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Speech presented by Adam Graycar, Director,  
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"Violence in the workplace: personal and political  
issues"

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*Violence in the Workplace: Personal and Political Issues*

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## Introduction

Many people are afraid of violence on the streets, but we know that people are more likely to be murdered or assaulted at home than on the streets. We also know that a great deal of violence occurs in the workplace.

Frequently and regularly at work, people are killed, robbed, raped, wounded, battered, kicked, bitten, punched, bullied, spat on, scratched, squeezed, pinched, stalked, cyber stalked, intimidated, threatened, sworn at, shouted at, called names - but most of us aren't! What's serious and what isn't? What protective behaviours can we assume - what preventive actions can we take? What drives workplace violence? Are changing and more tense political environments likely to exacerbate workplace violence, or is the solution in modifying personal behaviour, or perhaps softening the workplace?

The most dangerous workplaces seem to be in the health field, with nurses the occupational group most at risk of violence in the workplace. A lot of people express enormous frustration at the health system, and take it out on nurses. Writing can be dangerous too. Worldwide 1100 journalists and media staff were killed in the line of duty between 1990 and 2002. They died because someone didn't like what they wrote or said, because they were investigating what someone did not want investigated, or because they were in dangerous places, or in the wrong place at the wrong time. On September 11, 2001 in New York, about 3,000 people were killed in their places of work.

Australian workplaces have been comparatively safe from political violence - and politicians, as an occupational group have not been under much threat. One government has been overthrown by force, and that was back in 1808. There was an assassination attempt in Sydney on a British Royal in 1868, and the Irish Nationalist who wounded him was executed. There was also an assassination attempt on the Federal Opposition leader in 1965. A South Australian politician was shot dead in 1921, and in the 1930s the New Guard was an armed revolutionary force estimated at 36,000 members ready to take control of union dominated workplaces. Their main claim to fame was cutting the ribbon at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Over the years here have been occasions of organised violent activity surrounding industrial strikes - the violence being perpetrated by both sides. Historically thus, workplace violence has not had a strong political dimension in Australia.

Workplace violence has been defined by the European Commission (Wynne et al 1997) as "incidents where persons are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health".

Violence at work therefore involves any incident in which employees and others are abused, threatened, assaulted or in extreme cases are victims of a

homicide, in circumstances related to their work, or in the course of the work undertaken. It occurs in the workplace or in the course of carrying out day-to-day duties. It can be as subtle as innuendos and unspoken threats from employers or colleagues, or it can be overt acts of assault by employers or colleagues, or aggression from clients, or it can be inflicted by strangers who have no link with the workplace. When it is the latter, it is most likely to occur in the course of a crime being committed. There are three main types of workplace violence ((Mayhew 2000a; Mayhew 2000b).

- Random public violence,
- Client-initiated violence; and
- Violence within organisations.

### **Random Public Violence**

On the afternoon of 8 December 1987, five women and three men were murdered, and a further five people were injured when 22 year old ex-student Frank Vitkovic, shot Australia Post employees on several upper floors of a building in Queen Street, Melbourne. Vitkovic then jumped from the eleventh floor to his death. Violent “Rambo style” videos were found in the young university dropout’s room. Vitkovic recorded in his diary the comments “Today is going to be the day”. “The anger in my head has to too much for me”. “The time has come to die”. “There is no other way out”. Vitkovic wrote a note to his parents before he left on his deadly mission saying “I’ve got to get rid of my violent impulses”.

In his diary, Vitkovic also confided this advice “Look for people with a history of rejection, loneliness and ill treatment who also have a fascination with guns and you won’t go wrong”. The inquest exposed the tortured mind of a young man who saw himself as a failure, inadequate and lonely, tormented by violent fantasies and finally suffused with hatred. He sought refuge in erotic and violent books and videos and cultivated a morbid interest in firearms. A school in Dunblane, Scotland was also the scene of a particularly bloody massacre where children and teachers were also involved in a rambo style shooting. These are both extreme examples of random public workplace violence. Other less publicised groups at high risk of random public workplace violence include petrol station attendants and taxi drivers.

Random public violence in the workplace has in the last decade come to include terrorism. Terrorists can target the workplace as part of the critical economic infrastructure. Computer systems can also be vulnerable to attack. In 1995, the first large-scale terrorist attack on people in the workplace in the USA occurred when Timothy McVeigh, a disenfranchised ex-soldier who was associated with the “survivalist” movement, bombed a Federal government building in Oklahoma. For him the Wako massacre was the catalyst, and this building was the ultimate symbol of political hegemony in the United States.

Then, on September 11, 2001, a number of airline pilots and flight attendants went to work not knowing of the terrible consequences in store for them.

Following on from September 11, anthrax became a major scare in the workplace. In the United States, four workers died from inhalation anthrax and an additional 13 developed the disease as a result of intentional terrorist activity. Concern about chemical, biological and radiological incidents has also been a major concern in Australia with every government workplace being provided with a wall poster which outlines the risks and how to deal with them. Even here in Canberra, white powder received in the mail delivery to a government department, saw media images of people being "cleaned" under showers and people wearing protective clothing so that they would not become contaminated.

### **Client-Initiated Violence**

The second form of workplace violence to be discussed here is client-initiated violence. Client-initiated violence is committed by individuals who have, or have had, some form of service relationship with the organisation. The incident may involve a (a) "one-off" physical act of violence that results in a fatal or non-fatal injury or no obvious injury; or (b) some form of harassment that continues over time. Sometimes both workers and other clients can be victims of the violence (for example, a client in a social security office may threaten everyone present with a knife) or the events may be repeated over time to a number of victims (Mayhew 2000b). Usually the motive is something other than political.

Nurses, police and counter staff in social service agencies are those most at risk of client initiated violence. Other occupations with some element of risk in this area include prison officers, teachers, postal workers, bar staff, retail sales staff, bank workers, and those employed in transport. There is rarely a political motive here, but the increase in some fields in recent years is related to higher levels of mind altering drug use by clients.

In the United Kingdom a real estate agent disappeared in July 1986 while doing her normal day's work: no trace of her body was ever found; and she was declared dead, presumed murdered in 1993. As a consequence, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust was established and in collaboration with other organisations, this trust has produced a series of substantive documents to prevent work-related violence. The disappearance and presumed murder of Suzy Lamplugh is an example of client-initiated workplace violence. There are many other high profile examples of this type of workplace violence. Last year a senior representative of the Health Department in Adelaide was shot as she was travelling in the lift in her workplace. Her alleged attacker was a disillusioned client. Many less publicised cases of client-initiated violence occur.

## **Violence Within Organisations**

Workplace violence also includes violence committed by individuals who have, or have had, some form of an employment relationship with the organisation. Sometimes it is personal, though there is potential for political destabilisation. As with client-related violence, the incident may involve (a) a “one-off” physical act of violence that results in a fatal or non-fatal injury or no obvious injury; or (b) some form of bullying, or harassment. In this latter case, sometimes multiple perpetrators may be involved (for example a mobbing) and there may be more than one recipient, and the events may be repeated over time (for example initiation or “bastardisation” rituals) (Mayhew 2000a). Activities by unions to destabilise a workplace have occurred in the past, as have activities by employers to break strikes.

## **Crime Prevention Framework**

To combat any sort of workplace violence, we need to establish a crime prevention framework that can be applied across a wider range of crime prevention activities.

Every crime requires four ingredients:

- A motivated offender – somebody willing to offend.
- The presence of a prospective victim or target.
- An opportunity
- The absence of a capable guardian.

Our task is to work on achieving two objectives.

- To reduce the supply of motivated offenders.
- To make crime harder to commit.

## **Risk Identification, Risk Assessment and Risk Control**

Each stage of the prevention process for workplace violence needs to be comprehensively completed before the next step commences and the full process repeated at regular intervals. While the detail is different for the three types of workplace violence, the broad process is similar and includes:



### **Risk Identification**

A formal risk identification process must identify the extent and nature of the risks, the circumstances under which risks arise, causes, and potential contributing factors.

In the case of violence within organisations and client-initiated violence, if threats assaults and intimidatory behaviours have occurred in the past, the frequency, severity, and characteristics of perpetrators and recipients need to be formally documented. Proper documentation of incidents is important for an organisation to learn by its experiences, and this documentation needs to be reviewed at the highest level. Those responsible for workplace safety need to identify what measures have been taken to stop the inappropriate behaviours, ascertain if the preventive strategies implemented have been adequate, and whether the outcomes have been objectively evaluated. A regular violence audit is an important part of the preventive strategy (Mayhew 2000a; Mayhew 2000b).

### ***Warning signs***

There are a number of warning signs that may be exhibited by stressed employees. These are:

- The employee has a history of violent behaviour.
- The employee has an obsession with weapons, gun magazines, or the discussion of weapons.
- The individual has a history of making threats or veiled threats.
- The employee uses various forms of intimidation on fellow employees.
- The employee has an obsession with the job but has little, if any, involvement with co-workers.
- The individual makes unwanted romantic advances toward another employee.
- The employee exhibits paranoid behaviour.
- The employee is incapable of accepting criticism.

- The employee holds grudges for a long time.
- They have family, financial or custody problems.
- The employee has a history of testing the limits of rules, regulations and social norms.
- There is a high level of stress in the job caused by change, staff shortages, new management, or the introduction of high technology.
- The individual has exhibited extreme changes in behaviour and/or political or religious beliefs.

Risk identification for random public violence is a more difficult to pin-point. In the United States guidelines in organisations for dealing with bio-terrorism are now common-place (Fox et al 2001). Many companies have now formed crisis management teams that are designed to identify potential threats and respond effectively to this problem. Many employers have already considered the impact of “traditional terrorism”, involving someone breaching the physical security of a facility and entering the site with weapons. In many respects, the threat of a traditional terrorist is much easier to deal with than a bio-terroristic threat which may be invisible in the workplace (Fox et al 2001). All employers need to be prepared for the practical, economic and legal implications of such a threat in the workplace.

### ***Risk Assessment***

In the case of violence within organisations and client-initiated violence, regular systematic audits/risk assessments provide a baseline for violence prevention planning. The level of detail in risk assessments should be broadly proportional to the risk. That is, there should be objective assessment of the probability and likely severity of an incident and evaluation of existing control measures (WorkSafe Western Australia 1999; WorkCover New South Wales 1999). It is important that all violent incidents be recorded. Past incident records need to be grouped, analysed, and the patterns identified. These can be separated into severity categories (major, minor and near miss events), perpetrator and recipient characteristics, possible causes/contributing factors, departments or units, activities of concern, or other risk factors such as time of day or night. Violence is often predictable and preventable (Mayhew 2000).

An incident investigation schedule would include the following:

- Type of incident – for example abuse, threat, bullying or assault.
- Who was abused/threatened/bullied/assaulted and their position in the hierarchy/area of work.
- Description of the location where the incident took place.
- Activity underway at the time.
- Time of occurrence/day of week.
- Nature of injuries sustained.
- How the incident arose and progressed (narrative data).



- Contributing causes.
- Lost time.
- Potential or actual costs.
- Corrective action recommended.
- Follow-up recommendations.

In the case of random public violence, once again the issue of bio-terrorism is at the forefront here. All employers need to be aware to recognise certain occupational illnesses and diseases which may result from exposure of anthrax, food borne botulism, wound botulism, pneumonic plague and smallpox in the workplace (Fox et al 2001).

### ***Risk Control***

In the case of violence within organisations and client-initiated violence, the risk control process should be introduced systematically based on objective evidence. The overt commitment of management is of core importance, as is the establishment of an ambience or culture that will not tolerate any form of aggression on-site. If the risks cannot be eliminated, then work environment arrangements should be reconfigured to minimise the risks. A mix of risk control measures, specifically tailored to each site, will usually be most effective (Mayhew 2000a; Mayhew 2000b). Risk control measures include:

- Workplace committee role in violence prevention.
- Security plan role in violence prevention.
- Training for violence prevention.
- Pre-employment tools.
- Post-incident support.
- Establishment of grievance/mediation procedures.

In the case of random public violence, every organisation needs to be observant about suspicious activity. In the case of anthrax for instance this suspicion would centre around envelopes and packages. All mail should be opened with a letter opener or method that is least likely to disturb the contents; all packages and envelopes should be opened with a minimum amount of movement; there should be no blowing into envelopes; there should be no shaking or pouring out of contents; hands should be kept away from the nose or mouth while opening mail; hands should be washed after handling the mail. All employees who handle mail should be trained to look for items that can trigger suspicion, which include items which are discoloured, crystallized, strange odours; envelopes with powder or powder-like residue; protruding wires or aluminium foil; excessive tape or string; a postmark that does not match the return address; restrictive endorsements such as “personal” or “confidential”; excessive postage; handwritten, blocked, printed or poorly typed addresses; incorrect titles; misspelling of common words; no return

address and so on (Fox et al 2001). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the Department of Labour in the United States has developed recommendations for handling suspicious letters or packages that should be reviewed by all mailroom employees. These can be found at <http://www/OSHA.gov/bioterrorism/pkghandling.html>.

### *Identity fraud*

I want to move a bit beyond risk, for a moment and talk about false identity. Knowing who you are dealing with in the workplace is a means of controlling risk. In dealing with government agencies and in conducting many business transactions, people are required to establish who they are by providing evidence of some unique identifying characteristics. Even using a key to open a door is a means of ensuring that a specified individual is able to gain access although of course, a key may be stolen or used by someone other than the intended holder.

While there are a number of identity fraud cases that impact on the workforce, they are not always aimed at violent activities. The presentation of fake qualifications is the thin end of the wedge. Fake degrees can be bought on the Internet for as little as \$35. For example, the CFO of Veritas resigned after misstating his educational credentials, including falsely claiming to hold an MBA. The president of the United States Olympic Committee resigned after she acknowledged lying about her academic credentials. The Chief Executive for one of New Zealand's newest television channel was sacked after a newspaper investigation into his claimed professional background and qualifications that proved to be fake.

Another way in which identity fraud can impact on workplace violence is when fake identification leads to some form of terrorist activity from within the workplace. False identity was an issue on September 11 in that nobody knew for a long time who it was who was flying those planes, or how they got into the country.

Some people steal somebody else's identity, and others create false identities.

Identities can be stolen or created using legitimate or forged documents. Legitimate documents might be stolen from a living or deceased person, while forged documents might involve changed names or variations of real names.

Forged documents can be created to support a fictitious identity - a fictitious name, or a misappropriated real name, date of birth, personal details etc can be forged onto documents. The technologies that allow us to do wonderful desktop publishing allow villains to create illegal documents that look convincingly real.

And, of course, there are many cases where people appear who have no documents at all, and about whom judgements have to be made.

In our Australian Institute of Criminology training course on identity fraud, as we look at what it is, how to identify it and develop effective controls, how to develop key prevention strategies, and we also examine some of the forensic indicators of identity fraud, and bring people together to see the whole picture.

We focus on:

- Prevention
- Detection
- Investigation and prosecution
- Reporting of cases
- Training and education

To make crime harder to commit there are three general situational strategies that we might ponder in looking at identity fraud,

- Increasing the effort.
- Increasing the risk.
- Reducing the rewards.

But that is a talk for another day!

### ***Monitoring and Review***

The existing risk control measures should be evaluated. That is, do they work in controlling the identified risk factors? If not, the search for additional preventive interventions should begin – which should also be subsequently evaluated (Mayhew 2000a; Mayhew 2000b).

### ***Conclusion***

Crime prevention is a community wide agenda. The Australian Institute of Criminology has put workplace violence firmly on the research and policy agendas. On our AIC website there is a very large annotated bibliography on occupational violence in Australia: covering prevention policies, strategies and guidance materials.

<http://www.aic.gov.au/research/cvp/occupational/index.html>

All violence in the workplace has significant legal and economic impacts on employers and recipients. Much can be done to “design” out workplace violence, and to reduce the impact of workplace violence on its victims. The activities range from new technologies through to better management skills

through to workplace education. Workplace security and the threat of terrorism is a new challenge for us all.

However we harness our resources, we need good information, good practice and good commitment. The thing we must bear in mind, and which appears very obvious, is that a safer workplace is a more productive workplace and a happier place for all concerned.

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