

Identify, Respond, and Preventing Workplace Violence Literature Review

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Abstract

In this study, several publications were analyzed, defining a spectrum of behaviors associated with workplace violence that threaten the physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of employees in the workplace. The spectrum also includes a wide range of perpetrators of such conduct to include co-workers, supervisors, customers, clients, and those who may not have a direct affiliation with the organization but seek to do harm motivated by an ideology. While discrimination and harassment may be the most common forms of abusive conduct employers recognize and set policies to expressly prohibit, other forms of inappropriate behaviors exist that employees should be protected from or at a minimum employers should take proactive measures to discourage or prevent. Education and awareness are key to such measures. In this review, four themes emerged: Perception of workplace violence, reporting, strategies, and workplace culture. Findings indicate there are both finite and broad ways of how workplace violence is defined that are dependent upon the entity governing the rules prohibiting such behavior, the type of workplace violence that is of concern in the occupation that is being focused on, and how the perception of what constitutes violence. This in part leads to a lack of reporting of such conduct which is pervasive. Strategies to combat workplace violence exist but are not shared across all workforces, and cultural differences that may hinder workplace civility for all workforces.

Identify, Respond, and Preventing Workplace Violence

Regardless of whether the behavior is formally or informally recognized by law, abusive behavior can lead to psychological, emotional, and physical harm if unchecked. No matter the occupational field, incivility within a workplace is a concern for everyone. “While many individuals practice good manners and humane behavior, human aggression seems to thrive in organizations” (Fredericksen, 2013 p.223). Much literature exists acknowledging the dangers of workplace violence in the healthcare field, but little literature is published about the dangers of such behavior over the wider spectrum of occupations. Further, “little is known about the consequences for bystanders who intervene when witnessing bullying of others” (Rosander, 2023 p.34). No matter the occupation, workplace violence continues to thrive in many organizations and businesses. In part, based on articles found, a trend exists where we compartmentalize the nature of the behavior by only discussing its types and remedies by profession and the associated environment. It is for these reasons that the topic demands further research with the intent of setting a standard across every profession that not only prohibits abusive conduct, but too empowers employees to recognize, respond to and help prevent behaviors that lead to workplace violence.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to summarize and evaluate current research pertaining to workplace violence. In understanding what constitutes workplace violence, several measures will be highlighted that employers can take to identify, respond to, and prevent workplace violence.

The literature review will answer three main questions:

1. What is workplace violence?
2. How are organizations planning and responding to workplace violence?

3. What training and legal protections exist to protect employees against workplace violence?

Defining Workplace Violence

Because of the varying trends of how people engage in incivility within the workplace, the term workplace violence has been defined by a variety of parameters commonly based upon the relationship between the person engaging in the incivility and the person being subjected to the behavior. In many articles examined in this literature review, authors lean toward definitions that are broad in an effort to capture forever expanding ways one person may adversely treat another within the workplace. Findorff (2005) analyzed an employers method of evaluating what their employees knowledge was of the organizations of work violence prevention policy consisted of. In their data collection, Findorff concluded that the employees perception of workplace violence varied. As such Findorff developed a generic definition: "Violence is broadly defined as words and actions that hurt people (Findorff, 2005, p.361). Questions were posed in a study supporting this definition to include in what way were the employees targeted. This included asking if employees were hit, shoved, kicked, bit, slapped, or what could be perceived as verbal assaults such as words, comments, unwelcomed sexual advances, physical materials, threats, or intimidation (p.361).

When workplace violence is deemed explicit or implied, authors will attempt to define the term by simple use of examples in an effort to help readers understand the type of violence the author is attempting to address. Bruce and Nowlin (2011) for instance share examples of workplace violence to include threatening behavior that can be deemed assaultive both verbally and physically. Problematic to this example is identifying what verbal words constitute a form of

assault and in what way can those words be punishable before one's free speech is deemed infringed upon.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence more finite as "violent acts or threats of a violent physical assaults that is specifically directed toward people who are at work or on duty (OSHA, p.2). The act can be in the form of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, disruptive behavior (p.2). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is a national administration of the United States that sets health and safety standards for workers for all occupations. However, its publications related to defining and preventing workplace violence are centered around the healthcare field commonly citing data that only pertains to workplace violence in the healthcare and social services work environment (OSHA, p.1). One such source is the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) where OSHA (2016) highlights "...that workplace violence is a threat to those in the healthcare and social service settings" (para 6). It further discusses how "...the majority of injuries from assaults at work that required days away from work occurred in the healthcare and social services settings" (para 7) which statistics and remedies about the healthcare field to follow throughout the remainder of their publication.

A broader approach to how workplace violence can be defined is human aggression. This is "...efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work, or have worked, or the organizations in which they are currently, or were previous employed" (Neuman & Baron as cited in Lord, 2001, p.185). From this perspective, acts of incivility go far beyond just the physical or verbal efforts. Intentions by the person engaging in the aggression are intentional and can be direct or indirect. It can also be expressed in an active or passive behavior.

According to both the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and OSHA, there are 4 distinct types of workplace violence that exist. Each are related to the relationship between the person committing the violent act and the target. Summarizing the types provided by FBI, they include: (Workplace Violence, p.13)

Type 1: The violence is committed by criminals with no nexus to the workplace and is doing so in the commission of a crime such as a robbery of the workplace.

Type 2: The violence is against an employee of a business by a customer, client, patient, student, inmate, or any other person that the organization provides services to.

Type 3: Violent acts committed by a current or a former employee against a coworker, supervisor or manager.

Type 4: A violent act committed by a non-employee however that person has a personal relationship with an employee of that organization. This common in domestic partnership disputes.

In Type 2 incidents, the workplace violence usually occurs as the worker is providing a normal service to the customer, client, or patient. In healthcare, patients can become violent and according to the FBI, that violence by patients is seen as inherent to the job. The same is said about the relationship between law enforcement officials to inmates or confined mental health patients. “Current research has identified staff, environmental, and patient risk factors as the major precursors of workplace violence initiated by patients” (Martinez, 2016 p.31). The action can be triggered by a disagreement, anger, dissatisfaction of the quality of service, denial of service, or delay of service. A shared notion of when these violent acts occur regardless of what precipitated it is that they are unpredictable.

Type 4 incidents are the least considered forms of workplace violence due to the relationship between the employee and the aggressor which may not be known by the employer or anyone else within the organization. As highlighted by Lassiter, et al. (2021) via statistics from the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, 76 percent of domestic assaults were committed reported by employees to have been committed by intimate partners. Of that number 32.9 percent of the victims were women who were assaulted. The correlation between these assaults and the workplace is the leading cause of death of women in the workplace is homicide committed by their intimate partner. The survey suggests the choice to commit this act in the workplace is due to the partner seeing the workplace as a predictable location their wife or girlfriend attends.

The FBI adds a fifth type of violence that acknowledges violence in the workplace associated with violence motivated by ideology. This is considered to bring awareness to terrorist acts of violence. This type of workplace violence may be nearly impossible to predict as it is likely to be committed by outside entities with no direct relationship to individuals within the organization. This type should still be considered for review as employees can be encouraged to remain vigilant in reporting suspicious activities just outside of their workplaces that can be early warnings of a targeted attack.

Planning & Responding to Workplace Violence

“The goal of intervention is to help organizations move from a toxic to a beneficial culture in which staff can do their work more effectively” (Bowie as cited in Bowen, et, al, 2011 p.189). This is convincing as far less egregious behaviors such as gossiping, ridiculing, teasing, or mocking of other employees, may not be workplace violence however are behaviors that if

sanctioned by the employer can cause the person engaging in such behavior to feel comfortable to upgrade their behavior. Just as equally important, victims subjected to such behavior may respond in a violent manner as retribution. These possibilities are demonstrated in studies highlighting how important leadership must be aware of traumatic effects of workplace incivility in addition to policies and procedures, and a non-coercive climate "...can still experience workplace violence and workplace incivility because of situational stresses interacting with personal traits" (Bowen, et, al, 2011 p.189).

Commonly found in organizations is a code of conduct which governs how employees are expected to behave towards colleagues, customers, and those in their care within the workplace. This code is commonly summarized in an ethos, creed, core value statement, mission statement, or list of goals. The summary is predicated on a more detailed series of policies defining prohibited conduct. The prohibited conduct commonly highlighted in the policy are discrimination, harassment, abusive conduct, and retaliation.

Bowen, et al. (2011) concluded that a predictive behavioral model can be formed once one understands the collective effects of workplace incivility. The authors further assert that incivility is seen as one of the lower-level forms of workplace violence that is displayed which is non-physical or a form of physical deviant behavior that violates the norms of mutual respect in the workplace. While this may be proclaimed, incivility itself can be identified as a starting point of more egregious acts making incivility apart of a continuum of escalating behavior. As a starting point of exhibited behavior, this can also be a starting point or early warning for a proactive response by employers and employees to combat workplace violence.

A way employers can plan for workplace violence is recognizing signs of a threat to an employee or the organization based on the current workplace culture. The FBI (OJP p.25)

suggest employers conduct threat assessments to include the employer having knowledge of the organization's current cultural behaviors. Promoting a cohesive workplace with a common goal in mind empowers people to speak up when they experience or witness workplace incivility or worst. One goal that every employee can rally around is the importance of physical and psychological safety. This includes encouraging employees to report behaviors amongst colleagues, clients, and even domestic partners that are dangerous or conflicts with the safety and wellbeing of others. Another consideration is the significance of sharing information amongst those responsible for responding to workplace violence. The FBI asserts that a lack of knowledge of threats made to the organization makes any plans to respond to workplace violence impractical (p.24).

What is certain throughout the research on how to plan and respond to workplace violence is the necessity for teamwork amongst both employees and employers. This is reiterated by Kaweckyj (2021) in their planning approach encouraging employers "use the team approach to deal with a potential workplace violence episode" (p.10). When everyone within the organization are aware of the programs, policies, and procedures in place to combat workplace violence, a higher level of competency, confidence and safety exist that can increase the survival of all who are targeted.

Training and Legal Protections

A common term used when discussing inappropriate behaviors in a workplace setting is workplace harassment. When an employee hears the term, we commonly associate the phrase with various forms of discriminatory and adverse treatment of others within the workplace associated with a protected class. These protected classes are governed by federal law within the United States which include adverse treatment based on or because of a person's sex, gender,

disability, ethnicity, race, or national origin as defined by Title VII Civil Rights Act (1964). But not all forms of abusive behaviors are motivated by a protected class or seen as disparate toward a particular individual. As demonstrated as a common concern in the literature reviewed, personality conflicts, gossiping, intimidation, and bullying are other motivating factors not commonly addressed in legal regulations. “Workplace violence risk management can be approached in the same manner as other safety and health programs utilizing a well-rounded approach rooted in hazard prevention strategies...” (Henriquez, 2022 p.10).

Workplace Policy

To combat workplace violence, employers need to go beyond the minimum standards of discrimination defined by federal law. A more effective workplace policy is one that exceeds federal law to prohibit additional forms of incivility and adverse treatment that could encourage the opportunity to commit workplace violence. Organizations should incorporate state laws into their workplace conduct policies. While there is no federal law in the United States that specifically addresses workplace bullying, there are some states that have implemented laws that prohibit such conduct in the workplace. One such state is California that in 2015 signed into law Assembly Bill 2053 (AB-2053), more loosely known as the “anti-bullying law” defines abusive conduct as “Conduct that a reasonable person would find hostile, offensive, and unrelated to an employer’s legitimate business interests” (2015). The assembly bill not only addresses bullying conduct but also actions by an employee that can be deemed a hazardous risk to the workplace. An example of this is bringing a weapon or other dangerous device to the workplace. While it may be legally possessed, the object may not be needed nor reasonably necessary for the performance of his or her duties.

Policies can be developed as a resource and guideline for employees to understand what behaviors are socially acceptable and avenues for how to report such actions that are witnessed. As suggested by Henriquez (2022), policies could include an anonymous telephone hotline program to compliment the security of the workplace. “If employees have knowledge about available policies and routines for reporting bullying, while also knowing that the organization will protect their health and welfare if they chose to report, it is more likely that they will actively intervene when they witness bullying of others” (Rosander, 2023 p.40).

Training

Training has been identified as an effective way to keep employees informed on how to respond to workplace violence. How that training is performed varies but can equally be considered among all professions. Martinez (2017) has developed a workplace violence simulated training where undergraduates enrolled in a psychiatric nursing course are presented with scenarios where coached role players acting out various health conditions (p.40). The studies of such simulations have resulted in nurse practitioners to feel more confident in recognizing signs of potential violence by clients and patients. While this research is limited to the healthcare field and the behaviors of patients, the application of simulated training in general can be tailored to other occupations.

Kaweckyj (2021) provides a more global approach to preparing employees to identify and combat workplace violence. This approach is in the form of emergency action planning where recommendations are given to organizations on how to respond to workplace violence depending on the type of danger presented. The types of situations referenced by Kaweckyj (2021) are closely like the types of workplace violence outlined by the FBI previously mentioned in this review (p.11). For example, when a robbery occurs within the workplace (a Type 1 form

of workplace violence), employees may be educated to “cooperate fully and hand over whatever is asked” (Kaweckyj, 2021 p.11). Other considerations include but is not limited to the use of an emergency code that alerts other employees of imminent danger within their workplace (p.10).

Conclusion

No matter the level of abusive conduct that is displayed or the level at which it is defined, workplace violence will always remain an issue within the workplace due to the number of behavioral variables that exist between employees, supervisors, managers, clients, and other indirect relationships held with employees of the organization (ie: domestic partner). The impact of workplace violence can be devastating for both the individuals involved and the organization as a whole. Victims may experience physical injury, psychological trauma, and loss of job or income. Organizations can suffer from decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and damage to their reputation especially when the conduct is originating from employees within, and the organization fails to respond in an immediate and transparent manner. “In addressing the issue of workplace violence, the first step an organization should take is zero tolerance for any type of violence” (Bruce, 2011 p.296).

A zero-tolerance approach is not just about policy implementation. It can include regular training and education for employees, as well as support services for those who have experienced violence. Soloranzo (2021) identifies several different types of articles which reaffirm the importance of workplace violence training programs. Analyzed were generic, simulated-based, and role-play-based training programs. The results of these studies suggest that providing training is another tool used to not only recognize workplace violence but too encourage employees to report such behaviors. Without training, it increases the number of unreported incidents (p.371).

Employers should also work to create a safe and secure workplace environment through measures such as security systems, background checks, and regular risk assessments. It can be difficult to prevent workplace violence due to its unpredictability. Human behavior is unpredictable therefore there is no way to forecast and prevent all acts of workplace violence. “If a violent incident cannot be predicted or prevented, the employer has a duty to provide immediate and appropriate treatment to the victimized employees” (Gallant-Roman, 2008 p.453). While all studies found and identified in this literature review focus on a specific occupation, all methods of workplace violence prevention can be a significant contribution to the comprehensive planning and response to incidents of workplace violence in any profession. Employers can use past incidents and employee feedback on experiences as a starting point in providing increased security, training, policies, and a culture that promotes a cohesive and zero tolerance posture against workplace violence. Preventing workplace violence is a shared collaborative responsibility between employers, employees, the government regulating workplace social behavior and families of the colleagues within the organization.

The focus of these studies does not provide us with enough information as the surveys are limited to a specific occupation and in some cases specific regions of the world where the cultural behaviors both within and outside of the organization differ. This is not to assert that the information provided is wrong but instead, the studies contribute to finding a solution for all organizations extremely challenging.

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