

Workplace Violence Fact Sheet: Protecting Employees from External Threats

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The [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) (OSHA) defines **workplace violence** as “any act or threat of **physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior** that occurs at the worksite.” It can range from unwelcome **verbal or physical** conduct to **assault** and **active shooter** situations.

Acts of violence are currently the third leading cause of fatal occupational injuries in the United States.¹ According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), of the 5,333 fatal workplace injuries in the U.S. in 2019, 841 resulted from violence.² Jobs, such as drivers-for-hire, retail employees, health care and social workers, utility workers, and police officers, are among the employees with the highest risk for violence.³

While there is no specific workplace violence standard, [OSHA's General Duty Clause](#) states that employers must provide a workplace “free from recognized hazards that are likely to cause death or serious physical harm.” A [Workplace Violence Prevention Program](#) can help employers comply with the law.



Identify Risk Factors

While not all risks are preventable, awareness of the types of workplace violence and the methods to assess an organization’s threat levels are a basis for providing a safer work environment.

Workplace Violence Types

According to the [National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health](#), workplace violence typically falls into one of four categories:

1 Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Workplace Violence. Webpage. <https://www.osha.gov/workplace-violence#:~:text=Workplace%20violence%20is%20any%20act,%2C%20clients%2C%20customers%20and%20visitors>. Accessed May 25, 2021.

2 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Injuries/Illnesses and Fatal Injuries Profiles by Event or Exposure, All Ownerships, 2019. Website. <https://data.bls.gov/gqt/InitialPage>. Accessed May 25, 2021.

3 OSHA Fact Sheet, “Workplace Violence.” PDF. <https://www.osha.gov/sites/default/files/publications/factsheet-workplace-violence.pdf>. Accessed May 25, 2021.

- **Criminal Intent**
These violent incidents are usually associated with another crime, such as robbery, shoplifting, or trespassing. These criminal encounters usually have no relationship to the business or its employees. Acts of terrorism also fall into this category.
- **Customer or Client**
This violence usually occurs when a customer, client, patient, student, or inmate has a legitimate relationship with the organization and becomes violent while being served by those in the organization.
- **Worker on Worker**
These violent incidences are when an employee or past employee of the organization attacks or threatens another employee(s) or past employee(s) in the workplace.
- **Personal Relationship**
Usually, the individual who commits this type of violence does not have a relationship with the organization but has one with the intended victim. These incidences are associated with victims of domestic violence who are assaulted or threatened at work.

- **Threats**
These individuals may make direct, veiled, or conditional threats of harm to the company or its employees.
- **Unreasonable Behavior**
These people constantly make slighting references to others. They never seem happy with the way things function or their environment. They are unreasonable and often overreact to feedback and criticism. They tend to take comments personally and turn them into grudges.
- **Intimidation and Control-Oriented**
These people feel the need to force their opinion on others. They have a compulsive need to control situations and often use intimidation – either physical or verbal -- to get their way.
- **Paranoid**
Paranoid people think others – including a company or its employees -- are out to get them. They think there is a conspiracy in all functions of society. They make comments about being persecuted or being a victim of injustice.
- **Angry, Argumentative, and Lacks Impulse Control**
These people have many hate and anger issues on and off the job with coworkers, friends, family, or the government. They are frequently involved in confrontations and often argue with others, including authority figures. These individuals demonstrate low impulse control, such as slamming or throwing things, cursing, threatening others, or using physically animated aggressive gestures.

Recognize Behavioral Warning Signs

What leads to workplace violence almost always starts small. While this publication addresses external workplace threats to employees,* most violence is a process that comes with warning signs. It is important to point out that **these warning signs, by themselves, do not indicate that a person will become violent.** However, when coupled with other signs, these behaviors may indicate the potential for violence. Workplace violence warning signs often include:

*See the Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers' Compensation publication, [Workplace Violence: Preventing Attacks from Known Assailants](#), for information on internal workplace violence threats.)

- **Irresponsible**

These individuals do not take responsibility for any of their behaviors, faults, or mistakes. It is always someone or something else that is to blame. They make excuses and blame others, the organization, or the system for their actions.



- **Antisocial Behaviors**

These individuals have a fascination with violence and acceptance of violence as a way to handle situations. They applaud violent acts portrayed in the media. They may have issues with law enforcement. They may also demonstrate a pattern of behavior that shows a disregard for the rights of others.

- **Vindictive**

These people may make statements like “he’ll get his,” “what goes around comes around,” or “one of these days I’ll make them pay.” They may verbalize hope for something bad to happen to others, especially those with whom they have a grudge.

- **Bizarre and Weird Behavior**

These individuals are often considered quirky, strange, or weird. Their unusual manner may make others feel uneasy.

- **Desperation**

These people may be experiencing extreme desperation with family, finances, or personal problems. They may make comments of feeling “at the end of their rope” or “there’s no other

way to deal with it.” They may seem backed into a corner with no options.

- **Obsessive-Compulsive Behaviors**

These individuals may have obsessive involvement with the job, with no apparent outside interests. They eat, sleep, and live for the job. Or they have a romantic obsession with a coworker who has no interest in them. They may suffer from other forms of obsession, jealous interest in a specific topic, or perfectionist tendencies.

- **Substance Abuse**

Persons demonstrating signs of alcohol or drug abuse may have frequent absences or tardiness; disregard for safety policies and procedures; appear disoriented, off-task, or distracted on the job; have jittery or slurred speech; or are often missing without notice for stretches of time.

- **Chronic Depression**

These people display a loss of interest or confidence in life or work, lack of energy, and withdrawal from things that once interested him or her.

Prevention Strategies

Manage Violence with Research, Teamwork, and Training

Frontline workers are often the most knowledgeable about business procedures and the business environment, especially if they work shifts when no manager is present. Workers' experiences can help identify practical solutions to safety challenges when using the following steps to develop a Workplace Violence Prevention Plan:

Assess the Threat

A **threat assessment** is a process of determining how likely or serious a potential threat is and how probable it is of becoming a reality. Employers are encouraged to form a **Threat Assessment Team** composed of representatives from all areas and levels of the organization. Their objectives are to evaluate the workplace's weaknesses and agree upon ways to implement preventive actions. In conducting its threat assessment, the team should:

- **Research Past Violent Incidents**
Review all information available regarding any previous violent activities at the organization. Examine the following sources, if available:
 - [OSHA Injury and Illness Recordkeeping Forms 300, 300A, or 301](#);
 - previous police records or investigation reports on violent incidents, including verbal mistreatment, aggressive behavior, and physical abuse;
 - insurance records about any past violence-related claims; and
 - the previous Threat Assessment Team's meeting minutes.

- **Analyze High-Risk Tasks**

Evaluate the risk level for employees' duties. High-risk duties include:

- exchanging money with the public;
- working alone or in small numbers;
- working late at night or in the early morning;
- guarding valuable property or possessions; or
- working in community settings.

Implement Safety Protocols

Making changes in work practices (known as **administrative controls**) and creating defensive barriers between workers and hazards (known as **engineering controls**) are effective methods of protecting workers from potential workplace violence.

- **Administrative Controls**

Based upon the Threat Assessment Team's findings, changes in administrative controls, such as work schedules, procedures, and policies, may be required to increase employee safety. Examples may include requiring employees who perform high-risk tasks to:

- never enter a location where they feel unsafe;
- use a buddy system or police escort when working overnight or in potentially dangerous situations;
- receive and use assigned staff cell phones and hand-held alarms;

- o prepare daily work plans and tell a contact person the schedule;
- o respond, as trained, to emergencies; and
- o cooperate with local law enforcement and state prosecutors as needed.

- **Engineering Controls**

Putting engineering controls in place that remove hazards or protect workers from potential risks, are considered the most effective. These physical changes can improve job safety without relying on people's behavior. Effective engineering controls may include:

- o installing video surveillance, alarm systems, or metal detectors;
- o adding more lighting;
- o restricting public access to the worksite;
- o requiring employees to use identification badges and electronic keys; and
- o hiring security guards.

Create an Emergency Action Plan

An employer must have an Emergency Action Plan (EAP) whenever an OSHA standard requires one. (See [29 Code of Federal Regulations 1910.38\(a\)](#).) The EAP aims to organize employers' and employees' actions during workplace emergencies to avoid confusion, injuries, and property damage.



An employer with more than 10 employees must have a written EAP in the workplace that is available for employees to review. An employer with 10 or fewer employees may communicate the plan orally to employees. The EAP, either written or oral, must include emergency evacuation procedures and how workers must respond to different types of emergencies.

Provide Annual Training

Yearly training for managers and employees is required. Training should include information on the:

- organization's [Workplace Violence Prevention Policy](#);
- types and examples of workplace violence, including active shooter preparedness;
- security hazards;
- location of security equipment and procedures for using it;
- early warning signs and appropriate responses to a potentially violent person;

- methods of de-escalating hostile situations;
- reporting threats or violent incidents;
- handling an emergency response; and
- providing post-incident procedures, including employee trauma counseling, or referring victims to employee assistance programs.

Prepare for an Active Shooter

An **active shooter** is an individual who is killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area. In most cases, active shooters use firearms, and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims. Active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. Because active shooter situations are often over before law enforcement can arrive, individuals must mentally and physically prepare to deal with the situation. Customers and clients who are on-site during such an event tend to follow the lead of managers and employees. Still, each person must be prepared to determine how to protect his or her own life quickly.

The [U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS) recommends creating an EAP that includes training exercises using the “**Run, Hide, Fight**” method. Prepare staff to respond to an active shooter incident using these steps when an active shooter is nearby:

- **Run**
Use a clear escape path and try to evacuate whether or not others agree to follow.
 - o Have a plan ahead of time, including an escape route.
 - o Follow the company’s EAP.
 - o Help others escape if possible.
 - o Prevent others from entering an area where the shooter might be.

- o Do not try to move injured people.
- o Leave belongings behind.
- o Follow police officers’ instructions.
- o Call 911 when safely out.

- **Hide**

If evacuation is not possible, hide in a location where the shooter is unlikely to look.

- o Choose a hiding place out of view, such as behind cabinets, desks, or storage items.
- o Look for protection from bullets -- such as a closed and locked door --but not one that prevents further movement.
- o Block and barricade doors with heavy furniture once they are closed and locked.
- o Turn lights off, if possible.
- o Remain quiet if the shooter is nearby. Silence cell phones, radios, televisions, and other noise sources.

- **When neither running nor hiding is an option, remain calm and call 911.**

If speaking is not an option, leave the phone line open to allow the emergency dispatcher to listen. If it is safe to speak, tell the dispatcher:

- o the shooter’s location;
- o the number of shooters;
- o a physical description of the shooter(s);
- o the number and type of weapons the shooter(s) is using; and

- o the number of potential victims at the location.

- **Fight**

As a last resort, fight. When in immediate danger, try to disrupt or disable the shooter. Act as aggressively as possible toward the shooter by throwing items, using surrounding materials as weapons, and yelling. Commit to the actions.

- **Comply with law enforcement**

When law enforcement arrives:

- o raise hands immediately and keep fingers spread;
- o avoid making quick movements toward the officers;
- o do not point, yell, or scream;
- o remain calm; and
- o follow officers' instructions.

Prevention & Control Measures for Late-Night Retail Stores

Employees of stores open late at night with large amounts of cash on hand – such as convenience stores, gas stations, liquor stores, and others -- are especially vulnerable to robberies, assaults, and homicides. Employees in these locations often work alone or in small numbers. In addition, the establishments are often in isolated or poorly lit areas.

While no single strategy to prevent workplace violence is appropriate for all late-night businesses, using the following control measures can help protect workers:

- **Create a Worksite Analysis**

A **worksite analysis** assesses a store's environmental and operational risks for violence. The employer should look for procedures that may place employees in danger and identify areas where violence is most likely to occur. This information can then be used as a baseline for periodic future safety audits.

OSHA recommends the following procedures when conducting a worksite analysis:



- o **Review and Analyze Records**

The employer should examine several years of medical, safety, workers' compensation, and insurance records – along with their OSHA Injuries and Illnesses Recordkeeping Form(s), if required. The purpose is to:

- » track the history of armed robberies and other violent incidents at their store(s);
- » look for patterns in job titles, workstations, dates, or times of day that assaults or

aggressive behaviors happen at a particular location; and

- » evaluate historical crime data for the neighborhood near the worksite (which may require working with local law enforcement).

To ensure this data is available, encourage employees to report incidents promptly and accurately. Involving cashiers and other frontline workers in violence prevention is crucial.

o **Conduct Screening Surveys**

While some encounters may go unreported or undocumented, employers can still identify violent incidents. One of the most effective ways to gather this information is by asking workers to complete a screening survey once a year or when work conditions change. The survey might ask employees questions about:

- » whether they have been assaulted, threatened, or harassed by customers;
- » whether customers have used or carried firearms into the store;
- » what employees were doing before and during a violent incident;
- » whether preventive measures were in place or used at the time of an incident; and
- » whether employees called the police.

Employers may give these questionnaires to employees. However, many employers prefer to use independent reviewers to conduct the survey, analyze the results, and offer advice to strengthen the company's violence prevention program.

• **Analyze Security**

Late-night retail employers need to routinely inspect their site(s) and evaluate employees' job tasks to identify potential hazards. Security measures to consider are the:

- o building layout;
- o inside and outside lighting;
- o existing security and communications systems;
- o jobs or locations with the greatest risk of violence;
- o processes and procedures that put workers at the greatest risk; and
- o characteristics of the assailants and victims of past violent incidents (if any) at the site.

• **Establish Robbery Prevention Controls**

After analyzing a worksite's hazards and security, implement a combination of engineering and administrative controls to help prevent armed robberies and other violent incidents.

o **Engineering Controls**

Workplace adaptations to minimize risks at late-night retail stores may include:

- » limiting the amount of cash available on-site by using drop safes;

- » posting signs indicating that cashiers have limited access to cash;
- » using security cameras;
- » mounting curved mirrors to expose hard-to-see areas in the store;
- » keeping windows clear of signs, shelves, and other obstructions;
- » lighting the inside and outside of the store as brightly as the local law allows;
- » installing and maintaining alarm systems, panic buttons, and other security devices;
- » keeping the cash register and customer service areas visible from outside the store;
- » using door detectors to alert workers when individuals are entering the store; and
- » installing bullet-proof barriers with pass-through windows to separate workers and customers.

o **Administrative Controls**

Work practices that can minimize risks for employees at late-night retail stores include:

- » not accepting large bills;
- » increasing staff at stores in high-crime areas or locations where robberies or assaults have occurred in the past;
- » creating procedures to ensure the safety of



employees as they walk to garbage or storage areas;

- » providing security escorts to staff as they walk to parking areas at night; and
- » training employees on how to request help from the police and file charges if assaulted.

• **Train Employees on How to Respond to Robberies**

Armed attackers usually commit robberies and assaults at night. The perpetrator may injure the employee in an unprovoked, surprise attack, or the employee may retaliate in response to the perceived threat. Train late-night retail employees to handle these high-stress situations. The following tips can protect employees and lower the risk of injury or death during a robbery:

- o **Safety is More Important Than Money or Inventory**
Hand over the money. Do not argue or resist. Most robbers are looking for quick cash.
- o **Do Not Reach for a Weapon**
Unless there is an immediate threat to life, do not reach for a

weapon. Statistics indicate that an employee's use of a gun increases his or her chances of injury or death.⁴

- **Cooperate with the Robber**
Stay calm and quiet. Speak in a cooperative tone. Never talk or volunteer more information than requested.
- **Avoid Eye Contact**
Do not stare at the robber. However, try to make mental notes of the offender's appearance to help police identify the person later.
- **Do Not Make Sudden Moves**
Move slowly and explain all movements to the robber before making them.
- **Do Not Chase the Robber**
Stay in place until the offender leaves the immediate area. After a safe period of time, lock the door, call the police, and ask witnesses

to stay until help arrives. Do not open the door until emergency responders are on the scene.

- **Record a Physical Description of the Robber**
In times of stress, memory is often fleeting. Encourage employees to write down all the details they remember about the offender and robbery while waiting for the police to arrive.
- **Do Not Touch Anything the Offender Has Touched**
Preserve any fingerprints that may be at the crime scene.

For more information on other occupational health and safety topics, download any of the Texas Department of Insurance, Division of Workers' Compensation (DWC)-Workplace Safety's [free publications](#). OSHA-authorized DWC Safety Training Instructors are available to provide a variety of safety and health training by contacting safetytraining@tdi.texas.gov or 1-800-252-7031, option 2.

⁴ American Psychological Association. "Gun Violence: Prediction, Prevention, and Policy." Website. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/gun-violence-report.pdf>. Accessed May 27, 2021.



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1-800-252-7031, Option 2

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