

# WorkplaceOHS

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## Work violence: don't overlook critical issues

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*Part 2 of a three-part series on workplace violence.*

Critical issues around workplace violence that you may be overlooking include scenarios that demand police intervention, as well as the role of positive work practices, and the potential spill-over of domestic violence into the workplace.

Dr Kelly Watt, a threat assessment specialist at ProActive ReSolutions, recently participated in a Q&A session with *WorkplaceOHS* that dealt with these issues and more.

Watt, who is based in Canada, will be in Sydney and Melbourne next month (12 and 13 November, respectively) to present a series of workshops to help workers assess, manage and respond to a risk of violence in their workplaces.

### **Q Which industries have the greatest exposure to violence risk?**

**A** Industries that are most at risk of violence are often those that involve emergency response and service customers in crisis. These include industries such as health care settings, social service settings, criminal justice settings (eg law enforcement, corrections), emergency response settings (eg fire fighters), educational settings, and transport industries (eg taxi drivers and bus drivers). Those working in the retail industry are also at higher risk of violence, especially if they are working in isolated conditions (eg at night or on their own).

Although they need to be extra vigilant, if they implement best practices related to preventing, triaging, assessing and managing violence risk much can be done to increase their safety.

**Q What risk factors are unique to white-collar work settings?**

**A** The risk factors that will be relevant will depend on the type of violence that is being committed (eg stalking, domestic violence, sexual violence) as opposed to something that is tied to the particular setting. The following information may help to clarify things.

There are several commonly occurring patterns of workplace violence:

1. **By service receivers (clients/customers/patients).** Everyone thinks about police and corrections, but it is surprising to learn that health care and social services workers are also frequently victims of this form of violence.
2. **By criminals outside the workplace.** This includes retail (eg, convenience store), especially those that are working in isolated conditions (at night, on their own).
3. **By co-workers.** This happens across all workplaces including bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, stalking.
4. **By current or former intimate partners.** This happens across all workplaces but the victims are primarily women.

The rates of workplace violence vary according to the nature of the workplace, the nature of the perpetrator and the characteristics of the victim. Overall, international statistics suggest that 10–25 per cent of all workers will be victims of significant workplace violence at some point in their lives.

**Q How important is it to address work-related stressors?**

**A** Addressing problematic work practices is very important in preventing the risk of violence from ever occurring.

By doing things like reducing stress, creating a respectful and supportive workplace climate, addressing serious conflict in the workplace, and responding to conduct problems as they occur, a great deal can be done to support employees and prevent violence.

Often when we are contacted to conduct a workplace violence risk assessment there have been months or even years of conduct problems and workplace conflict that if addressed differently may have prevented the situation from escalating to this level.

**Q Do you recommend a 'zero tolerance' policy?**

**A** A zero tolerance policy is not recommended. Although all organisations should make it clear that violence is not acceptable in their workplace and should be reported and will be responded to, how you respond should be determined on a case-by-case basis. A zero tolerance policy is not going to apply to all situations and it might conflict with other responsibilities an employer may have.

For instance, an organisation that is concerned about an employee's violence risk always has to consider their ability to accommodate the problem. If you have concerns about the risk of violence, you should always consider:

1. Whether the violence risk is the result of mental health problems
2. Whether the mental health problems can be reasonably accommodated
3. Whether the accommodation of the problem will effectively manage their violence risk.

The outcome of any violence risk assessment should strive to manage people's risk for violence

by providing them with assistance. Often when people are a risk for future violence it is because they are in distress and need help. Anything employers can do to help support perpetrators as well as victims would be a positive thing for workplaces to invest time and resources into.

**Q Is the duty to address violence confined to the workplace?**

**A** The obligation of the employer would extend beyond violent incidents in the workplace to violence that occurs outside the workplace if there is a concern about spill-over into the workplace.

**Example**

Possible spill-over of intimate-partner violence into the workplace is a major issue for all workplaces to consider. It's important for employers to increase the awareness of the warning signs specific to intimate partner violence and the possibility of spill-over into the workplace. Spill-over could have potentially lethal consequences, not just for the intimate partner but for others in the workplace.

Employers also need to consider incidents that occur at a workplace social or workplace conference. Some employers may not appreciate that these functions are an extension of the workplace; but, they are.

**Q Should the police ever get involved?**

**A** If an employee has committed a criminal act at work (eg physical assault), the police should be involved.

If there's lower level behaviour (eg verbal aggression, property aggression), it might not be necessary at that stage to contact the police, but if a worker starts to engage in actual, attempted or threatened violence, an employer could actually be legally liable if they don't contact the police and the situation were to escalate. It's a threshold issue related to the severity of the act: whether it would be considered a criminal offence and how you want to involve the police.

Employers should also liaise with police if they're concerned their own management practices could increase the risk of violence.

**Example**

If an employer decides to terminate an employee and they have reasonable grounds to believe that doing so might increase violence risk in the short-term, then they should definitely contact the police.

**Tomorrow (Part 3):** Our Q&A concludes, with a look at the role of counselling services, domestic violence, practical jokes and customer violence.

**In Part 1** of this series, Watt outlined key risk factors for violence, as well as the strategies you should implement to tackle the risk of violence at your workplace.



**James Harkness**

James Harkness is a staff writer for WorkplaceOHS and Workplace Info, whose role includes producing case write-ups, news stories, and analysis pieces. He has also produced copy and performed editorial tasks for a handful of business chambers operating in Inner City Sydney. [more from James](#)

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