

Workplace Violence

Practical Considerations for Mental Health Professionals in Consultation, Assessment, and Management of Risk

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KEYWORDS

• Workplace violence • Targeted violence • Threat assessment • Direct threat

KEY POINTS

- Workplace violence risk consultations focus on potential acts of targeted violence perpetrated by individuals with a connection to the workplace, directed toward others in the workplace.
- Distinctions exist between fitness for duty evaluations and violence risk consultations, the latter occurring in dynamic scenarios in which the opinion of risk shifts depending on case developments.
- Effective threat management requires multidisciplinary teamwork, the careful consideration of available interventions, and awareness of the possibility of risk mitigation interventions having unintended consequences.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, a series of shootings by disgruntled US postal workers and other employees focused media attention on acts of violence in the workplace. Over the past 3 decades, researchers have shed light onto the types of violence that occur in the workplace, the characteristics of individuals who engage in workplace violence, and the contextual factors that may escalate or mitigate the risk of violence. These advances and the accumulated experience of threat assessment practitioners have contributed to the development of industry practices designed to prevent workplace violence. Especially among large employers, multidisciplinary threat assessment and management teams receive, triage, investigate, and respond to scenarios of concern.

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These practices operate in a complex legal context in which the rights of the involved parties must be considered and balanced. In assessing and managing the potential for workplace violence, employers, and others participating in the evaluation process must first determine whether and how to intervene to ensure safety, yet in a manner mindful of the laws and policies intended to protect the employee of concern. In particular, the employer is subject to claims of invasion of privacy, discrimination, and wrongful termination. In this article, we describe the phenomenon of workplace violence, review important elements in the assessment of workplace violence risk, and provide an overview of threat management, including brief commentary on common legal considerations arising in these situations. For the purposes of this article we do not address the issue of “outsider” threats, for example, those posed by a jealous rejected husband or partner of an employee; however, many of the strategic points presented here still apply in those cases.

WHAT IS “WORKPLACE VIOLENCE”?

Naturally, media coverage of incidents of workplace violence focuses on the most egregious and tragic cases: those involving mass murder, often by current or former employees. In reality, homicide represents the extreme end of a continuum of behaviors comprising workplace violence, has been in steady decline since 1993, and accounts for less than 1% of all violent crimes in the workplace.¹ According to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration² workplace violence is defined as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site, and may cause physical or emotional harm. Short of homicide and physical violence, other workplace violence behaviors include stalking, threats, bullying, and emotional abuse.³ Specific individuals are not the only targets of workplace violence. Beyond the obvious severe psychological trauma caused by workplace shootings, aggression and threats of violence cause anxiety, fear, and frustration, with resulting damaged morale and productivity.⁴ Direct and indirect victims may suffer stress or burnout, physical health problems, and may ultimately leave an organization.⁵

Acts of workplace violence have been categorized in numerous ways. One major typology divides acts of violence according to the relationship between the perpetrator and the organization ([Table 1](#)).³ Type 1 acts account for most workplace violence.⁶ A key distinction within this framework is that which exists between type 1 acts of workplace violence and all of the others: that is, in type 1 violence, the perpetrator is a stranger to the victims, whereas in types 2, 3, and 4, the perpetrator has a

Table 1
Categories of workplace violence

Type 1	Violent acts by criminals who have no other connection with the workplace, but enter to commit robbery or another crime.
Type 2	Violence directed at employees by customers, clients, patients, students, inmates, or any others for whom an organization provides services.
Type 3	Violence against coworkers, supervisors, or managers by a present or former employee.
Type 4	Violence committed in the workplace by someone who does not work there, but has a personal relationship with an employee (eg, abusive spouse or domestic partner).

From Rugala EA, Isaacs AR, editors. Workplace violence: issues in response. Quantico (VA): Critical Incident Response Group, National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, FBI Academy; 2003.

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