

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace

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On this page

[What is workplace violence and harassment?](#)

[Is there specific workplace violence prevention legislation?](#)

[When conducting a workplace assessment, what work-related factors increase the risk of violence?](#)

[Which occupational groups tend to be most at risk from workplace violence?](#)

[How do I know if my workplace is at risk?](#)

[What can be done to prevent violence in the workplace?](#)

[What are some advantages of having a written policy about workplace violence, harassment and other unacceptable behaviour?](#)

[What are some examples of preventive measures?](#)

What is workplace violence and harassment?

Most people think of violence as a physical assault. However, workplace violence and harassment is a much broader problem. It can be defined as any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her employment.

While exact definitions vary in legislation, generally speaking, workplace violence or harassment includes:

- **Threatening behaviour** – such as shaking fists, destroying property or throwing objects.
- **Verbal or written threats** – any expression of an intent to inflict harm.
- **Verbal abuse** – swearing, insults or condescending language.
- **Physical attacks** – hitting, shoving, pushing or kicking.

Some jurisdictions include harassment as a form of violence, while others define harassment separately. Harassment can be thought of as any behaviour that demeans, embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms or verbally abuses a person and that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome. These behaviours include words, gestures, intimidation, [bullying](#), or other inappropriate activities.

Generally speaking, any action or behaviour – from spreading rumours, swearing, verbal abuse, pranks, arguments, property damage, vandalism, sabotage, pushing, theft, physical assaults, inflicting psychological trauma, anger-related incidents, rape, arson to murder – are all examples of workplace violence or harassment.

Also, note that workplace violence or harassment is not limited to incidents that occur within a traditional workplace. Work-related incidents can occur at off-site business-related functions (conferences, trade shows), at social events related to work, in clients' homes, or away from work but resulting from work (a threatening telephone call to your home from a client).

NOTE: In this document, we use the term violence also to include bullying and harassment.

Is there specific workplace violence prevention legislation?

Yes, all jurisdictions in Canada have legislation specific to harassment and violence. Please see the OSH Answers titled [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#) for more details. Contact your [local authorities](#) in your jurisdiction for specific information.

Please refer to the following OSH Answers documents for information:

- [Bullying in the Workplace](#)
- [Internet Harassment or Cyberbullying](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Family \(Domestic\) Violence](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Legislation](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Dealing with Negative Interactions](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Parking Lot Safety](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Warning Signs](#)
- [Violence and Harassment in the Workplace – Working Late](#)

When conducting a workplace assessment, what work-related factors increase the risk of violence?

Certain work factors, processes, and interactions can put people at increased risk of workplace violence. Examples include:

- Working with customers or the public.
- Handling money, valuables or prescription drugs (e.g., cashiers, pharmacists, veterinarians).

- Carrying out inspection or enforcement duties (e.g., government employees).
- Providing service, care, advice or education (e.g., health care staff, teachers).
- Working with unstable or volatile persons (e.g., social services or criminal justice system employees).
- Working in premises where alcohol is served (e.g., food and beverage staff).
- Working alone, in small numbers (e.g., store clerks, real estate agents), or isolated or low-traffic areas (e.g., an isolated reception area, washrooms, storage areas, utility rooms).
- Working in community-based settings (e.g., nurses, social workers, and other home visitors).
- Having a mobile workplace (e.g., taxicab, salesperson, public transit).
- Working during periods of intense organizational change (e.g., strikes, downsizing).

The risk of violence may be greater at certain times of the day, night or year. For example:

- late hours of the night or early hours of the morning
- tax return season
- overdue utility bill cut-off dates
- during the holidays in the retail sector when demand for service is higher
- Friday or Saturday nights in establishments that serve alcohol
- paydays
- report cards or parent interviews
- performance appraisals

The risk of violence may increase depending on the geographic location of the workplace. For example:

- near buildings or businesses that are at higher risk of violent crime (e.g., bars, banks)
- in areas isolated from other buildings or structures

In other situations, workplaces might be exposed to family (domestic) violence, such as a family member repeatedly phoning or e-mailing an employee, which interferes with their work, or showing up at the employee's workplace and disrupting co-workers (e.g., asking many questions about the employee's daily habits).

Which occupational groups tend to be most at risk from workplace violence?

Certain occupational groups tend to be more at risk from workplace violence. These occupations include:

- healthcare employees or those who dispense pharmaceuticals
- veterinary practices
- police, security, or correctional officers
- social services employees, including crisis intervention and counselling services
- teachers or education providers
- municipal housing inspectors
- public works employees
- retail employees
- sellers of alcohol (sale or consumption on the premises)
- taxi or transit drivers

How do I know if my workplace is at risk?

Conduct a workplace assessment to determine which hazards are present and the risks they represent. This assessment may involve conducting an inspection of the workplace. When conducting this assessment:

- Focus on the work being done, the workplace design and layout, and your administrative and work practices.
 - Consider internal factors such as culture, conditions, activities, organizational structure, etc.
 - Consider external factors such as location, clients, customers, family violence, etc.
 - Any measures in place to protect the psychological health and safety of the workplace include factors like how much control over the work an individual has, excessive workload, tight deadlines, etc.
- Review any incidents of violence in your own workplace.
 - Ask employees about their experiences and whether they are concerned for themselves or others.
 - Review any incidents of violence by consulting existing incident reports, first aid records, and health and safety committee records.
 - Determine whether your workplace has any of the risk factors associated with violence.

- Evaluate the history of violence in similar places of employment.
 - Obtain information from any organizations with which you are associated, e.g., your industry association, workers' compensation board, occupational health and safety regulators, or union office.
 - Seek advice from local police security experts.
 - Review relevant articles or publications.

Organize and review the information you have collected. Look for trends and identify the occupations and locations that you believe are most at risk. Record the results of your assessment. Use this document to develop a prevention program with specific recommendations for reducing the risk of violence within your workplace.

What can be done to prevent violence in the workplace?

The most important component of any prevention program is management commitment. Management commitment is best communicated in a written policy. The policy should:

- Be developed by management and employee representatives, including the health and safety committee or representative and union, if present.
- Apply to management, employees, clients, independent contractors and anyone with a relationship with your company.
- Define what you mean by workplace violence, harassment, and bullying in precise, concrete language.
- Provide clear examples of unacceptable behaviour (e.g., making threats) and working conditions (e.g., working alone without appropriate safeguards).
- State clearly your organization's view toward workplace violence and harassment and its commitment to prevention.
- Precisely state the consequences of making threats or committing violent acts.
- Outline the progressive discipline procedure that will be used to hold individuals accountable for unacceptable behaviour to ensure fair and consistent treatment.
- Outline the process by which preventive measures will be developed and implemented.
- Encourage reporting of all incidents, including reports from witnesses.
- Outline the confidential process by which employees can report incidents and to whom.
- Assure no reprisals will be made against reporting employees who make reports in good faith (sincere and honest).

- Outline the procedures for resolving or investigating incidents or complaints.
 - Describe how information about potential risks will be communicated to employees.
 - Make a commitment to provide support services to targets of violence.
 - Offer a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to allow employees to seek help.
 - Make a commitment to fulfill the prevention training needs of different levels of personnel within the organization.
 - Make a commitment to monitor and regularly review the policy.
 - State applicable regulatory requirements.
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What are some advantages of having a written policy about workplace violence, harassment and other unacceptable behaviour?

A written policy will inform everyone about:

- What behaviour (e.g., violence, intimidation, bullying, harassment, etc.) your organization considers inappropriate and unacceptable in the workplace.
- What to do when incidents occur.
- Contact information for reporting incidents.
- The procedure that will be followed when an incident is reported.

A written policy will also encourage employees to report such incidents and show that management is committed to fairly addressing incidents involving violence, harassment, and other unacceptable behaviour.

What are some examples of preventive measures?

Preventive measures generally fall into three categories: workplace design, administrative practices, and work practices.

Workplace design considers factors such as workplace layout, use of signs, locks or physical barriers, lighting, and electronic surveillance. Building security is one instance where workplace design issues are very important. For example, you should consider:

- Positioning the office furniture, reception area, or sales or service counter so that it is visible to fellow employees or members of the public passing by.

- Positioning office furniture so that the employee is closer to a door or exit than the client so the employee cannot be cornered.
- Installing surveillance cameras in the public spaces of the workplace, such as entrances, parking lots, waiting rooms, etc.
- Installing physical barriers, e.g. pass-through windows or bullet-proof enclosures.
- Minimizing the number of entrances to your workplace.
- Using coded cards or keys to control access to the building or certain areas within the building.
- Using adequate exterior lighting around the workplace and near entrances.
- Strategically placing fences to control access to the workplace.

Administrative practices are decisions you make about how you do business. For example, certain administrative practices can reduce the risks involved in handling cash. You should consider:

- Keeping cash register funds to a minimum.
- Using electronic payment systems to reduce the amount of cash available.
- Varying the time of day that you empty or reduce funds in the cash register.
- Installing and using a locked drop safe.
- Arranging for regular cash collection by a licensed security firm.
- Keeping other valuables safely stored and secure, such as firearms, tools, opiates, medicines, etc.

Administrative practices may also include education and training for employees. This education and training would include not only information about the workplace's policy and process to respond to incidents but may also include the following:

- What civility and respect mean in the workplace.
- How to respond to customers or members of the public who may be angry or frustrated, such as how to exit a confrontational interaction or de-escalate a conflict safely.
- How to respond to an incident of violence (e.g., emergency response, when to contact security or police, etc.).
- Knowledge about discrimination, family violence, diversity and cultures.
- How to respond to individuals who may be impaired.

Work practices include all the things you do while you are doing the job. They may include management functions such as making sure the performance evaluation process is fair and transparent or “checking in” with employees to determine their workload or stress level and make reasonable adjustments where possible.

People who work away from a traditional office setting, for example, those working from home, salespeople, real estate agents, or home care providers, can adopt many different work practices that could reduce their risk. For example,

- Identify a designated contact at the office and a backup contact.
- Prepare a daily work plan and share it with your designated contact so they know where you are expected to be throughout the day in case of an incident.
- Keep your designated contact informed of your location and consistently adhere to the check-in schedule.
- Verify the credentials of clients.
- Use the "buddy system", especially when you feel your personal safety may be threatened.
- DO NOT enter any situation or location where you feel threatened or unsafe.

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