

Violence at work

► **Work-related physical violence or the threat of it are alarmingly common. Violence can lead to physical injuries or even loss of life and the threat of violence can cause constant fear and anxiety. However, you can prepare for the possibility of violence, prevent its occurrence and keep better control of violent situations.**

What is violence at work?

Violence at work refers to incidents in which employees are verbally abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work.

Violence and threatening situations can include verbal abuse, shouting, pushing, wounding, kicking, biting, pinching, snatch-theft, object throwing, etc. Incidents of theft can become violent encounters if culprits are caught. The most serious situations can arise when weapons and violence are used to commit crimes e.g. muggings, robberies, etc.

How bad is violence at work?

In 1997, the British Crime Survey found that 1.2 million workers in England and Wales had faced a violent incident: with over 500,000 physical assaults and 700,000 threats being made by members of the public against people doing their jobs.

For victims, violence can cause pain, distress, anxiety, stress, disability and even death. For employers, violence can cause poor morale and company image, making it hard to recruit and keep employees: also, it can cause absenteeism, higher insurance premiums and compensation payments.

Who is at risk?

Employees who deal with the public can be at risk from violence from external sources, especially if they are involved in: giving a service; caring; education; cash handling; delivery and collection; and representing authority. Working alone or in a place where there are few people, working late at night or early in the morning, or meeting intoxicated or mentally unstable people at work increases the risk. Violence can also come from internal sources through conflicts, harassment and bullying.

Do you have a problem?

You have a duty to ensure the safety of employees – ask them (or use a short questionnaire) whether they ever feel threatened. Record all violent incidents including verbal abuse and threats. Use your records and employee reports to check for patterns e.g. causes, areas or times. Controls can then be targeted where they are most needed.

Taking action

Decide who might be harmed and how. Regularly check that the precautions in place are adequate. You may be able to improve the job design; the work environment; and the training and information provided, etc. Decide who in the company has responsibility for the safety of employees and customers, and ensure employees know who it is.

Job design

Risk situations, such as working alone, should be avoided wherever possible. If employees have to meet clients away from the workplace, check clients and meeting places in advance and give employees the means of staying in contact (e.g. a mobile phone). If employees have to go into a potentially violent situation ensure they are trained and accompanied. Use cheques/credit cards instead of cash and bank your money frequently, varying the route, to make robbery less likely. Money counting should take place in a private, secure area. There should be procedures for the safe issue, use, storage and return of keys.

The work environment

Systematic planning can be effective in reducing violent situations. Planning should ideally begin before premises are selected. If your business is operating, you must review your security measures.

The work environment should be designed so that potentially violent and threatening situations are identified early and if possible, prevented. Examples of useful design features are:

- Robust materials/structures and 'protective' furniture (e.g. wider counters, cash-box screens)
- Good visibility to and from the workspace
- Good lighting indoors, at entrances/exits, front and back yards and parking areas
- Allowing eye contact to be established with arriving customers
- Provision of easy escape from the work post to a place of safety
- Location of the cash registers in secure positions
- Backdoors are locked and those who come through them can be identified



- Access control on entry/exit routes
- Movements of outsiders can be monitored
- Access by outsiders to places other than customer areas is prevented e.g. by the use of coded security locks
- Well designed, comfortable waiting areas

Surveillance, alarms, etc.

Appropriate technical devices and accessories are used to prevent the development of violent and threatening situations and to monitor operations. For criminals, the risk of getting caught is increased.

CCTV or mirrors can be used for monitoring. At risk employees can be given personal portable alarms or an alarm button, suitably located, linked to the police, a security company or nearby shop. It's good to keep emergency numbers in sight near phones or to have them on speed dial. Time-delay boxes for cash storage and stickers warning of security systems can all help prevent robberies. It is important to function test all devices in use. You may also consider using on-site security personnel.

Training and instructions

Basic security must first be ensured by design. However, training/instruction are also important in preventing and managing violent and threatening situations. As a minimum, all employees in contact with the public (including part-time employees) should be trained in the security procedures. Employees should also be reminded that security arrangements are not to be divulged to outsiders.

Procedures and relevant instruction and training should be provided on the following:

- Locking and unlocking of doors
- Maintenance of order and cleanliness
- Use of security devices and raising the alarm
- Handling and transportation of money
- Threatening and difficult customer situations
- Actions to be taken in case of theft, robbery or a hostage or bomb-threat situation

Here are some tips for problem situations:

Difficult customer situation

- Try to remain professional and helpful
- Avoid giving or taking offence
- Give the customer a 'face-saving' way out

Threatening situation

- Stay calm and matter-of-fact
- Don't touch the threatening person, don't turn your back on him or her
- Ensure your own escape route and try to get additional help if needed
- Don't try to confiscate a weapon!

Theft situation

- Monitor the actions of the suspect and, if possible, summon a guard or superior
- Do not grab hold of the suspect or even touch their clothes

- Ensure your safety if you have to wait for the police with a person who has committed theft
- Don't pursue a person who is suspected of theft, take their description and give it to the police

Armed robbery situation

- Obey the robber's commands calmly
- Memorize the robber's physical appearance
- Raise the alarm as soon as it is possible to do so without endangering anyone. Try to avoid becoming a hostage
- Give police a detailed description of the situation
- Close business and isolate the scene of events
Don't touch anything. Notify your superior about the event

Check what you have done

It is important that you regularly review the arrangements that you have put in place to prevent violent or threatening situations in the workplace. To do this you should:

- consult with your employees or their representatives;
- examine records of incidents to see if the situation is improving;
- if arrangements are not working – try something else; and
- ensure lessons are learnt from incidents

Support, counselling and aftercare

Becoming a target of violence or the threat of violence is always a traumatic experience that violates a person's integrity and self esteem. The sooner that support, counselling and aftercare is available, the better the recovery from a traumatic incident may be. Help may be available from victim support schemes operating in many areas – local police stations can tell you your nearest one or you can phone (England) 020 7735 9166 or (Scotland) 0131 684486

Reporting and investigating incidents

If a violence-related occupational incident occurs at the workplace, the employer must report it to the enforcing authority if it results in death (immediate or within one year); major injury; or inability to work for three or more days. Deaths must also be immediately reported to the police. All incidents must be investigated to establish the underlying causes and learn lessons for prevention. Risk assessments will need to be reviewed following the incident. Records of all reports, investigations and assessments should be retained.

Further information

Violence at work: a guide for employers, INDG69(rev), HSE (2001), HSE Books, Sudbury
This Info Card is based on the above HSE guide and information from VTT and FIOH.