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Workplace Violence

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Workplace violence has become a well-known yet often misunderstood social problem in both the United States and around the world. Ever since 1986, when a postal employee in Edmond, Oklahoma, murdered 14 fellow employees and wounded several others, workplace violence has been synonymous with senseless violence directed against coworkers and supervisors by deranged and disgruntled employees. In a report entitled “Violence on the Job—A Global Problem” released in Geneva and Washington, DC, in July of 1998, the International Labour Organization (ILO) noted that outbursts of violence occurring at workplaces around the globe suggest that this issue transcends the boundaries of a particular country, work setting, or occupational group. According to the ILO, a 1996 European Union survey based on 15,800 interviews in its 15 member states showed that four percent of workers (6 million) were subjected to violence in the preceding year (Chappell and DiMartino 1998).

In the United States, data from the National Crime Victimization Surveys (NCVS) for 1992-1996 indicate that an annual average of 2,010,800 citizens experienced violent victimizations while they were working or on duty. Overall, for each year there were about 1.5 million simple assaults, 396,000 aggravated assaults, 51,000 rapes and sexual assaults, and 84,000 robberies. In fact, one in six violent crimes in the entire U.S. occurred in the workplace, including eight

percent of all rapes, seven percent of robberies, and 16 percent of assaults. The occupations of these survivors of workplace violence varied widely.

Annually, 330,000 retail sales workers became victims of workplace violence. These included 61,000 convenience store clerks and 26,000 bartenders. More than 160,000 medical workers were victimized. An estimated 70,000 nurses, 24,000 technicians, and about 10,000 physicians were victimized each year. Teachers accounted for about 149,000 workplace victimizations and mental health workers accounted for 102,500 violent assaults. Approximately 234,000 police and 71,100 private security officers were assaulted while on duty. Over 76,930 transportation workers were attacked while working. In fact, the taxi driver's job is the most dangerous occupation with 183.8 victimizations per 1,000 workers compared to the overall average of 14.8 victimizations per 1,000 workers in all occupations (Warchol 1998). Workplace violence and homicide have been identified as the fastest growing forms of violence in the United States, doubling in the past ten years (Carll 1999).

A study conducted by the Northwestern National Life Insurance Company in 1993 suggests that the number of assaulted employees may be closer to 2.2 million. Furthermore, 6 million workers were threatened and 16 million were harassed. Overall, one in four workers in the U.S. are attacked, threatened, or harassed each year while on the job. Even more tragic are the homicides which occur at the workplace. During the early and mid-1990s, approximately 1,000 people were killed at work annually in the U.S., although U.S. Bureau of Labor data for 1999 reveal that 645 American workers fell victim to homicide on the job compared to 714 in 1998. This drop in homicides at work is likely related to the overall drop in violent crime in the U.S. during the late 1990s. Nevertheless, the homicide rate remains higher than existed in the early 1960s, and remains high when compared to many other industrialized nations around the world (Fox and Levin 2001).

The economic costs of workplace violence are enormous. In the U.S., the National Safe Workplace Institute estimated in the early 1990s that assaults and murders at work cost the economy \$4.2 billion (Kinney 1995). A more recent estimate in 1998 by the Workplace Violence Research Institute identified the cost of workplace violence to be closer to \$36 billion once such variables as loss of productivity, work disruptions, employee turnover, litigation, and incident-related costs such as increased security expenditures and higher insurance premiums are considered (Mattman and Kaufer 1998). Internationally, the total cost of group harassment and individual bullying of German workers has been estimated at 2.5 billion marks per year. In Canada, the British Columbia Worker's Compensation Board has reported that wage loss claims by hospital workers due to acts of violence have increased 88 percent since 1985 (Chappell and DiMartino 2000). While the true value of a lost life can never be expressed in mere economic terms, one study by the U.S. Department of Labor estimated the dollar value of the life of an employee at \$7 million (Kinney 1995). Certainly, any figures such as these must be cautiously interpreted due to variations in fundamental assumptions and the imprecise nature of much financial data. Nevertheless, the enormity of the estimates alone attests to the contemporary significance of the problem.

Notwithstanding increased popular and scholarly attention to workplace violence, there remain disagreements concerning the exact nature and extent of the problem. Some observers believe the actual threat to workers presented by their disgruntled coworkers is vastly exaggerated by the media and numerous self-proclaimed experts who stand to profit through consulting contracts from hasty corporate expenditures designed to protect their workers from a perceived imminent danger (Southerland et al. 1997). Other observers cite statistics indicating that only 59 employees were killed by coworkers or former coworkers in 1993, out of a total national workforce of 120.8 million people. These critics place the odds of murder by a fellow employee at roughly one in 2 million and point out that the National Weather Service puts the odds of getting struck by lightning at one in 600,000 (Larson 1996). In fact, most murders of employees

are committed during robberies of retail establishments. Other workplace homicides center around disputes with customers and clients or involve the murder of police officers while on duty.

A number of scholars also believe the concept of workplace violence has been unduly limited to physical assaults and homicides. There is a belief that much emotional injury results from sexual harassment, bullying, and other forms of psychological aggression which should become part of the international discourse on workplace violence (Denenberg and Braverman 1999; Keashley 1998; Neuman and Baron 1998). Accordingly, a more comprehensive definition of workplace violence is “any act against an employee that creates a hostile work environment and negatively affects the employee, either physically or psychologically. These acts include all types of physical or verbal assault, threats, coercion, intimidation, and all forms of harassment” (Shea 2000).

In an attempt to promote better understanding of workplace violence, a number of perpetrator typologies have been suggested. Such conceptual distinctions would facilitate investigation into the etiology, patterns, and control of the problem. For example, one psychologist has identified five main types of work-site assailants: the angry customer, the medically ill person, the batterer in a domestic dispute, the criminal, and the disgruntled employee of the company (Flannery 1995). Other experts, after scrutinizing numerous case histories, have identified seven categories of workplace assailants: criminals, personal/domestic disputants, disgruntled employees, mentally ill, disgruntled customers/clients, disgruntled student/trainees, abusive supervisors (Feldman and Johnson 1996).

An increasingly popular conceptual scheme, however, is that posited by the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA). The key to this typology is the relationship of the perpetrator to the workplace. In Type I violence, the perpetrator has no legitimate connection

to the workplace. For example, during the commission of a robbery at a small late-night retail establishment such as a liquor store, gas station, or convenience store, an employee or proprietor is killed or injured. A Type II workplace violence event involves fatal or nonfatal injuries to individuals who provide services to the public. These events involve assaults on public safety personnel, bus or cab drivers, teachers and social workers, sales personnel and medical, psychiatric, and nursing care workers. A Type III workplace violence event consists of an assault by an individual who has some employment-related involvement with the workplace. These events generally involve threats or assaults by a current or former employee, coworker, supervisor, former spouse or lover, or some other person who has a dispute involving an employee of the workplace.

Because the circumstances and targets of workplace violence vary widely, so, too, will the motivations of various perpetrators. Due to the wide range of workplace violence incident types, no single etiological theory will generalize broadly enough to be universally applicable. Nevertheless, several theoretical approaches have proven useful in understanding the multifarious nature of workplace violence. Workplace violence Type I crimes are generally explained according to conventional social process and social structure theories of criminality such as differential association theory and strain theory. Routine activities theory and the “General Theory of Crime” (self-control theory) are also representative of current criminological thinking applied to workplace violence (Siegel 2001).

Type II crimes are often explicable through the same theoretical approaches useful in the analysis of Type I crime. There are, however, additional considerations in several instances. For example, medical people may be attacked because of the paranoid delusions of some of their patients. Attacks at schools may result from the combination of youthful developmental insecurities and school cultures that generate or tolerate bullying (Aronson 2000; Olweus 1994).

Also, as in the case of school shooters, the interaction of personality traits with school, family, and social dynamics may be the best predictor of violent behavior (O'Toole 2000).

Attempts at explanations of Type III workplace violence often take the form of various profiles describing the disgruntled employee as a narcissistic loner whose ego involvement with his job prevents insight, who feels unappreciated, places blame externally, is infatuated with weapons and violence, and who is characterized as having negative affectivity. Because profiles often produce an unacceptable number of false positives, other observers attribute workplace violence to any of a variety of factors such as perceived injustice, increased worker diversity, downsizing, noxious environmental conditions, hostile attributional bias, and Type A behavior patterns (Neuman and Baron 1998). Also appropriate to explain many cases of Type III workplace violence between coworkers is Agnew's general strain theory, which discusses how anger may develop as a consequence of failure to achieve positively valued goals, removal of positively valued stimuli, and the actual or anticipated presentation of negatively valued stimuli (Agnew 1992). Also present in the literature are explanations attributing workplace crime to domestic violence spillover into the workplace and to such psychiatric disorders as Borderline Personality Disorder, Delusional Disorder, Dependent Personality Disorder, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, Histrionic Personality Disorder, and Antisocial Personality Disorder.

Employers can sometimes find themselves liable in tort for those instances of workplace violence which were "substantially certain" to befall their employees and where no preventive action was taken to protect these employees. Causes of action such as negligent hiring, negligent retention, negligent supervision, and negligent entrustment have been successfully brought against employers by injured employees who are not barred by workers compensation laws from bringing suit. To avoid such litigation, to prevent other financial losses, and to fulfill their moral duty to their employees, many employers are adopting "zero tolerance" policies toward aggressive behavior on the part of their employees. Security surveys are being conducted to identify threats to employee safety. Employee Assistance Programs are becoming responsive to

victimization prevention needs, and company leaders are forming threat assessment teams to evaluate developing situations that may prove a threat to employee safety.

Both government employers and private sector employers are developing comprehensive violence prevention policies and are sharing information widely. For example, the International Association of Chiefs of Police recently commissioned the development of guidelines for both law enforcement and employers to follow in order to prevent workplace violence, manage acute incidents, and deal with the aftermath. Overall, the best strategies for dealing with the problem of workplace violence will ultimately require this kind of coordinated effort.

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