VIOLENCE AT WORK

€1.50

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This booklet aims to highlight-

(1) What is considered violence within the work context and what are its effects;

(2) How to check if there is a violence problem at your workplace;

(3) What situations can cause violence and/or make violence more likely;

(4) How to ensure adequate safeguards - as required by law – for violence hazards and risks.

WHAT IS WORKPLACE VIOLENCE?

Workplace violence occurs where people, in the course of their employment, are aggressively verbally abused, threatened or physically assaulted.

IS IT COMMON?

Every year, over 5% of all reported workplace accidents in Irish workplaces are due to violence. The sectors involved include:

% of Reported Accidents in Sectors*

Public Administration and Defence	17%
Health and Social Work	16%
Education	7%
Financial and Retail Services	7%
Hotels and Restaurants	3%
Transport, Storage and Communication	3%

*Statistics taken from the Health and Safety Authority
Summary of Injury, Illness and Fatality Statistics, 2005 - 2006

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF VIOLENCE?

For the victim there may be both immediate and long term effects.

- **PHYSICAL**

  The result may be an injury which may need First Aid treatment such as pressure to stop bleeding, swelling or pain and/or hospital referral. As with all ill-health and accidents violent hazards can increase costs due to absenteeism, employer's liability premiums and compensation payments.

- **PSYCHOLOGICAL**

  Experiencing violence often results in loss of self confidence and increase in fear and feelings of insecurity, loss of control and even panic. For those who haven't directly experienced the violence but who work in the area or who have been witnesses to it, similar effects can exist. Violence at work lowers morale in the 'whole workforce and may make it difficult to recruit and retain staff. This, if not adequately treated, may further develop into behavioural problems for those in fear, including illness such as anxiety or depression. Post traumatic stress disorder can also develop in severe cases.

WHAT DOES THE LAW REQUIRE?

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2006 require employers to ensure the safety and health of employees. They require employers at each workplace to carry out risk assessments and prepare a Safety Statement by:

- finding out if there is a problem and how serious it is by:
  - identifying the hazards
  - assessing the risks to health and safety from violent acts and

- putting in place appropriate safeguards

Violence is a potential hazard in all workplaces where there is interaction between people, clients, customers or employees, and it must be assessed accordingly.

In some workplaces it will also be necessary to look at arrangements made for getting to and from work, or moving around the workplace grounds if employees are vulnerable to attack, such as late night workers, lone workers, workers in geographical areas where violence is a regular occurrence, working with a violent population or in diminished circumstances, such as combative situations (rescue workers, guards, social workers, for instance) working with abusive clients in a care giving role, working with the mentally ill or with populations with alcohol or drug-related addictions.

There must also be consultation, as far as is reasonable, with those at risk concerning the measures to be taken and monitoring of their effectiveness. Information must be given to staff on the protection and preventive measures which are essential for their safety.

HOW DO YOU FIND OUT IF THERE IS A PROBLEM?

This involves systematically going into the workplace and work operations under your control to find out if there are any problem areas i.e. reviewing the workplace, the work organisation and the tasks being carried out, discussing work practices with staff, looking at your accident records, learning from similar workplaces, paying attention to any attacks that have previously occurred and the circumstances under which they occurred, getting relevant health and safety information and generally being vigilant on an ongoing basis.

Assessments can be done either informally by asking staff at meetings and ensuring violence is referred to at all health and safety sessions or formally through questionnaires or audits. Any such assessments should ensure all employees are included, are consulted on aspects of the assessment and are informed as appropriate of the findings. Employees who are exposed to violence, when forewarned, can be assisted in many ways so it is crucial that where this is known, the relevant information is passed on to the employees concerned as far as is reasonable, taking into account data protection legislation.

WHICH ARE THE HIGH RISK AREAS?

Experience has shown that workers engaged in the following activities are at higher risk:

PROVIDING CARE, ADVICE OR TRAINING

- Healthcare e.g. ambulance crews, psychiatric nurses, casualty department staff and community social workers;

- Social welfare staff and those engaged with the public in similar circumstances;
- Teachers;
- Local authority housing staff.
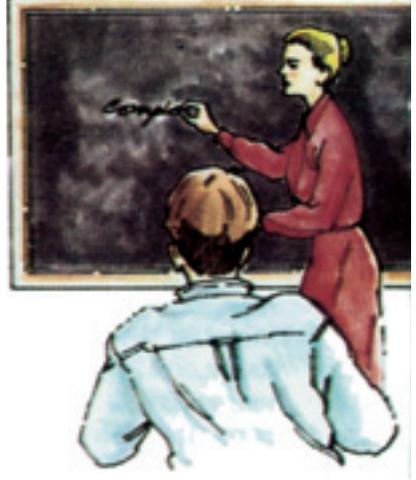
WORKING WITH THE MENTALLY DISTURBED

- Mental health workers.

WORKING WITH DRUNK POPULATIONS OR DRUG ADDICTS

- Prison officers;
- Public house and hotel staff;
- Voluntary workers in shelters;
- Health care staff.

CARRYING OUT ENFORCEMENT OR INSPECTION DUTIES

- Traffic wardens/clampers;
- Police;
- Door attendants at discos, rock concerts and clubs;
- Park keepers and attendants.

HANDLING MONEY AND VALUABLES

- Bank, building society and post office staff;
- Security staff;
- Transport workers, e.g. bus and taxi drivers;
- Shop assistants;
- Petrol station workers.

WORKING ALONE

- Taxi drivers;
- Home visitors such as domestics, milkmen, meter readers;
- Nightwatchmen;
- Estate agents.
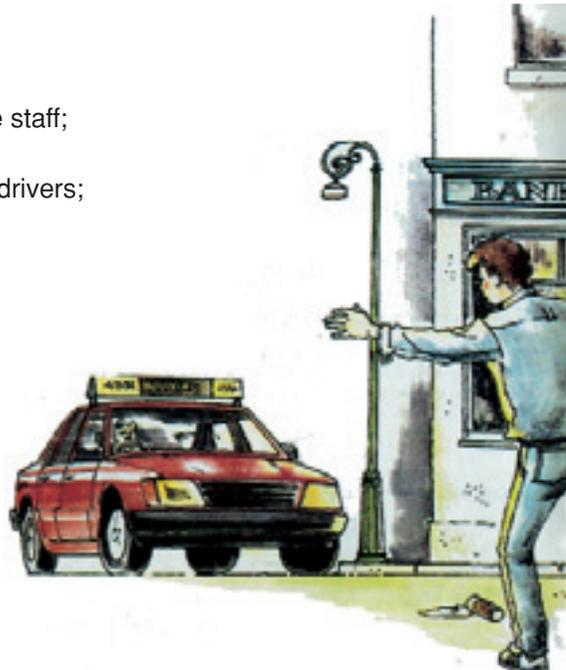
WHAT SITUATIONS CAN CAUSE OR WORSEN VIOLENCE?

When reviewing your workplace for the potential for violence it is helpful to think about:-

(a) the attacker;
(b) the victim;
(c) the work environment;

and how these might come together to create a violent situation.

(a) THE ATTACKER

* **Personality:** History of violence/aggressive personality. Some aggressive personalities come to speedy conclusions and wrongly interpret ordinary, non combative situations or words as threatening and react with aggressive responses.   Sometimes these people may be in a confused mental state or be suffering from an active or dormant psychiatric illness. It may be that they have recently experienced violence and are hyper vigilant to any clues which they misinterpret as another threat. These people tend to react quickly and angrily and employees exposed to this type of behaviour should not challenge the person but try to de-escalate the scenario and lead the interaction back to a cooperative one.

As well as employees in hospitals, clinics etc. any employee dealing with large numbers of the public e.g. transport workers, will encounter such people in the general population. It is important to realise that some people mis-read clues and so it is not always helpful to try to rationalise or to 'take on' such characters but to remove anything – including words or gestures – which they are interpreting as threatening and remain calm, repeat non-threatening phrases and refuse to be enticed into an angry exchange.

* **Alcohol and Drugs:** Alcohol is a factor in many assaults e.g. casualty departments, discos and public transport. However, premises that operate at times when drunken customers can be expected should take this into account when doing the risk assessment for the Safety Statement.

- **Violent expectations:** Sometimes members of the public will approach situations prepared for confrontation. Disputes over housing, social security or finance may be especially prone to such exchanges so training, physical barriers, security and remedial support should be available to certain employee bodies.

- **Immature Personalities:** Young people can be less restrained in their behaviour especially when gathered in groups and so where there are groups of young people extra precautions may be necessary.

(b) **THE VICTIM**

Sometimes the employee may be able to influence the occurrence of violent behaviour:-

- by being sensitive to changes in potential assailant's body language, they may be able to alter their own accordingly and avert violent confrontation.

- while sometimes female employees may be better at calming irate customers, where aggressive males are concerned and where money motivated assaults are concerned they are likely to be more vulnerable.

Previous training to deal with potentially violent situations helps staff behave in a confident manner which in turn reduces the chances of situations escalating to a physical violent stage. Referring a dispute to a line manager or offering a route of appeal to an otherwise aggrieved customer is a useful de-escalation technique.

A useful approach is to ensure the aggressor knows that there is back up on site. It is also important to keep calm. If required, indirectly seek the attention of other employees or customers. Never turn your back on a potential assailant but back away to a place of safety. Always use an appeasing tone and accede to the potential assailants view until you are safe.
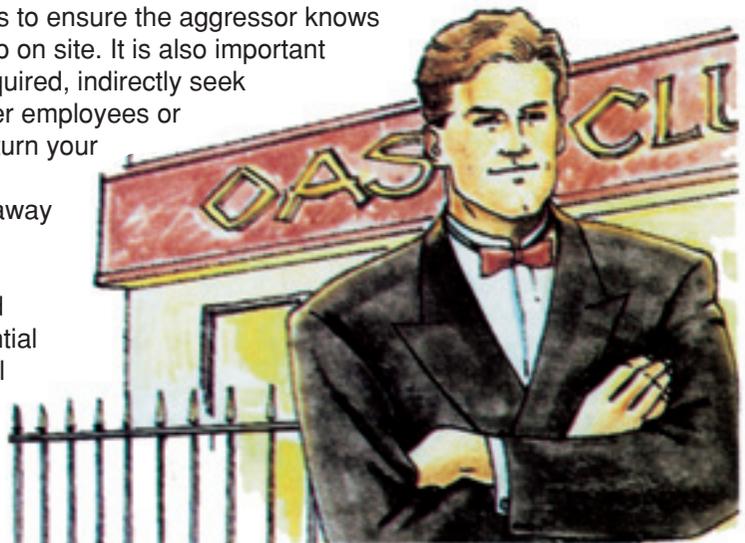
(c) **THE WORK ENVIRONMENT**

This includes both the workplace and work practices.

- **Lone Workers:**

  Isolation from colleagues puts employees at increased risk and makes them feel more vulnerable to violence even if the violence does not manifest itself.

- **Job Location:**

  This can affect an employee's risk of becoming a victim of assault as certain areas may have higher rates of violent crime. Employees who are mobile should be aware of locations which have a history of violent incidents. Known high risk areas should be identified to employees.

- **Cash:**

  Handling cash means robbery may be a possibility even if only small amounts are handled. The local crime prevention officer of the Gardai is readily available to provide advice to help reduce this risk.

- **Waiting:**

  Employees who provide a public service often deal with persons who have been waiting in a queue for some time, with rising frustration.

- **Time:**

  There are certain times of the day which are more dangerous than others, such as after pubs close or when opening or closing premises in which cash is kept. Retail premises operating after 10pm should have closed circuit television (CCTV).

HOW TO ENSURE ADEQUATE SAFE GUARDS

Once you have identified that there is a potential for violence, you will most likely have identified the reasons for this. In turn this will allow you to select the most appropriate safeguards. Make sure that the preventive measure does not exacerbate the situation e.g. a safety screen that causes customers to raise their voice will also make them angry.

Preventative measures include:

- screens and partitions to improve protection from physical assault. Exclusion of the public by using coded door locks and secure refuges for employees may be used;

- dress code should state that necklaces, ties and scarves should not be worn (clip on ties may be used as an alternative);

- in situations of high risk for assault with knives, stab resistant vests should be worn under normal clothing;

- in high risk areas avoid ceramic pots or other potential missiles. If knives are essential to the workplace they should have a smooth handle without moulded grips or notch and the blade should be non- tapering and bend when pushed along its axis; they should be stored in drawers and area not visible to the public;

- the installation of video surveillance and personal alarms and other emergency communication equipment can help deter attackers; the best system combines static panic buttons with personal alarms;
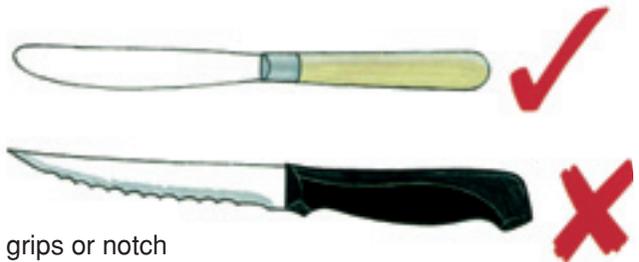
- isolated staff should be issued with bleepers or with mobile phones. Emergency code phrases are also useful;

- interview rooms should have an exit behind the staff member and a desk between the employee and client and glass/perspex panels should allow visual contact of the employee to other employees or have an appropriate panic button/intercom;

- cash free systems e.g. cheques, credit cards, tokens, etc. Time locked safes can prove useful where cash is held and signs signifying this should be posted;

- waiting rooms should have reading material or a television and an ordered system of queuing such as numbered tickets or expected waiting time displayed. They should also have signs from senior management stating that no level of violence will be tolerated and if violence occurs it will be reported to the Gardai;

- chairs should be of the continuous bent metal tube form rather than four "metal spikes" form.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

- Training can be given in the recognition and avoidance of violent situations. Techniques of distraction and empathy as well as break away techniques and training in physical restraint can be used.

Conflict resolution and non-confrontational styles of approach can be taught to staff – keeping the palms open, using a calm voice, tilting one's head and shrugging the shoulders, always provide alternative means or routes of appeal to disappointed customers.

Warning signs that employees should be trained to recognise are fixed gaze rapid breathing, clenched fists, loud talking, restlessness or pacing which should alert them to possible violent intent of customers/clients.

- Staff should be trained in the use of security measures and devices such as silent alarms or intercoms combined with coded phrases to alert colleagues. They should not try to resist if cash or goods are the obvious motive for the attack.

REHABILITATION AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS - IF VIOLENCE HAS OCCURRED

Part of the safeguards in place must be support for the victim after violence. These must be known to all staff **before** problems occur.

TREATMENT FACILITIES

Adequate first aid and emergency treatment support arrangements must be available.

SUPPORT AND COUNSELLING

Support and counselling should be made available to all victims who request it or who other people have noticed are suffering a trauma due to a work-related violent incident. This can include members of the public if the work activity has caused or led to the exposure to violence. Sometimes, the employee may not be aware of the change caused by the incident and so the employer should make reasonable efforts to ensure that employees affected access appropriate support and assistance, even if initially they resist this. This can be of an informal nature from colleagues or more formalised counselling from appropriately trained professionals. Where required this should be done soon after the incident.

REPORTING OF VIOLENCE

As well as reporting the accident on-line through the Authority's website www.hsa.ie or by sending a completed Accident Report Form (IR1) to the Health and Safety Authority, all violent incidents should be recorded internally on a suitable form.

USEFUL DATA ON REPORT

(1) Who was involved?
    Personal data about the victim and, where possible, the assailant should be recorded separately. The victim data should include age, sex, job and extent of training in handling violence.

(2) What happened?
    A full written description, including use of weapon.

(3) Why did it happen?

(4) Where did it happen?

(5) When did it happen?

(6) Which protective systems failed?
    Were procedures (e.g. escort to car park or residency) by-passed?
    Did a communication alarm fail to work?

(7) Forms should be completed and signed by the victim and victim's immediate superior.

These records should be used as a basis for discussion and devising suitable protection measures.

> - **It may not be possible to prevent all episodes of violence at work.**
>
> - **It is possible to reduce the chances of it occurring.**
>
> - **It is possible to minimise the consequences.**

CHECK LIST

(1)   Are my clients likely to be violent?

(2)   Will the interaction with my clients be confrontational e.g. will I be telling them something they don't want to hear.

(3)   Do I/staff work alone?

(4)   Is the environment safe?

(5)   Are there emergency procedures in place?

(6)   Follow up in the event of an assault.

Violence at Work

Working *to*
create a
National Culture
Excellence
in Workplace Safety,
Health and *Welfare*
for Ireland

**HEALTH AND SAFETY
AUTHORITY**

Tel. 1890 289 389

Callers outside
Republic of Ireland
00353 1 6147000
Fax. (01) 6147020

website: www.hsa.ie

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