Prevention of physical violence at work

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violent incidents exists. The risk of workplace violence is associated with specific workplace factors such as (6):

• provision of services, care or education
• working with the mentally disturbed, with drunks or drug abusers
• handling of money, medicines or other valuables
• representing authority or carrying out law enforcement or security duties
• working alone or with very few workmates
• working late at night, or very early in the morning
• working in high-crime areas.

According to an analysis of the Finnish occupational accident database maintained by the Federation of Accident Insurance Institutions in 1994–1999, altogether 3,103 occupational accidents were related to violence in Finland. The proportion of violence-related occupational accidents was 0.4% of all the registered occupational accidents. Occupational violence is a risk especially for women; 42% of the violent injuries occurred among female workers, whereas of all occupational accidents only 29% occurred to women. The majority of the violent injuries occurred in the service sector (38%), health care and social services (24%), transport (13%) and in the retail trade (12%). The most hazardous occupations per 1,000 employees were hotel receptionists, restaurant service workers, police officers and security guards.

In 1990–1998 there were 17 fatal occupational accidents related to violence in Finland. Four of these happened to women. In 1990–1998 the average annual rate of workplace homicides per 100,000 workers was 0.10. The highest rates were found for police officers, with an annual rate of 5.42 per 100,000 police officers. Other occupations in which workers suffered work-related fatal occupational accidents were driver, security guard, salesperson, waiter, hotel receptionist, nurse and bank employee (5). Last year taxi drivers were in the highest risk; two taxi drivers were victims of job-related homicide in 2001.

Prevention of violence

Although workplace violence may appear to be random, many incidents can be anticipated and avoided. Even when a potentially violent incident occurs, a timely and appropriate response can prevent the situation from escalating and resulting in injury or death.

In connection with the pilot study carried out in 1995–1996, a model for the assessment and management of the risk of violence at work was developed at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (Figure 1). Important issues in the prevention of violence at workplace level involve a systematic approach with risk assessment and preventive measures directed at the work environment, at safety and security systems, at work procedures, guidelines and training. Other means are the reporting and analysis of violent incidents, and post-incident support for the victims. The elements of the model provide a basis for an effective safety and security programme for workplaces to support their efforts to prevent violence (7).

Policy

Commitment on the part of the management and involvement of the employees are complementary elements of an effective safety and health programme. The management provides the motivation and resources to deal effectively with violence at work. The visible com-
All the possible hazards, conditions, and a just distribution of tasks. Violent situations are, e.g. not working alone or late at night or very early in the morning. (A workplace in Zambia.)

The risk of workplace violence is associated with e.g. provision of services, handling of money, working alone or late at night or very early in the morning. (A workplace in Zambia.)

The development of violent and threatening situations can be prevented in advance with certain procedures. Guidelines can focus either on reducing exposure to violence, or on encouraging appropriate behaviour when violence does occur, or on the action to be taken after a violent incident has happened. Every company should have explicit procedures and guidelines, at least for the following items: coming to and leaving the workplace, security of the keys, use of technical devices, handling of money, emergency procedures in case of a robbery or other violent situation, report-keeping and post-incident support. The procedures are effective only if they are followed properly by all the personnel. Training is the key component of any successful violence prevention programme; it gives the employees information on company policy, procedures and guidelines.

Reporting and evaluation of incidents

A good reporting system helps employees to assess the severity of the risks, evaluate the methods of hazard control, and identify training needs. The report should contain information on previous events, on the incident in question, and on the consequences, as well as the actions taken after the incident.

Post-incident support

The victims of workplace violence may suffer from a variety of physical and mental consequences, and a follow-up programme can help minimize these consequences. Post-incident support may include, e.g. first-aid and emergency medical treatment, reporting the incident to the police and other authorities, and post-incident debriefing and counselling.

Reviewing and improving the system

It is important to regularly assess the effectiveness of the workplace violence prevention system. The effectiveness will increase if the impact of the activities is monitored, the consequences are assessed, and the parts of the system are developed as needed.

The KAURIS method

The model for the assessment and management of the risk of violence at work is a basis for the method developed at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. The method is called KAURIS, acronym for the Finnish words “kaupan riskit” (“Risks in the retail trade”). The KAURIS method helps individual businesses in the assessment and management of workplace violence. The method involves a set of tools for helping establishments to identify violence-related risks and to improve the prevention of violent incidents.

The KAURIS method utilizes a participative approach in which a team (consisting of the foreman and workers) is formed for carrying out the necessary actions. In addition, the entire personnel is involved in the process. Each team starts from its own situation, and the first task is to make a risk assessment by utilizing a questionnaire and a check-list provided for the purpose. Handling the
risk of violence may be improved with the help of the information sheets of the KAURIS method. The training of the personnel is an important part of improving safety.

Conclusions

Violence at work is a complex problem which demands multifunctional actions and cooperation among researchers, the authorities, employers’ and employees’ organizations, enterprises and other relevant groups. The systematic prevention of workplace violence ensures undisrupted working conditions and increases job satisfaction, as well as the well-being of the customers.

The KAURIS method is a practical tool which workplaces can use to support their violence prevention programmes. A well-operating safety control system ensures that the work can be done without disturbances, and the mental stress of the workers will decrease.

References


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Violence at workplaces

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“Violence in the workplace has become an epidemic. Not only is workplace violence increasingly common in those workplaces where violence is expected — for example corrections, law enforcement and mental health — but in almost every occupation that deals with the public.”

(Occupational Safety and Health Administration)

Introduction

Violence has become an everyday reality for many workers, from bus and train drivers to teachers, residential and bank security personnel, domestic servants, nurses and aircraft crews. Shrouding such a serious subject in silence and secrecy is counterproductive.

Every week people are abused, threatened and beaten up simply because individuals with whom they have to deal as part of their job turn violent. Many people suffer minor or major injuries, and the psychological effects — stress, depression, even fear of work — can be even worse. The most effective solutions can only be achieved through an active partnership of all the actors concerned.

This short introduction to violence at workplaces is intended to provide brief answers to a number of questions. These include: What is violence? What are the risk factors of violence at workplaces? What are the types of violence prevalent at workplaces? What is the cost of violence at workplaces? How can violence at workplaces be prevented?

What is violence?

Violence is defined as any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising from his or her employment.

Erwin (2001) supports the above definition when he states that violence is the outcome of disputes or adverse interpersonal relations between employees and maintains that violence at workplaces is not just limited to physical assault, but can also include near misses, verbal abuse and sexual harassment. Even the fear of assault among co-workers can have serious health effects.

What are the risk factors of violence at workplaces?

There is a very dangerous common myth that violence at workplaces is essentially random and unpredictable. Because we cannot predict it, we cannot do anything about it. However, experts have compiled a long list of risk factors that are utilized to predict violence; these include the work environment, workplace practices, and victim/perpetrator profiles.

Environment factors that predict violence include: a violent society; a violence-prone neighbourhood; a large number of weapons in circulation; the early release of mental patients; and the hospitalization of criminals instead of incarceration and the threat of penalties for injuries to patients or clients.

Workplace practices that predict violence include: low staffing levels; solitary work; working with money; and long waiting times for customers, clients or patients requiring services, or a lack of easily accessible services.

Perpetrator profiles that predict violence include: mentally ill persons who are not properly supervised or treated; gang members; and relatives of injured persons who are also prone to violent acts.

Victim profiles include:
• Employees who work in homes or in the community
• People who handle money