

*A Guide for Employers and
Employees on Dealing With*

VIOLENCE *at work*

*Information for employers and
other people who may be exposed to
physical assault, verbal abuse,
threats or intimidation.*

Acknowledgements

Some information in this booklet has been taken from publications issued by the Health and Safety Executive, United Kingdom, based on the work carried out by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, and from the Department of Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare, Western Australia, publication *Violence in the Workplace*.

The work of these organisations is gratefully acknowledged.

Published by the Occupational Safety and Health Service,
Department of Labour, Wellington,
New Zealand.

Published: January 1995

ISBN 0-477-03563-9

Contents

FOREWORD	5
1. VIOLENCE IN THE PLACE OF WORK	6
2. WHAT IS VIOLENCE AT WORK?	6
3. WHOSE CONCERN IS IT?	7
4. WHY REDUCE THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AT WORK?	7
5. WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF VIOLENCE AT WORK?	8
6. WHAT TYPES OF WORK CAN BE AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE?	8
7. REDUCING THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AT WORK	9
8. MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN	10
8.1. STEP ONE: Find out if There is a Problem	10
8.2. STEP TWO: Record all Incidents	11
8.3. STEP THREE: Classify all Incidents	11
8.4. STEP FOUR: Search for Control or Preventive Measures and Plan	12
8.5. STEP FIVE: Decide What to Do	15
9.6. STEP SIX: Put Measures into Practice	15
8.7. STEP SEVEN: Review and Check that Measures Work	15

FOREWORD

This booklet gives practical advice to help you find out if violence is a problem for your staff and, if it is, how to tackle it. It is aimed at employers but should also interest employees and others.

While the booklet discusses various forms of violence at work, including the threat of armed robbery, it does not specifically cover violence associated with a robbery. The threat of robbery or attack is an important factor for employees who handle items such as cash, valuables or drugs. The publication *Guidelines for the Safety of Staff from the Threat of Armed Robbery* is designed to assist employers in putting in place procedures to deal with such threats, and it is recommended that you obtain a copy of that publication. It is available from your local office of the Occupational Safety and Health Service, Department of Labour.

Also available is a pamphlet entitled *What Employees Should Know and Do About Violence at Work*.

1. VIOLENCE IN THE PLACE OF WORK

Violence is a hazard encountered in a variety of places of work. It can occur suddenly, without notice or provocation. It may cause mental and physical pain and suffering and may result in permanent disability or even death.

It is important for employers to recognise that violence is a hazard associated with many occupations and to take all practicable steps to protect employees and others from violent incidents which may result in injury or harm to health.

2. WHAT IS VIOLENCE AT WORK?

The term “violence at work” applies to any incident in which employees and others are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances arising out of, or in the course of, the work undertaken. It covers employers, self-employed people and anyone else who may be affected by a violent incident at their place of work. The expression of violence can take many forms, ranging from physical assault and verbal abuse to intimidation and low-level threatening behaviour.

Violence, as discussed in this publication, includes violence from fellow employees, customers and outside contacts. However, the advice is primarily aimed at dealing with the potential for violence from customers and other contacts arising in the course of employment. Violence from fellow employees is an issue on which all employers should have a clear policy which is set out in the staff manual, house rules or conditions of employment. Occurrences should be dealt with promptly, in a way that clearly indicates that such violence will not be tolerated. The action taken should take into account the impact on the victim.

A definition of violence at work is:

Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by fellow employees or by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of the course of his or her employment.

This definition may not quite fit your place of work. If not, it may be useful to talk over and agree on an alternative with your employees.

Violence includes sexual or other forms of harassment. Verbal abuse and threats are the most common types of incident. Physical attacks are comparatively rare.

The procedures to be followed when sexual harassment is alleged to have occurred are set out in the Employment Contracts Act (sections 29 and 36) and the Human Rights Act (sections 62, 64 and 69).

It is management's responsibility to ensure that all staff know that sexual harassment will not be tolerated and that they know the steps to take should sexual harassment occur. Note that the legislation covers harassment by both fellow employees and customers.

3. WHOSE CONCERN IS IT?

All employers have a legal duty under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 to take all practicable steps to identify all hazards in the place of work; to determine their significance; and to eliminate, isolate or minimise the likelihood that the hazard will be a source of harm. The potential for incidents involving violence is a significant hazard in many places of work, and the duty on employers extends to taking all practicable steps to protect employees from violent behaviour from any source, the same as for any other hazard in the place of work.

Employees also have a duty under the Act to take all practicable steps to ensure employees' safety while at work, and that no action or inaction by employees while at work causes harm to any other person.

4. WHY REDUCE THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AT WORK?

Both employers and employees have an interest in, and can benefit from, reducing violence at work.

For employers, violence can lead to low morale and a poor image for the organisation, making it difficult to recruit and retain staff. There are costs associated with violence at work. As well as the financial costs of absenteeism, lost productivity, possible higher insurance premiums, compensation levy payments and medical expenses, there is the personal cost of emotional trauma suffered by the victims and their families.

For employees, violence can cause pain, suffering and even disability or death. Physical attacks are obviously dangerous, but serious or persistent verbal abuse or threats can also damage employees' health through anxiety or stress.

5. WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF VIOLENCE AT WORK?

It is impossible to determine the reason for every violent outburst but there are common factors which may apply to all places of work. A combination of personal and/or environmental factors often influences the situation.

Violent and threatening behaviour at work may involve many factors, including the following:

- Random violence with no clear intent, such as from someone under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.
- Intimidation used to achieve a desired end, such as control or sexual favours or simply faster service.
- The expression of uncontrolled irritation such as dissatisfaction with poor service or prolonged discomfort.
- Displaced anger from past situations applied unreasonably to the issue at hand.
- Violence related to criminal activity, thrill-seeking or revenge.
- Violence related to cultural or religious differences between subgroups in society.

Forms of violence such as verbal abuse, intimidation and threatening behaviour may not result in physical injury but may have significant effects on the psychological well-being of employees.

6. WHAT TYPES OF WORK CAN BE AFFECTED BY VIOLENCE?

Employees may be exposed to various forms of violence and threatening behaviour in a wide variety of places of work. The violence may come from members of the public, students, patients or clients, or from supervisors, managers or other workers.

Employees in the following types of job are probably at the greatest risk of violence:

Handling money, valuables or drugs:	cashiers delivery staff transport workers bank and post office staff commissioners security staff shop assistants forecourt attendants pharmacists
Providing care, advice or training:	nurses ambulance staff social workers teachers housing office staff
Carrying out inspection or enforcement duties:	traffic wardens ticket inspectors park keepers police/security officers
Working with mentally disturbed, drunk or potentially violent people:	prison officers landlords mental health workers
Working in licensed premises (restaurants, bars, brasseries and night clubs):	food and beverage staff bartenders security staff
Working alone:	home visitors bus/taxi drivers domestic repair workers

7. REDUCING THE RISK OF VIOLENCE AT WORK

The recommended approach to the management of violence at work is to eliminate the opportunity for the violent or threatening behaviour to occur.

Actions to provide additional personal protection such as personal alarms or self-defence training should only be used when all practicable steps have been taken to minimise the risk of injury or harm to health.

A plan to manage violence at work should be prepared in consultation with employees. It should be an action plan, not simply a written policy, and should identify any potential for violence at work which may result in injury or harm to the health of employees and others. The action plan should provide for the assessment of incidents that have occurred and determine control measures designed to prevent the occurrence or measures to deal with violence during or after the event. Provision should be made to assist those affected by the violence. It may be appropriate to seek specialist assistance, e.g. consultants, security agents, police or support services.

8. MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN

The following seven steps are designed to assist in identifying and dealing with violence in the place of work.

These steps are mainly designed to assist in identifying and managing potential hazards to employees from outside the place of work. Violence from fellow employees is an issue that management should also address, and the steps given may assist in this. Staff manuals, house rules and employment conditions should clearly state that abuse, threats or assaults by fellow staff will not be condoned and will be severely dealt with. Formal procedures should be included for the reporting of violence and the action to be taken should violence occur, i.e. formal warnings or instant dismissal, depending on the nature of the violence.

8.1. STEP ONE: Find out if There is a Problem

You may think violence is not a problem at your place of work or that incidents are rare. Your employees' view may be very different. For example, a petrol company may not be aware that there is a problem faced daily by forecourt employees unless their views are sought. Forecourt employees may be convinced that customer violence is the most serious threat to their personal health and safety.

The easiest way to find out is to ask. This can be done informally by managers, supervisors, safety representatives or employee representatives, or through a short questionnaire. The idea is to find out whether your employees ever feel threatened or under great stress. You should tell your employees the results of your survey so that if there is a problem they will realise you

recognise it, and if there isn't, any fears will be put to rest.

Even if no problem is found, it is wise to check the situation again from time to time because things can change.

If a problem is found, you will need to identify the areas of work where employees are exposed to some form of violence or are likely to be exposed.

This may include:

- Reviewing existing accident reports.
- Gathering new information from people at the place of work on violent incidents that are occurring.
- Providing information to staff to increase awareness of violence as a hazard and to help them recognise incidents that should be reported.
- Assigning a particular person in the organisation to deal, in confidence, with enquiries and reports of violent incidents; and
- Providing a confidential means of reporting violent incidents for those employees who may require it.

8.2.STEP TWO: Record all Incidents

By keeping a detailed record of all incidents, you can build up a picture of the problem. A simple report form can be used to get the details of what happened, where, when, who was involved, and any possible causes.

Employees may not report incidents for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps they accept aggressive behaviour as part of the job. They may think it will reflect badly on them if they admit it happens. You should encourage employees to report all incidents. Having a report form will help show that this is what you expect.

8.3.STEP THREE: Classify all Incidents

You will want to know what kinds of incidents are happening. This means classifying them under various headings: place, time, type of incident, who was involved and the possible causes.

For example, here is a simple classification to help you decide how serious incidents are:

TYPE OF INCIDENT	RESULT
Involving physical contact:	Fatal injury Major injury Injury or emotional shock requiring first aid, out patient treatment, counselling, absence from work (record number of days)
Involving serious or persistent threats or verbal abuse (sexual harassment):	Emotional shock requiring counselling or absence from work (record number of days) Feeling or being at risk or under great stress

It should be easy to classify “major injuries” but you will have to decide how to classify “serious or persistent verbal abuse” for your organisation, so as to cover all incidents that worry employees.

Use the details on incident report forms, along with the classifications, to check for patterns. Look for common causes, areas involved, and the times the incidents occurred by:

- Analysing information gathered on violent incidents to assess the underlying causes of the violent behaviour; and
- Grouping those incidents which have similar features.

It is important to assess the nature and extent of the problem throughout the place of work. This applies to the obvious high-profile threats and risk of physical attack, as well as the low-level forms of threat and intimidation. The steps you take can then be targeted where they are needed most.

8.4. STEP FOUR: Search for Control or Preventive Measures and Plan Victim Support

Find ways of preventing the types of violent incidents that have been identified in each work area.

There will often be a number of solutions to a particular problem and some will be easier to carry out than others. The introduction of new ways of managing violent and threatening behaviour will be easier and more effective

if employees are actively involved in choosing and implementing changes that will affect their work.

The way jobs are designed can reduce the risk of violence. But there are no ready-made remedies. You will have to find measures that are right for your place of work. Here are some examples of measures and how they could be used:

- Changing the job or system of work to give less face-to-face contact with the public to limit the opportunity for violent and threatening behaviour, e.g. improving cash handling procedures, introducing automatic ticket dispensers/collectors and cash machines, rostering experienced staff, rostering more staff on at peak periods to reduce stress, setting realistic deadlines. (At the same time, you should take care that measures do not increase the risks of violence to members of the public because staff are less visible.)
- Using electronic payment systems (e.g. EFT-POS), credit cards, cheques or tokens to reduce the amount of cash held and so make robbery less attractive.
- Checking the credentials of clients and if possible the arrangements for meetings away from the office. This could apply to real estate agents, for example.
- Making sure that staff can get home safely. The threat of violence does not stop when work has ended. The Act requires employers to protect employees only while they are at work, but good employers will take further steps where necessary. For example, if you need staff (particularly female staff) to work late, try and arrange for them to be able to drive to work and park their cars in a safe area. Employers in industries where staff are employed for late hours, e.g. restaurants, bars, brasseries and night clubs, should consider alternative transport options for these staff.
- Providing information, induction training, training and supervision for existing employees, either to give them more knowledge and confidence in their particular jobs, or to improve their ability to deal with aggression by spotting the early signs of potentially violent situations and taking appropriate action.
- Designing or changing the layout of public waiting areas to provide welcoming, calming surroundings. This could include improving seating, decor and lighting; installing

security lighting and protective barriers; installing video surveillance cameras (as well as protecting staff these can reduce vandalism and graffiti); reducing irritating background noise; and providing more regular information about delays. Such measures may help prevent tension building up in waiting rooms, i.e. hospitals, offices and similar places where the public are required to wait for service.

- Using wider counters and raising the height of the floor on the staff side of the counter to give staff more protection (many hotels have done this).
- Using coded security locks on doors to keep the public out of staff areas.

Where it is not practicable to completely eliminate all opportunities for violent and threatening behaviour, the action plan should include back-up procedures to be followed when violent incidents do occur.

These may include:

- Selecting sufficient and appropriate staff, who have clear guidelines to follow and the interpersonal skills to defuse potential violence.
- A system to alert co-workers that urgent help is required.
- Procedures for immediate first aid and medical help, dealing with emergency staff and police, completing medical and legal reports and provision of transport for the victim.
- Help for victims. From employers this may include counselling, time off, or help with compensation and legal advice. From work mates, it may mean giving evidence in court, talking about problems or just being sensitive to the victims' feelings and giving them support. Any support service for employees involved in violent incidents at work should be designed to reduce the impact of the crisis situation and to develop skills for handling violent incidents in the future.

It is important to sort out the support you plan to give before an attack happens. Employees will be better able to cope with stressful situations once they know they have your support. Your local police station is a sensible place to obtain information about what victim support is available.

Additional personal protection such as personal alarms or self-defence training (alarm buttons on buses or protective barriers) should be considered if other practicable steps do not deal with the problem effectively.

8.5.STEP FIVE: Decide What to Do

Employees are likely to be more committed to the measures if they help to design them and put them into practice. Employees and employee representatives may suggest measures that can be taken and their valuable contribution should not be ignored.

A mix of measures will often work best. Try to balance the risks to your employees against any possible side effects to the public. An atmosphere that suggests employees are worried about violence can sometimes increase its likelihood.

For example, while the provision of protective screens is a step that should be considered, in some situations protective screens could make it difficult for employees and the public to speak to each other. This may cause tension on both sides. A package of measures including taking screens down, providing more comfortable waiting areas and better information on waiting lists and delays could well reduce tension and lessen the potential for violent incidents.

8.6 STEP SIX: Put Measures into Practice

Whatever measures are decided on should be included in your health and safety management procedures, and all employees made aware of them. This will help your employees to co-operate with you, by following procedures properly and reporting incidents.

8.7.STEP SEVEN: Review and Check that Measures Work

Monitor the results of changes that have been introduced, using a system where employees can provide regular feedback, to check how well they are working and to make more modifications as necessary.

Careful monitoring of the situation not only allows the effects of each change to be assessed, it also ensures that any remaining problems or change in the nature of the problem can be identified.

It may be appropriate to hold joint management - employee meetings to discuss the measures put in place. If the measures work well, keep them up. If violence is still a problem, try something else. Go back through steps two and three and identify other preventative measures that could work.

Review the management plan on a regular basis.

Appropriate preventative measures will depend upon the nature of each problem, but it is likely that a combination of measures will be needed to reduce the risk.

Through a process of consultation, employers and employees should decide upon a wide range of strategies that suit their particular place of work.

Consultation is the key to a successful management plan.