Workplace Violence in Organizations: An Exploratory Study of Organizational Prevention Techniques

Jack L. Howard

In an effort to better understand workplace violence, this exploratory study examines it from an organizational level perspective. This perspective allows for the identification of the types of prevention measures used by organizations to address workplace violence, as well as the effectiveness of these techniques at preventing it. Descriptive statistics indicate the types of organizational policies and procedures used to prevent workplace violence, as well as some of the conditions that place organizations at a higher risk of experiencing it. Additionally, the methods for minimizing violence in the workplace, such as counseling and grievance procedures, are analyzed to determine which prevention techniques appear to be most effective at addressing workplace violence. The significance of the findings and future research directions are discussed.

KEY WORDS: workplace violence; prevention techniques; organizational policies; sources of violence; organizational practices.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IN ORGANIZATIONS: EVIDENCE OF THE SOURCES AND PREVENTION MEASURES

Over the past several years, workplace violence (WPV) is an issue that organizations have had to begin addressing. Even the most unlikely of environments, such as schools in small communities, have fallen victim to violence affecting the employees and consumers associated with the organization. This has resulted in a considerable amount of publicity about the subject in the popular press (Day, 1996; Pereira, 1995). To increase the understanding of WPV, the present study examines WPV in a largely exploratory manner. This paper first defines WPV from a broad perspective. Following the definition, various ways an organization might address WPV are discussed. Next, an exploratory study assesses the prevalence and effectiveness of policies and procedures present in businesses used to address WPV in organizations, such as WPV policies, grievance procedures, prevention plans, and harassment policies. Additionally, an assessment is made providing information of the sources of WPV that organizations face, and the effects of the violence generated by those sources. Businesses having experienced WPV will be examined to determine if they

1Department of Management and Quantitative Methods, Illinois State University, Campus Box 5580, Normal, Illinois 61790-5580; e-mail: jilhowar@ilstu.edu.
are more likely to have implemented WPV policies and procedures to address it. Finally, the conditions that firms operate in will be examined to determine if certain conditions of conducting business are associated with higher occurrences of WPV. The purpose of this study is to shed further light on a very complex problem faced by organizations of all types.

**DEFINING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE**

When attempting to define WPV, several obstacles exist making it difficult to develop an orderly discussion of the topic. Regardless of the definition developed, certain areas might be omitted which some would consider WPV, whereas additional areas might be included that still others do not view as appropriate. Regardless of this problem, defining and addressing WPV is necessary. A definition is provided, with supporting rationale following the definition. As such, based on the following rationale, a definition of WPV was developed for the purpose of conducting the present exploratory study. Thus, the following definition is proposed:

Workplace violence is an illicit behavior or action which reduces the actual or perceived security of employees, patrons, and the organization itself. Workplace violence may include events outside company premises and beyond normal working hours where the activity was driven by work-related motives.

Complicating the process of defining WPV is the presence of “overlaps.” Many unpleasant things occur in the workplace, such as harassment or negligence, whose definitions overlap that of WPV. An effective definition of WPV should address these overlaps. One approach could be to recognize that an act of WPV could overlap with another problem. The proposed definition takes this approach.

What specifically constitutes WPV might depend on the perspective taken by the party attempting to address WPV. Certainly, the effects on individuals stand out to most people, but one should remember that implications for the organization also exist. The proposed definition, which adopts as broad approach, allows for the inclusion of a wide array of possible acts of WPV. As such, this definition lends itself to the possible segmentation of acts of WPV into subsets that focus on particular types of WPV such as internally generated WPV or injury causing WPV.

This definition encompasses areas not included in previous definitions. The most prominent definition of workplace violence focused on events, as well as the people, within the organization (O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). Although this begins to focus organizations on issues that could lead to workplace violence among employees, it has been estimated that 75% of workplace homicides occur during robberies and other crimes (Barrier, 1995). Additionally, given the fact that domestic violence can spill into the workplace, looking solely at employee-to-employee or employee-to-organization workplace violence only begins to address the issue of workplace violence (Burns, 1999). To better encompass workplace violence as a whole, considering employees, patrons, and the organization itself should be included in a definition of workplace violence, but does not appear in definitions used in research on this topic (Howard & Voss, 1996).

Security is important to both the employees of the organization and the organization itself. Looking at the individual level, providing a workplace free of any recognizable hazard is a requirement of OSHA (Sovereign, 1994). This further demonstrates the need for a definition to consider outsiders, such as estranged spouses or the common thief.
However, when one more closely examines the effects of a reduction of security, it becomes evident that the security of the organization as an entity is at risk. Labig (1995) suggested that increasing the physical security of the organization could be used to address, or even prevent, WPV. Building on the concept of security identified by Labig, it could be that the key element that distinguishes acts of WPV from nonviolent acts is the reduction in security.

Although the actual security of an organization and its employees is important, the perception of security, or its reduction, is also important to consider. Drawing from the field of social cognition, how an individual approaches something, living or otherwise, is based upon that individual's learning history (Feldman, 1988). If learning history is likened to perception or experience, one might reasonably interpret the previous statement to mean that the perception that is attached to an object or action might shape the behavior of an individual to the object or action. Knowing this, the perceived reduction in security can shape both the actions taken by individuals, in addition to their well-being. To illustrate this point, organizations have been found to limit the access of information to minimize potentially violent acts against their organizations, such as the location of the U.S. factory making the French abortion pill RU-486 has been kept secret (Day, 1996). Because perceptions of reduced security may influence actions taken by individuals or organizations, a definition of WPV should encompass the issue of perceived reductions in security. The proposed definition addressed each of these areas of security.

If the focus of the definition were left to a “reduction in security,” too many issues might be considered. If the focus were only on illegal acts, those threatening, immoral acts might slip through the cracks. The word illicit is preferred to the word illegal because, according to Webster's Dictionary (1991), illicit covers acts that are both illegal, and also those that are disapproved of for moral or ethical reasons. Using the word illicit implies that only acts that possess an element of illegality or immorality are to be included in the concept WPV. Thus, acts such as ordinary negligence or legitimate competition are excluded by the use of the word illicit.

An actual or perceived reduction in security as the result of illicit acts represents the core of the definition of WPV being developed. However, it is important to address the issue of where violent acts occur, and whether these acts should be considered WPV. For example, in the context of work, employees may need to travel extensively and in the course of these travels muggings may occur. If said muggings increase turnover, the organization will be faced with the cost of replacing employees. The question is whether or not this loss that occurred off the property of the organization should be defined as WPV. One may believe it is, as there is a tangible cost of replacing this worker (Cascio, 1987). Another example would be when the windows of an executive's home are shot out during a period of labor strife (Howard, 1995). As a result, in defining WPV, it is important to consider that WPV is not restricted to events within a physical structure. Rather, if it is to be restricted, it should be restricted to work related activities or events.

This definition effectively incorporates many groups that might be adversely affected by violence in the workplace. The definition addresses the surrounding issues of the perception of violence, which might influence behaviors of employees as well as patrons, extending the definitions that have been developed by others (Baron & Neuman, 1996; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). Additionally, this definition indicates that WPV can come from within the organization, but may also include those sources outside of the organization, an area lacking in previous definitions. The next section of this paper provides some of the methods that organizations may use to reduce and prevent WPV.
PREVENTATIVE MEASURES FOR WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

An area of the literature on WPV that has received a considerable amount of attention concerns ways of preventing WPV. Most of the literature is prescriptive, with little or no supporting evidence regarding the effectiveness of these measures. It does, however, lend itself to a considerable amount of conventional wisdom as seeming to be effective, and are consistent with practices for providing a safe workplace.

Screening and Selection

One of the most effective ways of reducing WPV is to prevent it before it enters the organization. One means of accomplishing this is to incorporate methods of identifying potentially violent applicants during the selection process (Anfuso, 1994; Coco, 1998; Mantell & Albrecht, 1994; Nalla et al., 1996). Organizations should conduct thorough background checks on an applicant's work history. Those individuals involved in screening and selecting employees should be informed of the profile associated with potentially violent employees. Additionally, having these individuals ask questions that could assist in identifying problematic applicants could prove to be helpful (Atkinson, 2001). This could help to effectively identify and screen out problematic applicants. Organizations may want to consider avoiding applicants who have a history of violence on the job, as it may prove to be a risk to workplace safety.

This task, however, is often easier said than done. For example, when screening employees for employment, it is important to understand what is both stated and not stated. Thomas McIvane was given a “General” discharge from the U.S. Marine Corps, rather than an “Honorable” discharge. This should have been a signal to employers, but the U.S. Postal Service employees did not pick up on this signal. Thomas McIvane was hired and was a problematic employee long before the massacre at the Royal Oak, Michigan Post Office (Dennenberg & Braverman, 1999). This example illustrates the importance of effectively screening employees during the selection process.

There are a variety of reasons that make it difficult for employers to identify whether an employee has had a violent past, or whether they have a propensity towards violence. First, many organizations do not provide much, if any, information about a past employee's performance in an organization. Although there are many reasons that this information is not provided, one reason is the fear of being sued on the grounds of defamation of the person's character (Sovereign, 1994). With the increase in the number of lawsuits and awards to plaintiffs, many organizations are hesitant to provide negative information on both past and present employees, regardless of its accuracy. Because of the legal problems, coupled with the fact that it is common for an applicant to provide socially desirable information in an interview, the danger signs might not be apparent. However, one must remember that an organization that does conduct background checks may limit its liability, as well as reducing lawsuits as a result of hiring violent employees.

Policies and Procedures

An effective means of preventing WPV is the climate an organization establishes with its employees. This can be accomplished a number of ways, with one of the ways...
being through the organization's policies and procedures. These policies and procedures communicate the boundaries within which employees can operate (Flynn, 2000).

One policy that has been suggested as a means of reducing WPV is an overall WPV policy (Nalla et al., 1996), in which organizations should clearly indicate that they will not tolerate violence of any sort, to include harassment. It has also been suggested that organizations adopting such a policy should adopt a zero-tolerance stand toward violence (Anfuso, 1994; Nalla et al., 1996). Following from this policy should be a disciplinary procedure associated with violations of the policy. It should be made clear that a severe cost exists for those individuals who choose to violate this policy.

Harassment may be considered a less severe form of WPV, but should be addressed by a harassment policy. For example, if one employee repeatedly threatens or bothers another employee, the employee being bothered might retaliate, escalating the problem to the level where violence could occur. It is suggested that by taking a serious stand on this issue, WPV might be reduced (Nalla et al., 1996).

Creating an atmosphere where employees feel comfortable, to include open communication, may go far in maintaining a positive atmosphere. Certainly evidence exists that when organizations do not openly communicate with their employees, employees may take actions in their best personal interest. These actions have represented costs to organizations in terms of good employees leaving the organization (Ferris et al., 1996). Extending the possibilities, it is feasible that employees could take other forms of action, to include violence (Buckley et al., 2001). To illustrate this point, consider the case of Gang Lu at the University of Iowa. Because Mr. Lu believed that he had not received fair consideration (i.e., procedures not effectively followed) for the best dissertation award, he killed another student, along with two physics professors (Deneberg & Braverman, 1999).

Finally, an organization may find under certain circumstances that it has provoked WPV itself by disciplining an employee too severely. When disciplining employees, it is important for the organization to be just in its decision. The procedure should be sound, allowing for responses on the part of the accused (Nalla et al., 1996). In addition, organizations must realize that what they do to their employees can lead to instances of violence (Folger & Baron, 1996). When employees feel that they have lost control of the situation, they might pursue violent means to regain perceived control (Barling, 1996). Providing a grievance procedure allows for the correction of a perceived injustice, possibly reducing the number of WPV incidents.

It is hoped that by communicating the standards of behavior and performance through policies and procedures, as well as by opening communication channels through the ability to file a formal complaint, that WPV might be reduced. These policies and procedures may potentially lower WPV.

Training for Supervisors/Employees

Another means of preventing WPV is to train supervisors and employees on the warning signs of violence (Bensimon, 1994; Coco, 1998; Mantell & Albrecht, 1994; Nalla et al., 1996). In employee-initiated acts of WPV, often times the perpetrator does not commit these acts without warning. In some instances, the acts are calculated, and the assailants provide indications of their intentions. Changes in behavior might suggest that the individual is having problems. If supervisors and employees are properly trained, they may be able to
identify problems, such as stress, in their early stages, reducing the number of instances of WPV.

Effective training could have prevented the workplace homicides of four social services workers in Watkins Glen, New York, in 1992. John Miller had come from out of state to contest being the father of a child, thus owing child support (Denenberg & Braverman, 1999). He argued with the supervisor of the department, as well as carrying a paper bag with him. Effective training could have provided employees of this department that coming from out of state of settle a disagreement could have been a signal, as well as carrying the paper bag.

Training should go beyond merely identifying the warning signs of potential problems (Coco, 1998; Flynn, 2000). Supervisors and employees should receive training on how to respond to an incident as it occurs (Fox & Levin, 1994; Seger, 1993). In the case of John Miller, when he returned to the office the next day, it was not until the supervisor had been shot that anyone took any actions. Upon his return, security could have and should have been notified that Mr Miller was in the building. Ironically, the local police department was only 100 feet from this particular office.

Although training cannot effectively prevent all incidents, it can do a lot to reduce the effects of the incident if the perpetrator does not carry out the act to completion. Training provided to employees and supervisors can be conducted to not only address WPV generated within the organization, but would also be trained to deal with WPV situations that might result from an outsider, as the case of John Miller illustrates, coming into the organization and taking out his or her aggression on the organization or its employees.

Employee Assistance Programs

One way of preventing instances of WPV that has been suggested by several authors is to provide counseling services to employees (Anfuso, 1994; Nalla et al., 1996). Employees may experience many pressures at work (and away from work), and after finding no solutions resort to violence in the workplace. Organizations that allow employees to seek professional assistance may see tremendous results. Employee assistance programs (EAPs) usually involve professional counselors who can effectively counsel a troubled individual. These counselors may be able to better help an employee than a supervisor, who might actually be the cause of the frustration or the target of the violence. The Postal Service has improved its EAP, and has found it effective in reducing WPV (Voelker, 1996).

In many cases, employees can address problems that exist at home, to include counseling for the employee and his or her family can use EAPs (Anonymous, 1999). This may assist the organization in reducing the possibility of having domestic violence spillover into the workplace, which has occurred in the past. For example, estranged spouses and significant others have resulted in violence in the workplace (Denenberg & Braverman, 1999; Johnson & Indvik, 1999). Although this does not directly address WPV episodes, reducing the likelihood of WPV is important to organizations. Given the increased legal attention associated with gender-motivated violence, increased attention might turn toward an organization's EAP (Diamond, 2000).

Addressing the problem of domestic violence in the workplace may be possible by using EAPs in conjunction with others prevention methods. The benefits are tangible for organizations; resulting in higher productivity, lower absenteeism, and turnover (Johnson & Indvik, 1999). EAPs help organizations help employees, but organizations ultimately benefit

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
the most. In the case of WPV, it can help prevent WPV, along with domestic violence. EAPs can help employees cope with work-related problems that could ultimately lead to violence if not addressed, as well as private matters at home that could lead to problems at the workplace.

Outplacement Services

In today's society, layoffs and terminations are all too common. The concept of job security and organizations maintaining loyalty toward their employees is not what it was 20 or 30 years ago. As a result, one of the areas that have led to highly publicized incidents of WPV regards the manner in which employees were released from the organization. In the early 1990s, Joyce McCarthy believed that she was being unjustly terminated, due to downsizing, and threatened to kill the manager in charge of cutting employees if she herself were cut (Dennenberg & Braverman, 1999).

Employees who believe that they were unjustly terminated, or disciplined which may lead to termination, may lead to instances of WPV (Diamond, 1997; Mantell & Albrecht, 1994). Perceived inequities can lead to situations where employees attempt to correct the inequities (Buckley et al., 2001). However, organizations can take actions to reduce perceived inequities proactively. Ensuring that an atmosphere is created where employees perceive that fairness and equity exists might reduce the likelihood of a former employee returning to the organization with the intention of harming others or the organization, and outplacement services might address this issue. Providing outplacement services can begin to reduce perceived inequities among employees. Helping good employees find employment can reduce the anxiety associated with losing one's job.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON THE USE OF PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Although there exists a considerable amount of research that prescribes what should be done to address WPV in organizations, there is very little empirical evidence on what organizations are actually doing to address WPV. An earlier study by the present author indicates that very few organizations, about 1 in 12 respondents, indicated that they actually had a WPV policy in place in their organization (Howard, 1999). Another study indicates that of 62% of 299 organizations responding to a survey had written policies addressing violent acts in the workplace (Katz, 2000).

Additionally, no evidence to date is known which examines precisely when an organization begins to address WPV. Conventional wisdom would suggest that once an incident of WPV occurs in an organization, then the organization will begin to take action to address it. However, conventional wisdom and actual actions taken by organizations do not always come together as one would expect. However, given the lack of empirical evidence surrounding this specific issue and the fact that this research is exploratory, it is expected that experiencing a WPV episode will prompt organizations to take the necessary actions to address WPV.

HYPOTHESES

As in most actions an organization focuses upon, the emphasis is usually on immediate concerns. After all, if the most pressing matters are not dealt with today, there may be no
tomorrow. This is not an unusual business practice. However, given the increased publicity and awareness of WPV, it is believed that organizations that have experienced violence in the workplace will be more likely to have policies and procedures designed to address WPV. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** Organizations that have experienced WPV are significantly more likely to have WPV policies and procedures than those organizations that have not experienced WPV.

Although little is known about what specifically triggers WPV, it is known that robberies accounted for 75% of the workplace homicides in 1993 and more than 50% of all WPV (Barrier, 1995; Duncan, 1995). This further illustrates the difficulty when attempting to define what specifically constitutes WPV. Nonetheless, these statistics demonstrate that greater than 50% of all WPV being generated beyond the "walls" of the workplace. For many organizations, the business relies on interacting with the public, to include possibly interacting with those that might inflict harm on the organization, its members and customers. As such, those organizations that interact with the public may be more at risk of facing incidents of WPV. Because of this inherent risk, organizations that have greater amounts of interaction with the public may be more likely to experience WPV. As such, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H2:** Organizations interacting with the public as part of conducting business are significantly more likely to have experienced WPV than organizations not interacting with the public as part of conducting business.

Because this study is largely exploratory, a wide variety of descriptive statistics will be examined. Among the descriptive information presented will be the types of policies and procedures in place. This will begin to provide reasons as to why some organizations may not choose to develop WPV policies whereas other businesses choose to implement such policies. Additionally, the sources of violence will be examined in an attempt to determine whether any particular source may be more likely to commit acts of WPV, as well as if these acts lead to more severe consequences for the organization. Finally, business conditions will be analyzed to determine if any of these conditions lead to a higher likelihood of experiencing WPV.

**METHOD**

**Sample**

To draw a sample that represents the 10 major SIC Codes, 2000 organizations based in the United States were randomly selected from the Disclosure Corporate Snapshots (1998) electronic database. This database focuses on publicly held organizations, but allows searches to be conducted by SIC code. Companies were selected randomly within each SIC code. Once organizations were identified, an attempt was made to identify the name of the CEO or Vice President of Human Resources. For those organizations in which no name was identified, letters were sent to the Director of Human Resources.

The 2000 organizations represented the retail trade, public administration, service, construction, manufacturing, mining, wholesale, transportation/communication/public utilities, finance/insurance/real estate, and the agriculture/forestry/fishing industries. Of those
industries, all had participants complete the survey in its entirety. Public administration, agriculture/forestry/fishing and construction were the only industries that had respondents that had not experienced an incident of WPV. Organizations ranged in size from 2.8 to 300,000 FTEs, with a median size of 1500.

Procedure

A cover letter describing the study accompanied the surveys, indicating that participation was voluntary, and that responses would be kept confidential. Accompanying the cover letter was the definition of WPV presented earlier in this paper. The response rate for this study was 21%, which is well within the typical 15–25% range of response rates targeting organizational leaders (Stimpert & Duhaime, 1995).

Measures

Those organizations having experienced WPV were asked to respond to the first item in the survey. This item was designed to assess from the organization’s perspective the influence of the WPV act on the organization. Because this may be perceived as a highly subjective issue, an ordinal level scale was developed, given that one cannot determine if three disabilities would be equivalent to one death in an organization. As a result, respondents were asked to assess the most recent act of WPV experienced by the organization based on the following scale.

Level 1-WPV—No influence on the organization
Level 2-WPV—Minor influence on the firm and its constituencies
Level 3-WPV—Moderate influence on the firm and its constituencies
Level 4-WPV—Serious disability or severe financial problems
Level 5-WPV—Death or bankruptcy

Those responding organizations that had not experienced an instance of WPV were asked to move to the next section of the survey. On the basis of this fact, an overall measure was created, with 0 indicating no WPV incidents in the organization, and 1 indicating that WPV had occurred in the organization.

Additionally, if a WPV incident had occurred, respondents were also asked to respond to five additional items. The items were similar in nature to the overall measure, but focused on a particular aspect of the WPV, to include the act itself, the effects of the act on victims, the effects of the act on ownership, the effects of the act on the external environment, and the effects of the act on management practices and principles. The response categories ranged from no effect to catastrophic effect, and were worded in a manner that was focused on the aspect being assessed.

Responding organizations were asked to identify if the source of the WPV act was an employee, former employee, customer, or other outsider. The organization was then asked to indicate what action was taken to address the WPV. Next, the effectiveness of the action was rated on a 7-point scale, with 1 representing Very Effective to 7 representing Very Ineffective. For employees, a variety of organizational options were provided: verbal warning; written warning; reprimand; suspension with pay; suspension without pay; termination; prosecution
in court; and required counseling. For the other sources of WPV, two options were provided: prosecution in court and other.

Respondents were asked to indicate the organizational policies and procedures that exist in their organization. These policies and procedures included: a WPV policy, open communication meetings, procedures for dealing with WPV, discipline, termination, counseling, negotiation and communication training, physical security measures, screening, and evaluation of applicants, a prevention plan, a crisis plan, an EAP, a stress management plan, training on identification of warning signs of WPV, outplacement services, harassment policies, and a grievance procedure. Each of these items was coded 0 if the policy or procedure was not present, and 1 if it was present. Respondents were also asked to indicate the effectiveness of each of the policies and procedures present in the organization at deterring WPV. The effectiveness was measured using the 7-point scale mentioned previously.

The survey then asked the respondents to provide background information on their organization and its experiences with WPV. Organizations were asked to indicate the industry in which they operate and the number of FTEs in the organization. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of public interaction the business depends on for the organization to be successful and to indicate the conditions that exist in the organization as it conducts business. If the condition was present, a coding of 1 was assigned. If the condition was absent, a coding of 0 was assigned.

Analysis

Data were analyzed in two primary ways. Descriptive statistics are provided to reveal the prevalence of WPV policies and procedures used to address WPV. T-tests were conducted to determine under what conditions organizations were more likely to experience instances of WPV, providing a test for Hypothesis 2. Additionally, t-tests were utilized to determine which policies and procedures implemented by organizations were more effective at deterring WPV. Finally, t-tests were conducted to determine if any differences existed between organizations that had experienced WPV and those that had not and the policies and procedures these organizations had established, providing a test for Hypothesis 1.

RESULTS

Of the 423 returned questionnaires, 337 were sent back with a variety of messages. The essence of these messages was that these organizations had not experienced WPV, and they did not find it necessary to have a WPV policy in their organizations. Of the remaining 86 returned surveys, 37 organizations indicated that they did have a formal WPV policy in place. Table I summarizes the elements found within WPV policies, as well as the policies found in organizations not having a formal WPV policy. This descriptive information indicates that organizations not having formal WPV policies in many cases have the components that provide for a foundation to address WPV, such as EAPs and grievance procedures.

Hypothesis 1, which states that organizations that have experienced WPV would be more likely to have WPV policies and procedures, received partial support. Although organizations that had incidents of WPV were not more likely to have a WPV policy than organizations not having experienced WPV, they were more likely to have stress management plans and grievance procedures. None of the organizations that had no WPV experiences
Table I. Elements of WPV Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizations with formal WPV policies</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment policies</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of discipline following WPV</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screening of potential employees</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures to address WPV incidents</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Termination procedures</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee assistance plans</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular meetings between managers and employees</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance procedures</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPV prevention plans</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication training</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis plans</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outplacement services</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training to identify threats</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling required following WPV</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress management plans</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations without formal WPV policies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screening of potential employees</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment policies</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance procedures</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee assistance plans</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication training</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outplacement services</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training to identify threats</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis plans</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPV prevention plans</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular meetings between managers and employees</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress management plans</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

had either of these procedures. However, 18% of the organizations having experienced WPV had grievance procedures, and 79% had stress management plans (see Table II).

Hypothesis 2, which states that organizations requiring interactions with the public as part of conducting business lead to greater levels of WPV, was not supported ($t = 0.30, p = .77$). Over 90% of the 86 organizations completing the survey in its entirety experienced WPV. Although interacting with the public did not lead to greater level of WPV, organizations requiring interactions with the public as part of conducting business had a significantly greater likelihood of victims of WPV requiring professional attention than organizations not requiring interactions with the public as part of conducting business ($t = 1.77, p = .09$).

Table II. WPV Policy Element Differences Between Organizations With and Without WPV Policies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WPV policy present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations having experienced WPV</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations not having experienced WPV</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress management plans present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations having experienced WPV</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations not having experienced WPV</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>3.46***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievance procedures present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations having experienced WPV</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations not having experienced WPV</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>13.79***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** p = .01.
Table III. Organizational Conditions That Lead to Greater Levels of WPV Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>t value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WPV experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations working with unstable individuals</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations not working with unstable individuals</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>2.07**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WPV experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations involved in guarding property</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizations not involved in guarding property</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>2.08**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**p = .05.

For those organizations not requiring interactions with the public, a mean rating of 1.11 was given, with 1 indicating that no one suffered an injury. Organizations requiring interactions with the public had a mean rating of 1.40, with 2 representing injuries that require professional attention. Although this result approaches significance, it may begin to indicate that interacting with the public can lead to violent incidents that lead to more serious injuries. One must remember that this is an exploratory study, and that this is a preliminary finding. Further study is necessary to determine if this finding is consistent, as well as significant.

Additional analyses were conducted to determine the organizational conditions and the sources of WPV that might lead to a greater likelihood of WPV. In terms of the organizational conditions that are part of conducting business, working with unstable or volatile individuals and work involving guarding property or possessions each resulted in a greater likelihood of experiencing WPV. In each of these cases, all of the organizations with these conditions of conducting business experienced WPV (see Table III). Additionally, 92% of those organizations not working with unstable or volatile individuals and 90% of organizations involved with guarding property or possessions experienced WPV.

Organizations possessing WPV policies were also found to be more likely than those organizations not having WPV policies to have additional policies to support the WPV policy in place. In particular, organizations with a WPV policy were more likely to have prevention plans, stress management plans, employee assistance plans, and harassment policies. These findings indicate that those organizations with WPV policies are more likely to implement policies in conjunction with the WPV policy to support such a policy than those organizations without such a policy. This further indicates that WPV may not simply be addressed with a single policy, but that it involves several components. Table IV summarizes these results. Additionally, organizations having a WPV policy were more likely to have had their profitability affected by a WPV incident than those organizations not having a policy (t = 2.49, p < .05). An average rating of 1.05 was given by organization not experiencing WPV, with 1 indicating no effect on profitability had occurred. An average rating of 1.25 was given by organizations that had experienced WPV, with 2 indicating that a minimal effect on profitability had occurred, ranging to 5, representing bankruptcy.

Organizations involved in retail trade (t = 1.77, p = .08), finance/insurance/real estate (t = 1.77, p = .08), and transportation/communication/public utilities (t = 1.77, p = .08) had a significantly greater likelihood of experiencing a WPV incident when compared to organizations in the other industries. Again, this is an exploratory study, and the results should be cautiously interpreted. As such, the results appear to begin to indicate findings that should be further examined in future research. However, each of the organizations in these industries experienced WPV. Additionally, 94% of the organizations outside of these
industries had experienced WPV. More specifically, WPV incidents in the service industry were less likely to require the victims to receive professional attention ($t = 3.24, p < .05$), with no one suffering an injury ($1.00$). Outside of the service industry the average rating was $1.35$, indicating that professional attention was more likely. Also, the service industry has a lower likelihood of WPV incidents leading to a significant increase in changes by external organizations ($t = 1.85, p = .07$). Organizations in the service industry had an average rating of $1.00$, indicating that the incident had no influence on the external environment, such as increasing insurance premiums. The effects of WPV incidents faced by nonservice industry organizations were more severe, which had an average rating of $1.17$, indicating a higher likelihood of increased cost of insurance premiums. Organizations in the manufacturing ($t = 1.85, p = .07$) and transportation/communication/public utilities ($t = 1.84, p = .07$) also had a significantly lower likelihood of changes by external organizations than organizations in other industrial classifications. In each of these cases, the lowest rating possible of $1.00$ was achieved, whereas other industries averaged $1.21$ and $1.18$ when compared to manufacturing and transportation/communication/public utilities, respectively.

Finally, although WPV incidents were committed by employees, former employees, customers and other outsiders, when employees committed acts of WPV, the effects on the organization were significantly greater ($t = 3.13, p < .01$), with an average rating of $1.80$, indicating that a minor influence on the firm was the effect. However, when nonemployees committed acts of WPV, the incidents were rated as having little, if any, influence on the firm, with an average rating of $1.17$.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the analyses provide valuable insight into the continuing problem of WPV facing organizations. Examining only the hypotheses does not provide a complete picture of how organizations are addressing WPV. However, when one examines the descriptive information in combination with the results of the hypotheses, the results indeed reveal a considerable amount of information surrounding this growing organizational problem.

Organizations experiencing WPV were not more likely to have a WPV policy than organizations not having experienced WPV. This finding does not support Hypothesis 1.
However, organizations having experienced WPV did have a greater likelihood of having a stress management plan and a grievance procedure. This result provides indirect support for the hypothesis in that these organizations have policies in place that can help address the issues associated with WPV. Specifically, these organizations appear to understand that providing a positive working environment with open communication and due process procedures can alleviate some of the problems associated with WPV (Folger & Baron, 1996). By creating a positive work environment, WPV may be reduced, and the introduction of these types of procedures may begin to effectively address WPV.

Additionally, the descriptive results provided by this study further reveal information that illustrates organizational stands toward this problem. First, only 37 of 423 responding organizations (8.75%) have implemented a WPV policy. This indicates that many organizations have a variety of perspectives toward WPV. In particular, those 337 organizations that returned surveys indicating that a WPV incident had not occurred in their organization and do not have a WPV policy in place reveals a variety of possible explanations for lacking such programs.

One such explanation could be that organizations are taking a reactive, rather than a proactive, stance toward WPV. In other words, WPV is a problem for other organizations and not ours. The problem with this position is that if an organization waits until a WPV incident occurs, the costs exacted on the organization or to an employee can and should have been avoided. Given the evidence of WPV, whether in the form of workplace homicide (Bulatao & VandenBos, 1996) or aggression toward the organization (Baron & Neuman, 1996), to ignore this problem is to allow unnecessary costs to be exacted on the organization.

A second possible explanation for the absence of WPV policies is that WPV does not occur with a high frequency, and that organizations have greater immediate concerns to address on a day to day basis. Certainly if one focuses on workplace homicide, the number of workplace homicides relative to the number of workers is still very low (Kuzmits, 1990). The explanation could be as simple as the odds. Because the odds are very low, as a result, organizations are focusing on issues where the odds of addressing these issues is higher, and deserving of more attention.

However, when one examines the data provided by those organizations completing the surveys, the percentage of firms having a formal WPV policy rises to 43%. More revealing than this number is the information related to the WPV policy. Those organizations making the effort to address WPV appear to be making a serious effort. Only four of the 37 organizations having policies only had policies. A vast majority of the organizations (31) had several procedures in place to address incidents of workplace violence, including discipline procedures (33), termination procedures (29), and counseling required following WPV (16). In addition, these same organizations have numerous other policies in place, such as grievance procedures, harassment policies, and outplacement procedures, to name a few. These organizations were also more significantly more likely to have a prevention plan for dealing with troublesome employees (t = 2.95, p < .01) and stress management plans (t = 2.26, p < .05), in addition to having significantly more EAPs (t = 1.84, p < .10) and harassment policies (t = 1.78, p < .10). This evidence indicates that those organizations that do actively institute WPV policies are doing much more than merely implementing a policy. In effect, these organizations are proactively attempting to address WPV through a variety of mechanisms, rather than through a single solution.

Examining those organizations that do not have WPV policies also provides some insights into why organizations may or may not be addressing WPV. Several of these

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Workplace Violence

organizations do have a variety of other organizational policies in place, such as harassment policies, grievance procedures, outplacement services, and EAPs. These policies and procedures may address WPV, and may represent components of an effective WPV prevention plan in an organization. Given this point, an argument can be made that many organizations have in place some of the pieces to address WPV, even if they do not implement a full-blown policy and set of procedures. As a result, these organizations may perceive that they are already proactively addressing workplace violence, and that additional policies and procedures are not necessary. Even if this is the rationale organizations are using, given the fact that they are not pursuing these policies and procedures at the same level as organizations with WPV policies and related procedures (i.e., stress management plans and prevention plans), they may not be as proactive as they should be. These are areas that organizations need to consider addressing, given the rise in WPV.

The conditions of conducting business that an organization faces also reveal some insights into better understanding WPV. Although the present sample did not find that interaction with the public leads to a greater likelihood of WPV, the likelihood of these incidents requiring professional attention did approach significance. Although this is not consistent with previous findings (Lynch, 1987), there are a variety of explanations for the results. First, the number of organizations that completed the entire survey was very small. But even though the size was small, the finding that when WPV occurred it led to a situation that requires professional attention indicates that when interacting with the public, the consequences of WPV may be severe. This finding, although not directly supporting Hypothesis 2, does provide ancillary evidence that WPV is an extremely important issue to address if conducting business requires interaction with the public. It indicates that these organizations must face an inherent, and often times unpredictable, risk, that of allowing the public at large onto its premises. This indicates that these businesses should consider that employees are not the only source of WPV, and that other risks associated with conducting business do exist. It is these risks that might increase WPV.

Additional conditions of business identified as possibly higher risks of experiencing WPV included working with unstable individuals, guarding property or possessions and working in community-based settings. In particular, the finding associated with working with unstable individuals is consistent with the health care literature (Newhill, 1995). The evidence regarding the conditions of doing business in an area which business leaders need to consider seriously, as it appears that these conditions impose certain risks. Coupling these findings with the findings associated with the different business sectors, such as retail trade, finance/insurance/real estate, and transportation/communication/public utilities, it is imperative that business leaders examine the risks associated with conducting business in these arenas. These leaders should realize that they are in a potentially more risky business in terms of experiencing WPV.

Finally, organizations should understand that risks can come from employees, former employees, customers and other outsiders, consistent with past research (Howard, 1999). However, special attention should be given to current employees, as they can cause greater negative effects to the organization when WPV is committed. Given that employees have greater access to the organization, it is not surprising that the effects of their actions on the organization were rated as more detrimental. This indicates that organizations should examine more closely the internal mechanisms for addressing WPV. When employees commit such acts, the results are more detrimental to the organization. That is not to say that the organization should ignore former employees, customers, and other outsiders. Rather, it
is simply to point out that employees have access to areas of the organization traditionally denied to other parties.

**Practical Implications**

The findings suggest several steps organizations can take to better address WPV. One of the best actions an organization can do is to develop a WPV policy, and link other policies, procedures and plans to the WPV policy. By developing a WPV policy, organizations set standards and boundaries of acceptable behavior by employees. This lets employees know what they can and cannot do, as well as how to handle various situations. However, it is important to realize that other policies can and should be tied to the WPV policy.

Specifically, organizations having experienced WPV were more likely to have implemented stress management plans. In fact, none of the organizations not having experienced WPV have implemented stress management plans. Stress management plans provide a mechanism for employees to release stress, not allowing it to build to a point where it leads to violence. By implementing a stress management plan, organizations may be reducing the likelihood of getting to a point where stress leads to violence. To further illustrate this point, organizations with a WPV policy were significantly more likely to have a stress management plan than organizations without a WPV policy. The fact that only those organizations that had experienced WPV had stress management plans indicates that not all of the organizations that experienced WPV had yet developed a WPV policy. These policies should both exist and be linked to one another.

Closely related to the previous point, organizations should also implement grievance procedures. Organizations that had experienced WPV were more likely to have a grievance procedure than those organizations not having experienced WPV. Again, no organizations that had not experienced WPV had implemented grievance procedures. Grievance procedures may be instrumental in reducing the likelihood of an incident escalating in violence. By implementing a grievance procedure, an organization puts in place a mechanism where an employee who perceives an injustice, or an action that is unfair, the opportunity to voice his or her concerns, as well as the opportunity to have an impartial individual or group to hear the complaint. This provides a sense of justice in the workplace, that the employees have the opportunity for their day in court. This may be able to reduce or prevent an incident from reaching violent proportions. It is very possible that these two steps, implementing stress management plans and grievance procedures, could be the result of a WPV incident, and that those organizations that have not experienced WPV have yet to understand the importance of these tools to effectively address WPV.

A third practical implication is that prevention plans also need to be developed, in conjunction with the WPV policy. Having a policy is a great first step, but it is only an initial step. It is important for organizations and their employees to fully develop a set of plans to address WPV. A prevention plan is an integral part of providing for a safe work environment, and should be one of the essential components linked to a WPV policy. Every organization must decide for itself what are the appropriate steps to be taken to prevent WPV. These steps can range from increased security to better screening of job applicants and from training of supervisors and employees to implementing grievance procedures to ensure justice in the workplace. Regardless of what is appropriate for a specific organization, actively developing a prevention plan can go a long way to making the WPV policy effective.
A fourth practical implication is complementary in nature with the previous three implications. It is imperative to link a wide variety of policies, procedures, and plans to the WPV policy. Only 4 of the 37 organizations had only WPV policies. WPV is an elusive phenomenon in organizations. An organization cannot always know when it will come, the shape of the violence, or from whom. Having numerous policies and plans linked to the overall WPV policy strengthens the policy, potentially preventing or reducing the likelihood of violence.

The final practical implication is to realize that WPV exists and could happen at any time. With over half of the HR professionals responding to the 1999 Society for Human Resource Management survey on WPV indicating that violence had occurred at their offices over the previous 2.5 years, WPV is more common than many employers would like to believe (Flynn, 2000). Organizations need to proactively address WPV. The attitude that it happens elsewhere and will not happen here is not an effective means for addressing WPV, and certainly will not prevent it. This represents the most important practical implication of the study. Take action now, rather than be caught off-guard, when it is too late.

CONCLUSION

This study begins to reveal the issues surrounding WPV. The results presented indicate that although not all organizations have WPV policies and procedures, many organizations do have many of the underlying components of WPV policies and procedures, such as grievance procedures, supervisory training, and outplacement services. This indicates that organizations are addressing WPV in a variety of ways, even if they are not specifically implementing WPV policies. This represents a proactive means of addressing WPV for many organizations. Although this is a step in the right direction, it is also important to point out that the results indicate that organizations should utilize a variety of policies and procedures to begin to address WPV, as most organizations (90%) completing the survey in its entirety experienced WPV. Those organizations taking the time to implement a WPV Policy were more likely to implement a variety of plans and policies to address WPV from a wide variety of perspectives.

Additionally, the results indicate that the conditions under which an organization operates when conducting business do vary in terms of their association with the likelihood of experiencing WPV. Although all organizations should realize that WPV is a possibility, it is more evident in certain types of industries and occupations, such as working with unstable individuals and guarding property. All organizations should examine the industry that they are operating within to determine the types of risks they face, as well as where those risks might lie.

Finally, although WPV is generated from a variety of sources, the effects that employees have on the organization are greater than the effects of other sources of WPV. Because employees have greater access to the organization, focusing on employees is important. However, organizations must not lose sight of the fact that most of the WPV comes from beyond the walls of the organization.

Future research should continue to examine the effects of WPV on businesses. In particular, a concerted effort should be made to assess the extent of the damages to the organization, in terms of financial damages, as well as the morale and well-being of the workforce. The effectiveness of the techniques used to address WPV after its occurrence
should also be assessed in an attempt to determine which techniques produce the most effective outcomes for business following an incident of WPV.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks John Lust, Richard Voss, and numerous other individuals that have encouraged me over the years to continue to pursue this research. Additionally, I thank Dr. John Keenan and several anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

REFERENCES

Workplace Violence


Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.