

V I O L E N C E A T W O R K

The 1988 British Crime Survey showed that nearly a quarter of violent incidents and over a third of threats experienced by individuals were work related.

A study of bus workers showed that almost a third had been subjected to physical assault and that this was related to the introduction of the single operator bus. A Health and Safety Commission study of five health authorities revealed that over 10 per cent of workers had been injured in attacks in the previous year and nearly 20 per cent had been subject to verbal abuse. Many thousands of workers face the threat of violence every day, arising directly out of their jobs. Those particularly at risk include: anyone working with the public, for example in social security, social services, housing, health, education, transport, hotels and catering. Their work may also involve handling money in shops, banks or post offices. Anyone required to work alone, late at night, or in people's homes is also at risk.

Violence at work, like any other occupational hazard, should not be accepted as part of the job, nor a result of bad luck or personal incompetence — a 'victim centred' approach is inappropriate. It is management's statutory responsibility to identify the nature and extent of the risk, to train and inform workers, and to devise measures which provide a safe workplace and a safe system of work.

This is most likely to happen where there is a trade union which deals with violence at work as an industrial relations issue and which is prepared to negotiate, or if necessary take action, to secure the required preventive measures. Full use should be made of the Safety Reps and Safety Committees Regulations in drawing up, implementing and monitoring agreed policies. Clearly, each workplace needs its own tailor made policy, but there are some key points that should be addressed in every case.

Definition

First, there should be an agreed definition of what constitutes violence. The HSE definition is: "Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of his or her employment". Many negotiated agreements go beyond this and include sexual and racial harassment, nuisance phone calls or attacks on property.

Identification and Assessment

Identify those jobs which place workers

at risk. Use records of previous incidents, interview workers, conduct surveys and inspect the workplace. Establish the nature of the risk and the preventive strategy required for each job. If changes in working practice are proposed, assess whether they expose workers to violence. During inspections, check that all security devices are properly installed and in working order.

Reporting and Recording

Accurate reporting provides information about the nature of the problem and a method of evaluating the effectiveness of preventive measures. The HSE provides a model report form which can be adapted to suit your workplace. Forms should be simple and available. They need to provide such information as the time of day, staffing levels and location of the incident as well as what happened. All incidents should be recorded and copies of all report forms secured by the safety rep. A procedure for monitoring should be set up to enable particular factors or patterns to be identified.

Prevention

Preventive strategies should cover staffing levels, working practices, protective equipment and alarm systems.

Staffing levels. Lone working should be avoided wherever possible. Where there is shown to be a risk, e.g. in home visits, insist on working in pairs. Where lone working cannot be avoided, make arrangements for communication by telephone or through a two-way radio. Institute a system of regular reporting-in by lone workers during their shift. Define the minimum safe level of staffing for all risky operations.

Working practices. Avoid cash-handling as much as possible. When cash is transported, ensure that times and routes are varied at random. Ensure the employer provides transport home for staff working late at night. Arrange to meet previously unknown "clients" in public places.

Protective equipment. This can cover protective screens and grilles, wide and high counters, installation of video cameras, improvements in lighting and decor, the design of waiting areas, entryphones, digital locks, and many other devices.

Alarm systems. Alarms need to be assessed for effectiveness. Can they be reached if a violent situation develops? Will their use provoke further violence? Will there be a rapid response? Alarms will only deter if potentially violent people believe that an efficient systems is in place — make sure the existence of alarms is well publicised.

Procedures

Clear procedures are needed on:

- what action individual workers are expected to take
- what back up and advice is available in handling difficult individuals
- who has specific responsibility to defuse and handle violent situations
- how and where to summon assistance
- the use of alarms and other security measures
- reporting procedures

Information and Training

Training for workers at risk should be given on induction and regularly thereafter. Training needs to be given on clear procedures to be followed for the prevention and handling of violent situations. Training in self-defence is problematic. It will not reduce the possibility of violence occurring nor necessarily the prospect of avoiding injury. It is not part of a preventive strategy.

Investigating Incidents and Complaints

Make sure the incident is properly recorded, and reported to the safety committee and the enforcement authority, and to the police if required. Interview the worker and any witnesses, and inspect the scene of the incident. The worker may want the union to provide legal services, so make sure that you inform the appropriate officials and help with the necessary paperwork. Try to negotiate full pay for workers who

need time off as a result of a violent incident at work.

Taking Action

As with any other employment condition, it may take action to get the management to move. Nurse Anita Ceesay was sacked from her job at the Royal London Whitechapel Hospital after an incident in which she was subjected to violent racial abuse, but her colleagues were swift to support her and she was reinstated after an internal appeal. CPSA members in Bristol and London went on strike for a year when the management unilaterally removed protective screens — a 50 per cent surge in assaults occurred, mostly on women, after the removal of the screens. Violence at work is a trade union, industrial relations issue and where employers refuse to bring in safe systems and conditions of work, it may be that the last resort is to take action.

Useful Publications

Many unions now have publications and policy on violence at work Check with your union first.

Official publications: *Violence to Staff, Safe Systems of Work and Working Alone in Safety*, HSE, Baynards House, 1 Chepstow Place, London W2. *Violence to Staff in the Health Services*, and *Violence to Staff in the Education Sector*, HSC, available from HMSO

