

Workplace Violence Prevention



[Workplace violence](#) is defined as any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening behavior at the worksite, affecting employees, clients, customers, or visitors. It comes in many forms and can sometimes be hard to recognize. Working in restaurants, I have been the victim of workplace violence many times, sometimes without even realizing it. It was just part of the culture that you would be yelled at, threatened, and occasionally have to defend yourself from an angry customer, usually after they were told we were not going to serve them anymore alcohol. However, business owners and supervisors have a responsibility to protect their employees from all forms of workplace violence.

Employees who are more commonly affected by workplace violence:

- Exchange money with the public.
- Deliver passengers, goods, or services.
- Work alone or in small groups, particularly in the late night or early morning hours, especially if serving alcohol.
- Work in high crime areas, or in community settings where they have extensive contact with the public, including visiting nurses, probation officers, law enforcement, gas and water utility workers (shut off calls can be particularly dangerous), restaurant workers, and retail employees.

All employees have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose the risk of serious harm.
- Receive information and training about workplace hazards, prevention methods, and the OSHA standards that apply to their workplace.
- Review the records of workplace injuries and illnesses.
- File a complaint about their workplace if they feel there is a serious hazard or the employer isn't following the OSHA rules, without risk of retaliation.

To protect their employees, employers should:

- Develop a comprehensive [Workplace Violence Prevention Plan](#). These plans are required of all businesses in California and should be implemented workplaces everywhere. The plan should include:
 - Specific designation of the person or persons responsible for implementing the plan.
 - Effective procedures to obtain the active involvement of employees and authorized employee representatives in developing and implementing the plan.
 - Methods the employer will use to coordinate the plan with other employers, when applicable, to ensure that employees and employers understand their respective roles, as provided in the plan.
 - Effective procedures for the employer to accept and respond to reports of workplace violence and to prohibit retaliation against an employee who makes such a report.

- Effective procedures to ensure that supervisory and nonsupervisory employees comply with the plan.
 - Effective procedures to communicate with employees regarding workplace violence, including:
 - How an employee can report a violent incident, threat, or other workplace violence concern to the employer or law enforcement without fear of reprisal.
 - How employee concerns will be investigated, how employees will be informed of the investigation results, and any corrective actions to be taken as part of the employer’s responsibility under this law.
 - Procedures to identify, evaluate, and correct workplace violence hazards, including scheduled periodic inspections.
 - Procedures for post-incident response and investigation.
 - Procedures to review the effectiveness of the plan and revise the plan as needed, including plans for the active involvement of employees and authorized employee representatives.
 - Initial interactive and collaborative training about the plan when first established and annual training thereafter.
- Provide safety training, including how to de-escalate a volatile situation and what to do if that doesn’t work.
 - Secure the workplace with proper lighting, security systems, and cameras. Work with local law enforcement or other public safety organizations to improve security around the workplace.
 - Provide drop safes to limit the amount of cash on hand.

Creating a culture of safety where these policies are adhered to and not just given lip service can increase employee retention and longevity. Nothing can guarantee that employees will not become victims of workplace violence, but proper training in recognizing potential threats, situational awareness, crisis de-escalation, and threat assessment will help make you and your co-workers safer.

The [Workplace Violence Prevention Association](#) (WVPA) helps businesses develop, maintain, and train their employees on all aspects of a workplace violence prevention plan tailored to their workplace. This includes all types of businesses, including large and small businesses, retail and service industries, schools, colleges, and universities. WVPA will help you comply with state and national regulations, including California SB 553.



Two Types of Violence

A useful first step to preventing violence in the workplace is understanding the difference between affective and targeted violence. Affective violence is driven by our emotions and is often a reaction to something that occurred immediately around the person, like a frustration with a customer (or a frustrated customer), having limits set by a supervisor, or an on-going argument with a spouse that carried over into work. This kind of violence is best addressed by identifying the frustrations at an early stage. From there, we can look for ways to disengage the individual from an escalating situation. We can also teach and model impulse control and frustration tolerance in the face of aggravation. While not always an easy path, addressing affective violence at its early stages often prevents it from escalating.

Affective violence, however, is not what we commonly see as the pathway to workplace mass shootings or premeditated attacks. Targeted violence (also known as mission-oriented, predatory, strategic, and instrumental violence) is different inasmuch as the violence is delayed and rarely occurs in the heat of the conflict. Here the person internalizes their frustrations and focuses them on fantasizing and planning how they will make things right or get their revenge from being wronged. This violence occurs over a longer period and is part of the pathway to workplace mass shootings or revenge motivated attacks on supervisors or other employees. While there is no one single risk factor to look for to identify a person on the pathway toward targeted violence, isolation, suicidality, holding onto past grievances and injustices, and seeing no pathway to a better future are several that are present in most mass shooting and planned workplace violence attacks.

So, what can you do? As the saying goes, if you see something, say something. Talk with human resources at your company about your concerns or make use of your workplace behavioral intervention team (BIT) or threat assessment team (TAT). DPrep Safety can help you form such a team and can train management and staff on how to respond to threats of violence from both staff and customers, including crisis de-escalation and active assailant response.



AFFECTIVE VIOLENCE

- Emotional reaction
- Based on situations and environmental stress
- Driven by adrenaline
- Lacks forethought or planning
- Can Be seen in FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE



TARGETED VIOLENCE

- Non-emotional reaction
- Deliberate planning (weeks-months-years)
- Based in perceived/actual grievance
- Willing to sacrifice life for cause

Types of Threats

In addition to understanding the difference between affective violence and targeted violence, employees, human resources staff, and supervisors should know how to identify and describe different types of threats that may occur in the workplace or over social media.

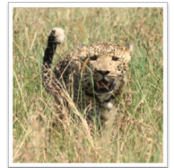


TRANSIENT THREATS/HOWLERS

These types of threats do not express lasting intent to harm. They are typically made in reaction to an intense, emotional, and passionate conflict. They are often made to protect reputation or “save face” and rarely a high likelihood of follow up or action. Approximately 70% of threats made in primary and secondary schools are transient.

SUBSTANTIVE THREATS/HUNTERS

These threats often conceal a more substantive intent to harm others in a predatory, mission-oriented attack. Substantive threats are more lasting and intentional, reaching beyond the current incident. In comparison to transient threats, substantive threats are 36 times more likely to be carried out.



Determining if a threat is transient or substantive occurs as part of a contextual analysis and threat assessment process. If either type of threat occurs, it is important to share this information forward to human resources and/or the workplace behavioral intervention or threat assessment team (BIT/TAT). While a threat may have low likelihood of being carried out, each threat should be reviewed by someone trained in this capacity.

TYPE OF THREAT	EXAMPLE
Direct	“I’m going to blow up the office.”
Indirect/Vague	“Something bad is going to happen to the office.”
Direct w/action/time imperative	“I’m going to blow up the office Tuesday at 3.”
Conditional ultimatum	“If you don’t give me a good review, I’m going to blow up this place.”
Transient	Frustrated about an task, an individual throws a folder and yells, “Burn this down!”
Substantive	“I’m going to bring a water bottle of gasoline to spread on these papers and light it up.”
Howling	“You can’t treat me like this. I’m going to set fire to the world and roast marshmallows!”
Hunting	“I have what I need. I know what I’m going to do. #fire”
Vague but direct	“Something bad is happening here soon.”
Direct but vague	“They might want to invest in fire extinguishers around here.”

Elements of Threat

- **Lethality.** Threat lethality represents the extent to which a particular threat has a high likelihood of resulting in death. For example, the possession of a firearm and ammunition combined with a threat to shoot up a workplace has a high likelihood of lethality whereas a transient threat to “make HR pay” by an individual without access to a firearm would likely have a lower lethality. Assessments of lethality may require deeper exploration into social media, past behavior, and weapons access.
- **Action and Time Imperative.** Action and time imperative refer to the time and location of an attack. If the threat contains a high degree of detail, this should be considered a heightened risk. An online post stating, “The day of the rope will be this Friday at 9 p.m.” is a higher concern than, “One of these days, there will be a reckoning for the Jews and Blacks.”
- **Fixation and Focus.** This relates to a narrowing down on a specific target. Fixations are hardened points of view, bordering on obsession, concerning a certain group being at fault and deserving of punishment. A focus builds off a fixation and further narrows onto a smaller group or a single person. For example, “I’m going to make those Asians pay for the COVID disease they brought to our country” would be a fixation on Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders. The threat, “I’m going to firebomb the corner store and rid our neighborhood of those rice eaters for eating those bats and killing American Patriots,” would include both a fixation and focus.

Determining the qualities of the threat is part of a contextual analysis and threat assessment process. When any threat occurs, it is important to share this information forward to human resources, the workplace Behavioral Intervention or Threat Assessment Team (BIT/TAT). While a threat may have low likelihood of being carried out, each threat should be reviewed by someone trained in this capacity.

No Threats ≠ No Risk

Understanding substantive and transient threats and the interplay between affective and targeted violence is an important starting place for those in human resources and on BIT/CARE teams to better assess the risk of violence in the workplace and on college campuses. Likewise, being able to assess concepts such as the lethality of a threat, the action and time imperative related to violence occurring, and the presence of a fixation and/or focus of a target are critical.

However, it is equally important to realize that many individuals who plan harm to others don’t make threats about this harm prior to the attack. They may be writing a manifesto, recording videos about their plans, and creating detailed maps of their attack, but these may be kept hidden from the public eye while they are in their planning phase.

Less direct signs of potential violence are often observable. While not always indicative of violent intent, isolation, being a victim of teasing or bullying, feelings of desperation and hopelessness, fascination with death and or firearms, or a loss of an important relationship, job or goal in life are often precursors to violence. When assessing violence risk, the presence of a threat is not the first thing professionals look for, particularly when trying to intervene prior to an attack. A lack of social support with worsening outlook regarding friends, relationships, school, work or achievement are additional risk factors that human resources and BIT/CARE professionals need to attend to.

While identifying and understanding the presence and types of threats is an important part of the violence prevention program, a full violence risk assessment looks at additional risk and protective factors in order to better understand and prevent the risk of both affective and targeted violence.