

VIOLENCE

AT WORK

a guide for employers



VIOLENCE AT WORK

People who deal directly with the public may face aggressive or violent behaviour. They may be sworn at, threatened or even attacked.

This booklet gives practical advice to help you find out if violence is a problem for your employees, and if it is, how to tackle it. The advice is aimed at employers, but should also interest employees and safety representatives.

VIOLENCE IS ...

The Health and Safety Executive's definition of work-related violence is:

'any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work'.

Verbal abuse and threats are the most common types of incident. Physical attacks are comparatively rare.

WHO IS AT RISK?

Employees whose job requires them to deal with the public can be at risk from violence. Most at risk are those who are engaged in:

- giving a service
- caring
- education
- cash transactions
- delivery/collection
- controlling
- representing authority

IS IT MY CONCERN?

Both employer and employees have an interest in reducing violence at work. For employers, violence can lead to poor morale and a poor image for the organisation, making it difficult to recruit and keep staff. It can also mean extra cost, with absenteeism, higher insurance premiums and compensation payments. For employees, violence can cause pain, distress and even disability or death. Physical attacks are obviously dangerous but serious or persistent verbal abuse or threats can also damage employees' health through anxiety or stress.

WHAT THE LAW REQUIRES

There are five main pieces of health and safety law which are relevant to violence at work. These are:

☐ The Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974 (HSW Act)

Employers have a legal duty under this Act to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare at work of their employees.

☐ The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999

Employers must assess the risks to employees and make arrangements for their health and safety by effective:

- planning;
- organisation;
- control;
- monitoring and review.

The risks covered should, where appropriate, include the need to protect employees from exposure to reasonably foreseeable violence.

❑ **The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995 (RIDDOR)**

Employers must notify their enforcing authority in the event of an accident at work to any employee resulting in death, major injury or incapacity for normal work for three or more consecutive days. This includes any act of non-consensual physical violence done to a person at work.

❑ **Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations 1977 (a) and The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 (b)**

Employers must inform, and consult with, employees in good time on matters relating to their health and safety. Employee representatives, either appointed by recognised trade unions under (a) or elected under (b) may make representations to their employer on matters affecting the health and safety of those they represent.

EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF VIOLENCE

A straightforward four stage management process is set out below and is further described on pages 4-9 and in *Health risk management* (see 'Where can I get further information?' for details).

STAGE 1 Finding out if you have a problem

STAGE 2 Deciding what action to take

STAGE 3 Take action

STAGE 4 Check what you have done

It is important to remember that these four stages are not a one-off set of actions. If stage 4 shows there is still a problem then the process should be repeated again. Stages 1 and 2 are completed by carrying out a risk assessment.

STAGE 1 FINDING OUT IF YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

The first step in risk assessment is to identify the hazard. You may think violence is not a problem at your workplace or that incidents are rare. However, your employees' view may be very different.

A major petrol company was not aware of the size of the problem faced daily by forecourt employees, until it sought their views during a series of meetings. Filling station employees believed strongly that increased customer violence was the most serious threat to their personal health and safety.

Ask your staff - do this informally through managers, supervisors and safety representatives or use a short questionnaire to find out whether your employees ever feel threatened. Tell them the results of your survey so they realise that you recognise the problem.

Keep detailed records - it is a good idea to record incidents, including verbal abuse and threats. You may find it useful to record the following information:

- an account of what happened;
- details of the victim(s), the assailant(s) and any witnesses;
- the outcome, including working time lost to both the individual(s) affected and to the organisation as a whole;
- details of the location of the incident.

For a variety of reasons some employees may be reluctant to report incidents of aggressive behaviour which make them feel threatened or worried. They may for instance feel that accepting abuse is part of the job. You will need a record of all incidents to enable you to build up a complete picture of the problem. Encourage employees to report incidents promptly and fully and let them know that this is what you expect.

Classify all incidents - use headings such as place, time, type of incident, potential severity, who was involved and possible causes. It is important that you examine each incident report to establish whether there could have been a more serious outcome. Here is an example of a simple classification to help you decide how serious incidents are:

- fatal injury;
- major injury;
- injury or emotional shock requiring first aid, out-patient treatment, counselling, absence from work (record number of days);
- feeling of being at risk or distressed.

It should be easy to classify 'major injuries' but you will have to decide how to classify 'serious or persistent verbal abuse' for your organisation, so as to cover all incidents that worry staff.

You can use the details from your incident records along with the classifications to check for patterns. Look for common causes, areas or times. The steps you take can then be targeted where they are needed most.

A survey by a trade union after 12 separate shop robberies found that each incident occurred between 5 and 7 o'clock in the evening. This finding could have useful security lessons for late night opening of stores and shops.

Try to predict what might happen - do not restrict your assessment to incidents which have already affected your own employees. There may be a known pattern of violence linked to certain work situations. Trade and professional organisations and trade unions may be able to provide useful information on this. Articles in the local, national and technical press might also alert you to relevant incidents and potential problem areas.

STAGE 2 DECIDING WHAT ACTION TO TAKE

Having found out that violence could be a problem for your employees you need to decide what needs to be done. Continue the risk assessment by taking the following steps to help you decide what action you need to take.

Decide who might be harmed, and how

Identify which employees are at risk - those who have face-to-face contact with the public are normally the most vulnerable. Where appropriate, identify potentially violent people in advance so that the risks from them can be minimised.

Evaluate the risk

Check existing arrangements, are the precautions already in place adequate or should more be done? Remember it is usually a combination of factors that give rise to violence. Factors which you can influence include:

- the level of training and information provided;
- the environment;
- the design of the job.

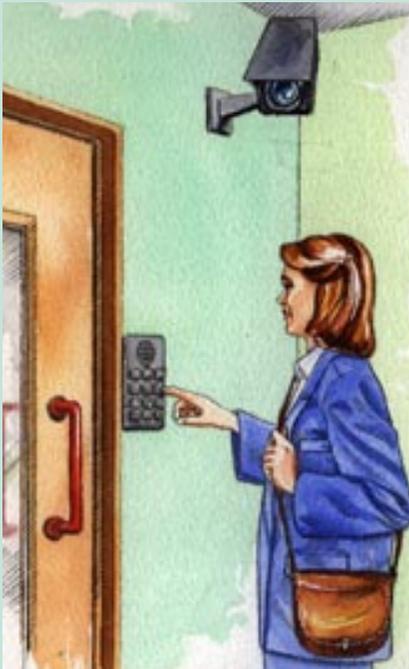
Consider the way these factors work together to influence the risk of violence. Pages 7-8 list some examples of preventive measures.



Training and information

Train your employees so that they can spot the early signs of aggression and either avoid it or cope with it. Make sure they fully understand any system you have set up for their protection.

Provide employees with any information they might need to identify clients with a history of violence or to anticipate factors which might make violence more likely.



The environment

Provide better seating, decor, lighting in public waiting rooms and more regular information about delays.

Consider physical security measures such as:

- video cameras or alarm systems;
- coded security locks on doors to keep the public out of staff areas;
- wider counters and raised floors on the staff side of the counter to give staff more protection.



The design of the job

Use cheques, credit cards or tokens instead of cash to make robbery less attractive.

Bank money more frequently and vary the route taken to reduce the risk of robbery.

Check the credentials of clients and the place and arrangements for any meetings away from the workplace.



Arrange for staff to be accompanied by a colleague if they have to

meet a suspected aggressor at their home or at a remote location.

Make arrangements for employees who work away from their base to keep in touch.

Maintain numbers of staff at the workplace to avoid a lone worker situation developing.

The threat of violence does not stop when the work period has ended. It is good practice to make sure that employees can get home safely. For example where employees are required to work late, employers might help by arranging transport home or by ensuring a safe parking area is available.

Employees are likely to be more committed to the measures if they help to design them and put them into practice. A mix of measures often works best. Concentrating on just one aspect of the problem may make things worse in another. Try to take an overall view and balance the risks to your employees against any possible reaction of the public. Remember that an atmosphere that suggests employees are worried about violence can sometimes increase its likelihood.

In one housing department it was found that protective screens made it difficult for staff and the public to speak to each other. This caused tension on both sides. Management and safety representatives agreed a package of measures including taking screens down, providing more comfortable waiting areas and better information on waiting lists and delays. This package of measures reduced tension and violent incidents.

Record your findings

Keep a record of the significant findings of your assessment. The record should provide a working document for both managers and employees.

Review and revise your assessment

Regularly check that your assessment is a true reflection of your current work situation. Be prepared to add further measures or change existing measures where these are not working. This is particularly important where the job changes. If a violent incident occurs, look back at your assessment, evaluate it and make any necessary changes.

STAGE 3 TAKE ACTION

Your policy for dealing with violence may be written into your health and safety policy statement, so that all employees are aware of it. This will help your employees to co-operate with you, follow procedures properly and report any further incidents.

STAGE 4 CHECK WHAT YOU HAVE DONE

Check on a regular basis how well your arrangements are working, consulting employees or their representatives as you do so. Consider setting up joint management and safety representative committees to do this. Keep records of incidents and examine them regularly; they will show what progress you are making and if the problem is changing. If your measures are working well, keep them up. If violence is still a problem, try something else. Go back to Stages 1 and 2 and identify other preventive measures that could work.

WHAT ABOUT THE VICTIMS?

If there is a violent incident involving your workforce you will need to respond quickly to avoid any long-term distress to employees. It is essential to plan how you are going to provide them with support, before any incidents. You may want to consider the following:

- debriefing** - victims will need to talk through their experience as soon as possible after the event. Remember that verbal abuse can be just as upsetting as a physical attack;
- time off work** - individuals will react differently and may need differing amounts of time to recover. In some circumstances they might need specialist counselling;
- legal help** - in serious cases legal help may be appropriate;
- other employees** - may need guidance and/or training to help them to react appropriately.

The Home Office leaflet *Victims of crime* gives more useful advice if one of your employees suffers an injury, loss or damage from a crime, including how to apply for compensation. It should be available from libraries, police stations, Citizens Advice Bureaux and victim support schemes.

Further help may be available from victim support schemes that operate in many areas. Your local police station can direct you to your nearest one. Alternatively you can contact them yourself at the addresses below:

❑ In England and Wales:

Victim Support
National Office
Cranmer House
39 Brixton Road
London SW9 6DZ
Tel: 020 7735 9166
www.victimsupport.org

❑ In Scotland:

Victim Support Scotland
15/23 Hardwell Close
Edinburgh
EH8 9RX
Tel: 0131 668 4486
Fax: 0131 662 5400
E-mail: info@victimssupportsco.demon.co.uk
www.victimssupportsco.demon.co.uk

WHERE CAN I GET FURTHER INFORMATION?

This guidance is aimed at giving employers an understanding of the general principles involved. In many cases, particularly in sectors where violence is a well-known problem, you should consult more specific guidance when developing an effective management system. Guidance on violence in specific sectors includes:

Preventing violence to retail staff HSG133 1995 HSE Books
ISBN 0 7176 0891 3

Prevention of violence to staff in banks and building societies
HSG100 1993 HSE Books ISBN 0 7176 0683 X

Managing and preventing violence to lone workers: Case studies
Health and Safety Laboratory/Report WIS/03/05. (A shorter version of the case studies is also available on the HSE website at www.hse.gov.uk/violence/loneworkers.htm)

Violence and aggression to staff in health services: Guidance on assessment and management (Second edition) Guidance
HSE Books 1997 ISBN 0 7176 1466 2

Work-related violence: Case studies - Managing the risk in smaller businesses HSG229 HSE Books 2002 ISBN 0 7176 2358 0

For further information on the four stage management process detailed in this leaflet, see:

Health risk management: A practical guide for managers in small and medium-sized enterprises HSG137 HSE Books 1995
ISBN 0 7176 0905 7

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Tel: 0845 345 0055 Fax: 0845 408 9566 Textphone: 0845 408 9577
e-mail: hse.infoline@natbrit.com or write to HSE Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG.

This leaflet is available in priced packs of 10 from HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 1271 6. Single free copies are also available from HSE Books.

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