

# Workplace Violence: Understand and Avoid It



**Workplace violence and disgruntled employees—all of us have heard the horror stories: a former worker with a grudge, an employee's ex-lover or an enraged client bursts through the door, shooting first and asking questions later.**



Workplace

Although workplace violence is not as common as the news might lead us to believe, it is a major problem in the United States. Government studies estimate that there are about two million assaults and threats of violence made against workers each year. According to the Workplace Violence Research Institute, workplace violence costs businesses more than \$36 billion each year.

But did you know that workplace violence is much more commonly committed by outsiders than by current or former employees? Or that thousands of acts of workplace violence are committed each year by the intimate partners and spouses of employees? This article lays out the facts about workplace violence, including steps you can take if you have concerns.

## Violence by Outsiders

Contrary to popular belief, the great majority of violent incidents in the workplace are perpetrated by outsiders—strangers intending to commit a crime—rather than employees. For example, according to the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, most workplace homicides are committed by robbers trying to steal from the business, not by current or former employees.

Employees who deal with the public are most likely to fall victim to this type of workplace violence. Those at particularly high risk include workers who exchange money with the public, deliver goods or services, work alone or in small numbers during the late evening and early morning hours or work in jobs that require extensive public contact. Certain industries, such as health care, security (including police officers), and retail are targeted more frequently than others.

Minimizing risk and improving security are the keys to preventing this type of workplace violence. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers the tips below for employers seeking to protect employees.

If you have concerns about violence by outsiders, ask your employer about implementing them (you can find fact sheets and more tips on OSHA's official website at [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov)):

- Train employees on how to recognize and respond to threatening situations.
- Secure the workplace by installing surveillance cameras, extra lighting and alarm systems.
- Minimize workplace access by outsiders through the use of identification badges and guards.
- Limit the amount of cash kept on hand, particularly at night.
- Give outside workers cell phones and alarms and require them to keep in touch with a contact person throughout their shift.
- Tell employees not to go anywhere they do not feel safe, and provide an escort in potentially dangerous areas.

## Domestic Violence at Work

According to the American Institute on Domestic Violence, 18,700 acts of violence are committed by intimate partners and spouses (current and former) every year against women in the workplace. And sometimes, these incidents go beyond the intended target to harm other employees as well.

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Experts tell us that domestic violence frequently follows a fairly predictable cycle, in which pressure, threats and coercion precede acts of violence. By the time an abuser shows up at the victim's workplace intending to do harm, chances are good that the abuser has already made threats and committed other acts of violence or property damage.

If you are a victim of domestic violence, here are a few things you should know:

- A number of states require employers to give employees time off to handle matters relating to domestic violence, such as relocating, seeking counseling or medical care, attending court hearings and so on. Even if your state doesn't require this type of leave, your employer may allow you to take time off to handle these issues.
- Your employer may be able to get its own restraining order against the abuser. This type of restraining order requires the abuser to stay away from the workplace; if the abuser comes to the workplace anyway, police can make an arrest for violation of the order, before any harm is done.
- There are safety precautions you can take if your abuser is stalking or threatening you at work, such as alerting security personnel, asking to have your phone number changed, having your calls routed through a receptionist or secretary, and making sure others at work know that they should not provide information about you or your movements to anyone outside the company.

You can find legal guides, information on state laws, fact sheets and tips on communicating with your employer about a domestic violence situation, from the Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund at [www.legalmomentum.org](http://www.legalmomentum.org); under the "Our Work" tab, select "Employment and Housing Rights for Victims of Domestic Violence."

## Violence by Employees and Former Employees

Workplace violence committed by current or former employees is the most foreseeable because the perpetrators are co-workers we see every day. Although some employees resort to violence without any warning, it's relatively uncommon for someone to simply snap one day and go on a rampage. Instead, experts say that the problem often builds up slowly, and the perpetrator may exhibit certain signs of trouble before becoming violent.

Of course, no single one of these signs, taken alone, is a sure indicator that an employee may turn violent. But managers and HR professionals should be on the lookout for clues indicating that intervention may be necessary—and, if other employees notice these signs and have concerns, they should raise them with a manager. Things to look for include:

- An unexplained rise in absences
- Substance abuse
- Outbursts at co-workers and customers or poor impulse control
- Verbal abuse or threats toward co-workers and customers
- Making harassing phone calls or email communications
- Strained workplace relationships
- Overreaction or resistance to even minor changes in workplace routine; insubordination and belligerence
- Lack of attention to personal appearance, including hygiene
- Interest in firearms or other weapons; access to weapons
- Signs of paranoia ("everyone's out to get me") or withdrawal
- Fascination with violent acts or fantasies or a history of violence
- Seeing oneself as a victim and others as persecutors; blaming others for one's problems
- Obsessive behavior toward a co-worker or customer, up to and including stalking
- Comments about suicide
- Mood swings
- Domestic problems, including money troubles or family disputes

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