

SRMG HOT TOPIC: WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

On August 20, 1986, Patrick H. Sherrill, a part-time letter carrier facing possible dismissal due to a troubled work history, walked into the Edmond, Oklahoma post office where he worked and shot fourteen people to death before killing himself. These killings—along with other similar events that occurred during the same period—brought the reality of workplace violence to the attention of the nation and marked the beginning of an increase in incidents of this nature that continues today.

WHAT IS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE?

Workplace violence takes numerous forms. It can be an actual act of physical violence against employees and/or employers, a threat of physical violence, or any type of harassment, intimidation, or menacing behavior in the workplace.

Workplace violence is on the rise and far more common than you might expect.

- The *Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Guideline* report released by ASIS International (ASIS; <http://www.asisonline.org/>) in 2005 noted that Fortune 1000 companies responding to an annual survey conducted by Pinkerton Consulting & Investigations Inc. (Pinkerton) cited workplace violence as the number one security threat for businesses in six of the previous seven years.
- According to an analysis conducted in 2004 by *USA Today*, twenty-five individuals are injured and one is killed per week on average as a result of workplace violence.
- A 2005 national telephone survey by the Corporate Alliance to End Partner Violence (CAEPV; <http://www.caepv.org/>) found that 21 percent of full-time employed adults were victims of domestic violence, and 64 percent of these individuals indicated that their work performance was significantly impacted.
- A 2005 national survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS; <http://www.bls.gov/>) found that nearly 5 percent of the approximately 7.1 million private industry business establishments in the United States had a workplace violence incident occur in the twelve months prior to completing the survey. For the largest establishments in the survey (employing 1,000 or more workers), this number rose to almost 50 percent.

Categories of Workplace Violence

According to experts, workplace violence incidents fall into one of four categories.

TYPE 1—Violent acts by criminals who enter to commit robbery or another crime but have no other connection with the workplace.

TYPE 2—Violence directed at employees by customers, clients, patients, students, inmates, or any others for whom an organization provides services.

TYPE 3—Violence against coworkers, supervisors, or managers by a present or former employee.

TYPE 4—Violence committed in the workplace by someone who has a personal relationship with an employee but doesn't work there (e.g., an abusive spouse or domestic partner).

(Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] Critical Incident Response Group [CIRG], *Workplace Violence: Issues in Response*)

WHO IS VULNERABLE?

A better question to ask is who is not vulnerable. Workplace violence can occur in any business environment, and no employee or employer is immune. However, according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA; <http://www.osha.gov/>), some individuals are more at risk, including those who exchange money with the public; deliver passengers, goods, or services; or work alone or in small groups, late at night or early in the morning, in high-crime areas, or in community settings or homes where they have extensive contact with the public. This group includes health care and social service workers such as visiting nurses, psychiatric evaluators, and probation officers; community workers such as gas and water utility employees, telephone and cable TV installers, and letter carriers; retail workers; and taxicab drivers.

HOW CAN EMPLOYERS PROTECT EMPLOYEES?

Employers are obligated to provide their employees with a safe and secure work environment. For this reason, it is important that employers take a few important steps.

- Establish a zero-tolerance policy toward workplace violence.
- Develop a workplace violence prevention program. This should include policies related to the work performed, such as specific instructions and procedures for employees at a higher risk of becoming victims.
- Provide training for employees so that they recognize the warning signs and know what to do if they are involved in a workplace violence incident.
- Secure the workplace using closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance, alarm systems, guard services, access control systems, and additional lighting as appropriate.
- Supply employees with additional security and safety equipment—such as cellular telephones and handheld alarms—if necessary.

HOW CAN EMPLOYEES PROTECT THEMSELVES?

While it is the responsibility of employers to protect their employees, even the best prevention programs cannot guarantee the complete safety of a workplace. Employees must also take steps to protect themselves.

- Bring any workplace violence warning signs or general security and safety concerns to the attention of management, human resources, or security (as applicable) immediately.
- Report any actual workplace violence incidents (whether you are the victim or a witness) to management, human resources, or security (as applicable) immediately.
- Attend any related training offered by your employer.
- Be aware. Watch for warning signs and utilize the security and safety measures and equipment provided by your employer.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Internet supplies a wealth of resources with information about how to prevent workplace violence, recognize the warning signs, and respond to incidents if they do occur. The following list provides a few valuable links:

- *Keeping Your Workplace Safe*—<http://www.osha.gov/Publications/98-40brochure.pdf>
- *Violence on the Job*—<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/video/violence.html>
- *Workplace Violence* (OSHA Fact Sheet)—
http://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_General_Facts/factsheet-workplace-violence.pdf
- *Workplace Violence: Issues in Response*— <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/workplace-violence>
- *Workplace Violence Prevention and Response Guideline*—
<http://www.theicor.org/art/present/qs/shrt/GSFM0007s.pdf>