Violence in the Workplace

What is workplace violence?

Most people think of violence as a physical assault. However, workplace violence is a much broader problem. It is any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment. Workplace violence includes:

- **Threatening behaviour** - such as shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects.
- **Verbal or written threats** - any expression of an intent to inflict harm.
- **Harassment** - any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome. This includes words, gestures, intimidation, bullying, or other inappropriate activities.
- **Verbal abuse** - swearing, insults or condescending language.
- **Physical attacks** - hitting, shoving, pushing or kicking.

Rumours, swearing, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, pushing, theft, physical assaults, psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson and murder are all examples of workplace violence.

Workplace violence is not limited to incidents that occur within a traditional workplace. Work-related violence can occur at off-site business-related functions (conferences, trade shows), at social events related to work, in clients' homes or away from work but resulting from work (a threatening telephone call to your home from a client).

What work-related factors increase the risk of violence?

Certain work factors, processes, and interactions can put people at increased risk from workplace violence. Examples include:

- Working with the public.
- Handling money, valuables or prescription drugs (e.g. cashiers, pharmacists).
- Carrying out inspection or enforcement duties (e.g. government employees).
- Providing service, care, advice or education (e.g. health care staff, teachers).
- Working with unstable or volatile persons (e.g. social services, or criminal justice system employees).
- Working in premises where alcohol is served (e.g. food and beverage staff).

- Working alone, in small numbers (e.g. store clerks, real estate agents), or in isolated or low traffic areas (e.g. washrooms, storage areas, utility rooms).
- Working in community-based settings (e.g. nurses, social workers and other home visitors).
- Having a mobile workplace (e.g. taxicab).
- Working during periods of intense organizational change (e.g. strikes, downsizing).

Risk of violence may be greater at certain times of the day, night or year; For example,
- late hours of the night or early hours of the morning
- tax return season
- overdue utility bill cut-off dates
- during the holidays
- pay days
- report cards or parent interviews
- performance appraisals

Risk of violence may increase depending on the geographic location of the workplace; for example,
- near buildings or businesses that are at risk of violent crime (e.g. bars, banks)
- in areas isolated from other buildings or structures

Which occupational groups tend to be most at risk from workplace violence?

Certain occupational groups tend to be more at risk from workplace violence. These occupations include:
- health care employees
- correctional officers
- social services employees
- teachers
- municipal housing inspectors
- public works employees
- retail employees

How do I know if my workplace is at risk?

Review any history of violence in your own workplace.
- Ask employees about their experiences, and whether they are concerned for themselves or others.
- Review any incidents of violence by consulting existing incident reports, first aid records, and health and safety committee records.
- Determine whether your workplace has any of the risk factors associated with violence.
- Conduct a visual inspection of your workplace and the work being carried out. Focus on the workplace design and layout, and your administrative and work practices.

Evaluate the history of violence in similar places of employment.
- Obtain information from any umbrella organizations with which you are associated; e.g., your industry association, workers' compensation board, occupational health and safety regulators or union office.
- Seek advice from local police security experts.
- Review relevant publications.
- Collect newspaper or magazine clippings relating to violence in your industry.

Contact legislative authorities to determine if specific legislation regarding workplace violence prevention applies to your workplace.

Organize and review the information you have collected. Look for trends and identify the occupations and locations that you believe are most at risk. Record the results of your assessment. Use this document to develop a prevention program with specific recommendations for reducing the risk of violence within your workplace.

What can I do to prevent violence in my workplace?

The most important component of any workplace violence prevention program is management commitment. Management commitment is best communicated in a written policy. The policy should:
- Be developed by management and employee representatives.
- Apply to management, employee's, clients, independent contractors and anyone who has a relationship with your company.
- Define what you mean by workplace violence in precise, concrete language.
- Provide clear examples of unacceptable behaviour and working conditions.

- State in clear terms your organization's view toward workplace violence and its commitment to the prevention of workplace violence.
- Precisely state the consequences of making threats or committing violent acts.
- Outline the process by which preventive measures will be developed..
- Encourage reporting of all incidents of violence.
- Outline the confidential process by which employees can report incidents and to whom.
- Assure no reprisals will be made against reporting employees.
- Outline the procedures for investigating and resolving complaints.
- Describe how information about potential risks of violence will be communicated to employees.
- Make a commitment to provide support services to victims of violence.
- Offer a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to allow employees with personal problems to seek help.
- Make a commitment to fulfil the violence prevention training needs of different levels of personnel within the organization.
- Make a commitment to monitor and regularly review the policy.
- State applicable regulatory requirements.

What are some advantages of having a written policy about workplace violence, harassment and other unacceptable behaviour?

A written policy will inform employees about:
- What behaviour (e.g., violence, intimidation, bullying, harassment, etc.) that management considers inappropriate and unacceptable in the workplace.
- What to do when incidents covered by the policy occur.
- Contacts for reporting any incidents.

It will also encourage employees to report such incidents and will show that management is committed to dealing with incidents involving violence, harassment and other unacceptable behaviour. Some employers caring to exceed "minimum" requirements in legislation include "personal harassment" in their anti-harassment policies. Personal harassment does fall under the definition of harassment - unwelcome behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, or humiliates a person; however, it is not covered by human rights legislation dealing with harassment related to race, ethnic origin, religion, sex, etc.

Can you give me some examples of preventive measures?

Preventive measures generally fall into three categories, workplace design, administrative practices and work practices.

Workplace design considers factors such as workplace lay-out, use of signs, locks or physical barriers, lighting, and electronic surveillance. Building security is one instance where workplace design issues are very important. For example, you should consider:
- Positioning the reception area or sales or service counter so that it is visible to fellow employees or members of the public passing by.
- Positioning office furniture so that the employee is closer to a door or exit than the client and so that the employee cannot be cornered.
- Installing physical barriers, e.g. pass-through windows or bullet-proof enclosures.
- Minimizing the number of entrances to your workplace.
- Using coded cards or keys to control access to the building or certain areas within the building.
- Using adequate exterior lighting around the workplace and near entrances.
- Strategically placing fences to control access to the workplace.

Administrative practices are decisions you make about how you do business. For example, certain administrative practices can reduce the risks involved in handling cash. You should consider:
- Keeping cash register funds to a minimum.
- Using electronic payment systems to reduce the amount of cash available.
- Varying the time of day that you empty or reduce funds in the cash register.
- Installing and using a locked drop safe.
- Arranging for regular cash collection by a licensed security firm.

Work practices include all the things you do while you are doing the job. People, who work away from a traditional office setting, for example real estate agents or home care providers, can adopt many different work practices that will reduce their risk. For example,
- Prepare a daily work plan, so that you and others know where and when you are expected somewhere.
- Identify a designated contact at the office and a back-up.
- Keep your designated contact informed of your location and consistently adhere to the call-in schedule.
- Check the credentials of clients.

- Use the "buddy system", especially when you feel your personal safety may be threatened.
- DO NOT enter any situation or location where you feel threatened or unsafe.

Is there specific workplace violence prevention legislation?

Most Canadian jurisdictions have a "general duty provision" in their Occupational Health & Safety legislation, which requires employers to take all reasonable precautions to protect the health and safety of employees. More information on this topic is available in the OSHAnswers document OH&S Legislation - Due Diligence. (http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/legisl/diligence.html) This provision would include protecting employees from a known risk of workplace violence.

Jurisdictions in Canada that have specific workplace violence prevention regulations include Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador and Prince Edward Island, as well as Canadian federally regulated workplaces (for those organizations that fall under the Canada Labour Code, Part II). Quebec has legislation regarding "psychological harassment", which may include forms of workplace violence. Many jurisdictions also have working alone regulations, which may have some implications for workplace violence prevention. Ontario also has specific harassment legislation.

For a list of where violence is specifically referenced in the legislation for Canadian jurisdictions see Violence in the Workplace. (http://ccinfoweb2.ccohs.ca/legislation/documents/notes/oshleg/leg_viol.htm) (please note: viewing the list is free, you will require a subscription to see the actual legislation).

In the United States, there is a "General Duty Clause" in the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The General Duty Clause would include recognized threats of violence.
California has legislation that requires businesses to have a workplace injury prevention plan and a specific law to combat violence in hospitals. Washington and Florida have laws in place to protect against certain types of retail violence.

Most North American jurisdictions also have legislation on stalking, threats, harassment and physical assault.

This list is not intended to be comprehensive. Contact your local authorities to find out more about the specific laws applicable to violence in your jurisdiction.

Many international occupational health and safety legislators have also included a "general duty" that employer's protect employees against known risks.

Where can I find more information about workplace violence from CCOHS?

CCOHS has produced a pocket guide called [Violence Prevention in the Workplace](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/violence.html). (http://www.ccohs.ca/products/publications/violence.html)This guide is written for anyone who wants to learn about workplace violence and its prevention. It is especially useful to individuals involved in the development and implementation of workplace violence prevention programs.

We also have created the following three e-learning courses based on the best selling pocket guide:
- [Violence in the Workplace: Awareness (FREE)](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/violence_awareness/) (http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/violence_awareness/)
- [Violence in the Workplace: Recognize the Risk & Take Action](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/recognize_violence/) (http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/recognize_violence/)
- [Violence in the Workplace: Establish a Prevention Program](http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/prevent_violence/) (http://www.ccohs.ca/products/courses/prevent_violence/)