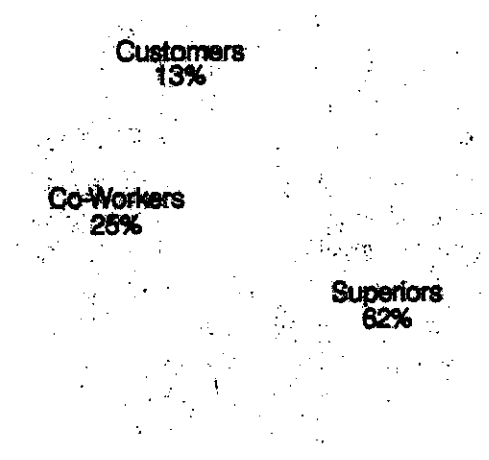
Working in "city hall," this building is the icon of the local government and probably the most likely target of violence/terrorism by insiders or outsiders.

Although the occurrence of sexual abuse was less frequent than the other two forms of violence, the relationships between sexual abuse and the other two forms of violence were also highly significant. This provides further evidence to suggest a culture of workplace violence. However, it is important to note that while perpetrators of verbal and physical abuse were more likely to be organizational outsiders, perpetrators of sexual violence were more likely to be organizational insiders. Our results agreed with earlier studies which have found that more than half of the attempted and completed sexual assaults against women in the workplace are committed by superiors.¹⁵ (See Figure 8)

Some of the men that I work with have some bad tempers and when they don't get their way they sometimes like to say things to harass you and then when you've had enough and say something back they want to call you out into the parking lot if you know what I mean.

Since I witness verbal/sexual harassment on nearly a daily basis and witness horseplay daily, I feel that I am always at risk that someone will turn this type of behavior at me.

Figure 8. Perpetrators of Sexual Assault (N=44)



Implications for Managers – The Enemy is Not Us

A higher degree of prosecution of those who commit violence against fire personnel [is needed]. It is too often accepted as part of the job to be threatened, intimidated, or physically abused by those we encounter on runs. The public should know that assaults, threats, etc. on firefighters will be pursued.

Recognize the potential for workplace violence and develop programs and training to address it.

Despite the attention workplace violence has garnered in the human resource management and public personnel press in recent years, workplaces have been relatively slow to set in place policies and programs designed to prevent it, especially when it comes to policies addressing violence committed by organizational outsiders. In a recent survey of city and county governments, only one percent of responders described violence against public employees in public facilities as a “very serious problem.” More alarming, given our research findings, is that of local governments surveyed, 1) only approximately one quarter had violence prevention policies and programs in place, and of these, 2) *customer*-instigated violence was addressed in just one quarter of violence prevention training efforts.¹⁶

In light of our findings, we suggest that HR violence prevention policies should focus on organizational insiders (employees) *and* organizational outsiders (customers/citizens). Although our findings suggest a culture of workplace violence, they also suggest that organizational outsiders are perpetrating the majority of verbal and physical violence. Generally, the bulk of extant organizational violence prevention efforts concentrate on measures such as ensuring adequate background checks of applicants and watching for violent tendencies among current employees. Such efforts assume that the enemy (those who perpetrate violence) is one of *us*, that is, an organizational insider. Understandably, employers have more control over the actions of their own employees and current HR policies reflect this. However, violence precaution and planning can be undertaken even when organizations shift their awareness to acknowledge “the enemy is not us.”

Beyond the clinical environment (i.e., in the patient-therapist relationship), little attention has been given to the fact that customers are a major source of workplace violence. Organizations must be concerned with not only understanding those paid to be in the workplace, but those who frequent their establishments as well. For instance, who is coming into the workplace and what are their physical and mental states? Are employees walking into potentially dangerous situations in visiting clients and customers? Customers common to the public sector, for example, incarcerated individuals, disgruntled traffic offenders, and complainants, are likely to be experiencing extreme stress and frustration. Customers who may use drugs and alcohol, feel powerless or socially isolated, have low or threatened self-esteem, all have a greater potential for violent behavior. As one of our respondents commented, “We deal with

people under the influence of alcohol and others whose behavior isn't predictable." Appointment delays, inept customer service agents, and frustrations with voicemail, automation, and other perceived inattention have the potential to result in verbal or physical acts of violence.

[Our] staff works with the public and many times we cannot give them what they ask for... We have called the police several times when we received threats from citizens over the phone [who] were coming to the office [and who presented] an extremely hostile tone.

[We work] with the public, and sometimes the rules we apply do not always go smoothly and citizens... easily get out of control.

Employees, when asked about their workplace, as they were here, seemed quick to diagnose threats to safety and to offer valuable input on how to combat violence. Three preventive strategies are derived directly from the words of the municipal government employees we surveyed. First, make the physical environment safer by restricting areas accessible to customers, increasing visibility around buildings by modifying landscaping and improving lighting, limiting the amount of cash on hand, and establishing and monitoring security systems.

[We need] metal detectors—it's only a matter of time until someone comes here with a gun and starts shooting.

Layout of office should be conducive to a safe environment. Example: main entrance door could have a bell/buzzer to notify those in the back areas of incoming customers. In most cases there are women left by themselves in the office to fend for themselves if something was to happen.

Second, because customer violence is often an expression of anger or frustration, interpersonal training of employees is crucial. Employees need to know what they can and should say to a disgruntled customer. They need to be trained to recognize when it is in their best interest to exit a charged situation or to call in another employee or supervisor. Training should include listening skills and conflict negotiation/avoidance tactics designed to detect and diffuse potentially dangerous encounters. Employees must know both where to report and how to deal with violent and potentially violent situations.

Seems like you are supposed to keep 'hush-hush' about anything. And if you discuss it you are being a troublemaker.

[We need] classes on how workplace violence affects other people and how we can handle these problems.

Third, organizations where workers routinely deal with angry customers or citizens may do well to establish a progressive system of "discipline" for clients. Step one

may be the issuance of a warning when an angry outburst occurs. Step two may permit the employee to ask the customer to leave the establishment or the employee to exit the scene. Step three may involve calling in security personnel or the police. Role-plays are an effective way to provide the practice necessary for employees to call upon these procedures when threats arise.

Realize that the public is not always right and don't feel the need to coddle people because they are the public. Workers have the right to be treated fairly too!

"Customer is always right" translates in this environment into "citizens can do anything."

Concluding Thoughts

According to a recent Society for Human Resource Management violence survey, approximately 40 percent of organizations either have no set procedure or "don't know" how they would respond to situations of workplace violence.¹⁷ Using a survey of a municipal government workforce, we call attention to the problem of multiple types of workplace violence occurring simultaneously in an organization and the disturbing frequency of experiencing and observing violent episodes. Given the negative consequences of these episodes, managers who report a lack of preparation for workplace violence is worrisome. Our data suggest that organizations need sound policies and programs to address multiple violence issues, and that they be expanded to include customer violence control. As one respondent succinctly commented, "our bosses need to recognize the potential for workplace violence and develop programs and training to address it." It appears that frontline workers understand the problem and even its potential solutions, yet human resources and management personnel are slow to recognize current HR policies are not adequately addressing this social problem.

Notes

- ¹ Laurent, A. (1996). "Short Fuse," *Government Executive*, 28, 12-20.
- ² U.S. Department of Justice. (1998). *Workplace Violence, 1992-1996*. NCJ Publication No. 168634. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.
- ³ Grossman, R. (2002). "Bulletproof Practices," *HRMagazine*, November, <http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/articles/1102/1102covstory.asp>.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Denenberg, R., & Braverman, M. (1999). *The Violence-prone Workplace: A New Approach to Dealing with Hostile, Threatening, and Uncivil Behavior*. Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press.
- ⁶ Buss, D. (1994). "Combating Crime." *Nation's Business*, 82, 16-22. This figure includes damages awarded from litigation.

- ⁷ Bachman, R. (1994). *Crime Data Brief: Violence and Theft in the Workplace*. Office of Justice Programs.
- ⁸ Society for Human Resource Management. (1996). *1996 Workplace Violence Survey*. Alexandria, VA.
- ⁹ Laurent, op. cit., p. 12-20.
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