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Murder and Violence in the Workplace

By Jim Kouri, CPP

The good news is the yearly downturn in our nation's violent crime statistics. The bad news is that we may still become the victim of a violent crime – even a homicide – while at work. Employers and employees need to heed the warning contained in the data compiled by the US Department of Justice, and some preventive measures may be in order.

According to the Justice Department's Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in six crimes occurs in the workplace and the number is increasing. An estimated 7 percent of all rapes, 8 percent of all robberies, and 16 percent of all assaults take place on worksites. Homicides account for 12 percent of all workplace deaths, and statistically violence is the number two cause of death on the job in the nation, and the number one cause of death in big cities like New York and Los Angeles. Of course, these deaths include employees of law-enforcement and security agencies. For instance, one report indicates that during the DOJ study period over 520 police officers were killed on-the-job ("in the line of duty"), with another 253 security personnel killed while performing protective services. These constitute high-risk occupations, according to the National Security Institute.

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

"The workplace is the scene of almost one million violent crimes each year," claims BJS former director Lawrence Greenfield.

"About 10 percent – or 100,000 – of these workplace crimes involve offenders armed with handguns."

Of the approximately 3.2 million crimes and thefts in the workplace, about 500,000 victims lose an estimated 1.8 million workdays each year and \$55 million in lost wages, not including days covered by sick or vacation leave. Among women who experience crime at work, 40 percent are attacked by a stranger, 35 percent by a casual acquaintance, 19 percent by a well-known acquaintance, and one percent by a relative. About 5 percent of workplace attacks on women are perpetrated by a husband, boyfriend, or former boyfriend.

The average number of victimizations from 1987-1998 totaled over 970,000 (not including homicides): there were 13,068 rapes, 79,200 robberies (17,900 involving injuries), 264,200 aggravated assaults (with over 48,000 serious injuries), and 615,200 simple assaults (89,500 involving injuries).

VIOLENCE IN THE GOVERNMENT

According to Justice Department data, federal, state and local government workers constitute 18 percent of the total US workforce. This 18 percent of our national workforce account for 30 percent of all workplace crime victims. There's an obvious disparity in these numbers. Several factors may be responsible for this over-representation, including a potentially high-risk victimization for particular government occupations such as public safety worker.

In addition to violent incidents, there was an annual average of over 2 million thefts in the workplace, non-inclusive of company-owned property thefts. Also, there were an astounding 200,000 motor vehicle thefts reported by employees. Unfortunately, more than half of all workplace crimes go unreported to police.

Among those not reporting their victimizations, 40 percent said the matter seemed too minor or too personal, while 27 percent said they reported the incident to a company official such as a security officer.

MURDER ON THE JOB

One study from the National Security Institute indicates that workplace homicides totaled 7,600 in one 10-year period, although the NSI concedes that this figure may be overly conservative because of data gathering limitations. The actual number of occupational homicides may be greater than reported because of the methods used to collect information – mostly death certificates – tend to underestimate the total number of deaths, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health. Of the 7,600 homicide victims, 80 percent were male. The homicide rate for male workers is three-times that for women. Nonetheless, homicide was the leading cause of death from occupational injury among women, causing 41 percent of all deaths among women as compared to just 10 percent among men.

Nearly half of the workplace homicides occurred among workers aged 25-44, but workers aged 65 or older had the highest rate of occupational homicide. Additionally, 75 percent of the victims were white, 19 percent were African-American, and 6 percent were Latino or other races. However, the rate for workplace homicide among black workers and other races was more than twice the rate for whites.

As far as weapons of choice, firearms figured in 75 percent of workplace homicides. Knives and other types of cutting and piercing instruments accounted for only 14 percent of these deaths. Information contained on death certificates doesn't allow identification of the circumstances of homicides in the workplace, but the types of high-risk workplaces and occupations suggest that robbery is the predominant motive. Some homicides are caused by disgruntled workers and clients, or by domestic violence which may spill into the workplace. An increasing number of these incidents involve one employee killing another over a disagreement. Violent employees have killed co-workers, supervisors and personnel staff in several high-profile cases such as the shooting of several personnel office workers by a former employee at New York City's Beth Israel Medical Center.

POLICE SUGGESTIONS

Police and security experts recommend the following steps in reducing vulnerability:

1. Make high-risk areas more visible to more people.
2. Install good external lighting.
3. Use drop-safes to minimize cash on hand.
4. Carry small amounts of cash.
5. Post signs stating that there is limited cash on hand.
6. Install silent alarms.
7. Install overt and covert surveillance cameras.
8. If possible, increase the number of staff on duty.
9. Provide training in conflict resolution.
10. Avoid resistance during a robbery.
11. Provide bulletproof barriers or enclosures.
12. Have police check on workers routinely.
13. Close establishments during high-risk hours.

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