
Workplace Violence

A growing threat, or
growing in awareness?

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Most American workers consider their organization safe from workplace violence and say they know what to do if they were to witness or be involved in an incident, according to a survey conducted for the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM). About a quarter say there has been at least one incident of workplace violence at their current place of employment.

According to OSHA, workplace violence is any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site. It ranges from threats and verbal abuse to physical assaults and even homicide.

“About a quarter of American workers say their workplace has had at least one incident of workplace violence”

An additional study that surveyed SHRM members found most of these human resource professionals understand how to handle incidents of work place violence and consider their organization to be safe from workplace violence. SHRM members are more likely than workers to say their organization has experienced an instance of workplace violence, perhaps because employees who work outside a company’s HR department are less likely to be aware of episodes of workplace violence.

The nationwide poll was conducted February 28 – March 4, 2019, using the AmeriSpeak Panel®, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 545 employees of organizations with more than one employee. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 6.1 percentage points. The study of HR professionals was conducted online February 18-20, 2019 with 1,416 members of SHRM who work in organizations with more than one employee.

Twenty-four percent of employees are aware that any incidents of workplace violence ever occurred at their workplace. Additionally, 14 percent say there was at least one instance of workplace violence at their organization in the past year. Fifty-seven percent say there hasn’t been any workplace violence at their company, and 19 percent say they are not sure.

Forty-eight percent of HR professionals say there has been an incident of workplace violence at their organization; 25 percent say an incident has occurred within the past year. While 37

percent say there has never been an occasion of workplace violence at their company, 16 percent are not sure.

Ninety percent of HR professionals say their organization has a process for identifying potential or current employees with a history of violence—mainly through background checks and employment or personal reference checks. While this type of screening is common, according to both surveys, organizations are less likely to have programs to prevent workplace violence or train workers on how to respond to such incidents. While most workers consider themselves capable of dealing with workplace violence, 30 percent of employees and 19 percent of HR professionals feel ill-equipped to deal with violence in the workplace.

Only 45 percent of American workers are aware of workplace violence prevention programs at their companies.



Overall, 71 percent of workers say their workplace is safe. But those who are employed by organizations with programs to deal with workplace violence feel slightly more secure.

In addition, 86 percent of employees who are unaware of any past incidents of workplace violence at their company say they feel very safe or safe. In comparison, 64 percent of those who say there has been an instance of workplace violence at their organization within the past year feel secure.

American workers feel safer with violence prevention programs at their companies.



Comparing the latest survey of SHRM members with a similar study conducted in 2012 suggests an increase in reported workplace violence. Forty-eight percent say their organization has experienced an incident of workplace violence at some point, up from 36 percent in 2012. Though survey respondents were not asked to speculate on differences, it is possible that one of the explanations for the rise in reported incidents is due to changing attitudes towards workplace behavior. With the rise of the #MeToo movement, as well as organizations' growing focus on inclusivity, it is likely that in the last seven years, HR professionals have come to view more types of behavior as problematic and indicative of future workplace violence.

According to the HR professionals, the reaction to workplace violence often varies depending on specific aspects of the incident. Zero tolerance policies seem to be losing favor among organizations, with many opting to consider each incident in context. Thirty-nine percent say their organization has zero tolerance for workplace violence and would immediately terminate the employee. In 2012, 47 percent said their company had a policy of zero tolerance. Seventy-two percent of respondents said that their organization's response to an incident would depend on the specific circumstances, compared to 61 percent in 2012. In both years, respondents were allowed to select more than one organizational response to workplace violence.

Recommendations

While there is no way to prevent all workplace violence, there are several things that organizations can do to increase employee preparedness and feelings of security.

- Make sure you have a workplace violence prevention program in place
- Establish an emergency response plan
- Provide trainings to all employees on how to respond to incidents
- Communicate with workers about what resources are available

For more guidance on workplace violence, see SHRM's newly released online toolkit, **[Understanding Workplace Violence Prevention and Response](#)**