

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

How Outside Problems Affect the Workplace

By Phil La Duke

Murder is the number one cause of death for women in the workplace (Rainbow House, 2015), and overall, workplace violence is the third leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the U.S. (OSHA, 2011). Furthermore, a recent study found that 70% of the victims of nonlethal violence were women.

In addition, 90% of all adult rape victims are women (RAINN, 2016) and 8% of all reported rapes occur in the workplace (NSC, 2019).

Many find these figures difficult to believe, but the facts do not lie. A common motive for workplace murder is robbery; some of the most lethal professions in terms of homicide (BLS, 2017a) include:

- taxi drivers: 83% are men (Schaller Consulting, 2004);
- police officers: 88% are men (NLEOMF, 2019);
- food service managers: 51.1% are men (DataUSA, 2019);
- retail managers: 55.9% are men (*Boston Globe*, 2017);
- cashiers: 26.8% are men (*Boston Globe*, 2017).

While men represented 85% of workplace homicide victims in 2015, they are the majority in all but one of these occupations most likely affected by workplace homicide (BLS, 2017a). If robbery is the most common cause of workplace homicide, and men are the majority in these occupations where robberies commonly occur, it would logically follow that more men would be killed in robberies than women. In 2015, robbery accounted for roughly 30% of workplace homicides (BLS, 2017a). Women are significantly less likely to be murdered in a robbery than men, despite the high incidence of robberies of cashiers; women make up the overwhelming majority of that occupation.

Men and women are about equal in every other category of workplace homicide except one: murder at the hands of a domestic partner or family member (BLS, 2017b). According to BLS (2017b), 43% of women who are murdered in the workplace are killed by a family member or domestic partner, compared to 2% of men. This is the widest variation in any of the statistics. Of all homicide categories, killed by a family member or domestic partner has the smallest number of victims, and yet nearly half of women murdered in the workplace are killed by a family member or domestic partner.

Unlike many of the world's problems this issue can be solved, but many organizations do not address it. Organi-

zations can reduce this problem by following several steps.

1) Understand Workplace Violence Types, Respond Appropriately

Anyone who is murdered in the workplace is by definition a victim of workplace violence, but understanding the circumstances surrounding these incidents is key to crafting preventive measures. The major types of workplace violence are robbery, being attacked by a patient or visitor to a healthcare facility, mass shootings, violence by a coworker, and violence by a family member or domestic partner.

Robbery

To some extent there is little that an individual company can do to prevent a robbery. It is unclear why some robberies end in murder while others do not. This article does not address robbery homicide as a form of workplace violence. As terrible a crime it is, its indiscriminate and inscrutable motives make it hard to predict or prevent.

Attacked by a Patient or Visitor

Being attacked by a patient or visitor is a type of violence prevalent in healthcare. The majority of victims are women because U.S. healthcare workers are largely women.

According to NSC (2019), "Women working in certain sectors experience a disproportionate number of various nonfatal injuries and illnesses, too. For example, the percentages of nonfatal injuries and illnesses involving women in healthcare is 80%." Roughly 75% of healthcare workers are women (*Boston Globe*, 2017) so while on the surface it may seem reasonable to infer that because there are more women in the field a higher incidence of violence is inevitable.

Violence in the U.S. healthcare industry bucks the overall trend. According to OSHA (2015), 80% of those who attack healthcare workers are patients, while 12% are other clients or customers (e.g., patients' family members, visitors). Essentially, 92% of attacks on healthcare workers are perpetrated by people they are trying to help.

In addition, according to OSHA (2015), violence against healthcare workers is exacerbated by several factors:

- working with people who have a history of violence or who may be delirious or under the influence of drugs;
- poor environmental design that may block vision or escape routes;
- poor lighting in hallways or exterior areas;
- lack of a means for emergency communication;
- presence of firearms;
- neighborhoods with high crime rates;
- lack of training and policies for staff;
- understaffing, especially during meal times and visiting hours;
- high worker turnover;
- inadequate number of security personnel;
- long patient wait times and overcrowded waiting rooms;
- unrestricted public access;
- perception that violence is tolerated and that reporting incidents will have no effect.

Despite a high incidence of assaults, few workplace murders occur in healthcare. In fact, the incidence is so low that the category of murders is "killed by a patient, student or client," which represents only 10% of murder victims (BLS, 2017b). This may be because the attacks are not premeditated murder, rather they typically involve:

- unpredictable drug reactions that cause otherwise nonviolent patients to attack caregivers;
- mentally unstable patients or inmates;
- frustrated and emotionally overwrought patients, family members or visitors;
- drug-seeking individuals who become enraged when they are unsuccessful in their attempt to procure drugs.

In all of these cases, violence is borne of rage, frustration or mental illness. Furthermore, the victims are not targeted because of their gender, rather they are exposed to violence because of their job or their proximity.

This is not to say that attacks against healthcare workers should not be addressed, but it serves to remind us that not all workplace violence involves homicide. An additional consideration in the epidemic of workplace violence in hospitals is that homicides seem to follow in environments where assaults are common.

Posted signs, fences and security patrols send a message to the single shooter that the person is not welcome and it will be difficult to achieve his/her goals.

Mass Shootings

The school principal or security guard who is killed in a mass shooting is still a workplace fatality, but, as with the aforementioned causes of workplace violence, mass shootings are not targeted at specific individuals. While in some cases, shooters may espouse allegiance to a fringe ideology, they can also be motivated by a desire for notoriety and a high body count. Many mistakenly treat all workplace violence events as mass shootings and this is a dangerous mistake.

Killed by a Coworker

Killed by a coworker is a complex category, as it encompasses everything including a squabble between two coworkers, a lover's quarrel between coworkers and violence against an authority figure for a real or imagined grievance. That said, coworker-on-coworker homicides are relatively rare, leaving significant overlap with the killed by a family member or domestic partner category.

Killed by a Family Member or Domestic Partner

The category of killed by a family member or domestic partner stands alone because the attack targets a specific victim or victims, at least one of the victims is typically a woman, and this is the leading cause of homicides in which women are the victims.

2) Make Your Facility a Hard Target

Single shooters prefer soft targets, or environments where the shooter can easily enter undetected with a weapon and have unfettered access to victims and an escape route. Employers can do several things to transform the workplace from a soft target into a hard target without making employees feel like they are working in a prison. Employers can transform their workplace into a hard target by following several steps:

1) Create multiple checkpoints before entering the main facility. It is not enough to prevent a hostile individual from entering the building; companies also should prevent that individual from entering the grounds. Posted signs, fences and security patrols around the property perimeter may seem like an overabundance of caution, but in addition to providing extra security, this measure also sends a message to the single shooter that the person is not welcome and it will be difficult to achieve his/her goals.

2) Restrict access of nonemployees. Anyone who is not a current employee must sign in at a central location and wait there to be escorted by an authorized employee. You should adopt a zero-tolerance policy for allowing nonemployees on the premises with-

out an escort; remember, most victims of this type of homicide know their attackers.

3) Require all visitors to sign in and out. Inexpensive technology exists that allows companies to print out visitor badges with a photograph of the visitor on it. This alerts employees to challenge anyone wearing a visitor badge who is not being escorted.

4) Use key card access for doors. The use of key cards to access an office or elevator is increasingly common, and affordable technology exists that will restrict individuals to and from specific areas. Some companies even embed GPS chips into access cards so that the individual's location is known at all times; this can be particularly useful in hostage situations or in situations where a single shooter has stolen a badge.

3) Know the Signs of Domestic Abuse

In some cases of violence against women, domestic abuse has led to workplace violence against women. The signs of domestic abuse can be obvious yet often go unnoticed or ignored by employers. Look for:

- bruising especially on the neck or forearm. For example, look for the telltale three-fingertip-sized bruises on the upper forearm and one thumb-sized bruise on the opposite side of the forearm. This is often indicative of someone forcefully grabbing the person by the arm;
- limping or moving slowly as if in pain;
- making excuses for obvious injuries;
- becoming withdrawn;
- excusing themselves from social invitations because their partner is jealous;
- suddenly turning down a social invitation;
- constantly checking in with a spouse or domestic partner;
- never having money on hand;
- a sudden change in wardrobe such as suddenly wearing scarves, switching from short to long sleeves or from skirts to pants in hot weather;
- being openly fearful of a partner.

4) Directly Address Cases of Domestic Abuse

Too many people will ignore signs of domestic abuse in the name of privacy, and this feigned politeness is dangerous not only to the abused party but also to those who might try to defend the person during an attack. There is nothing inappropriate about asking someone if s/he has been harmed and offering to help. Simply say, "I have noticed that you aren't yourself lately and I'm con-

cerned. Who is hurting you?" Your company likely has resources for helping a victim of domestic abuse. It may feel like meddling but you may be saving multiple lives.

Conclusion

Organizations can take steps to reduce the threat of workplace violence. One such step is understanding the different types of violence and responding appropriately to each. Making the facility a hard target can restrict a potential shooter's ability to cause harm. Also, recognizing the signs of domestic abuse and directly addressing specific cases can empower employers to better protect employees. Following these steps can help organizations better protect employees, customers and the business against workplace violence incidents. **PSJ**

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