

PREVENTING VIOLENCE in Community Social Services:

A Review and Survey in British Columbia

S U M M A R Y R E P O R T 

**For the Joint Committee on
PREVENTING VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE**

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This report summarizes a policy and research review, and a workplace violence survey, conducted in 2001 by the Joint Committee on Preventing Violence in the Workplace. A copy of the full report can be obtained from the Committee's member organizations: Community Social Services Employers' Association (CSSEA, 604-687-7220, 1-800-377-3340); the BC Government and Service Employees' Union (BGCEU, 250-388-9948, 1-800-667-1033); the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE, 604-291-1940); the Health Employees' Union (HEU, 604-438-5000); and the Health Sciences Association (HSA, 604-439-0994)

Background ►

The Community Social Services Employers' Association (CSSEA), four unions (BCGEU, CUPE, HEU, HSA), and the Provincial Government agreed in 1999 upon the *Public Sector Accord on Preventing Violence in Community Social Services*. The *Accord* mandated the present review and survey. In Nov. 2000 the WCB updated violence related sections of the *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation*, which applies to CSS settings.

Review ►

Section 4.27 of the *Regulation* defines "violence" for the purpose of the violence in the workplace prevention requirements:

"Violence means the attempted or actual exercise by a person, other than a worker, of any physical force so as to cause injury to a worker, and includes any threatening statement or behavior which gives a worker reasonable cause to believe that he or she is at risk of injury."

"Worker" includes contractors, volunteers, and students. Threats to the worker's family or children are included as threats to the worker. The survey included WCB-defined types of violence as well as other types that were of concern for personnel in social service work.

Where violence risk is likely, the *Regulation* requires a risk assessment to be performed. Employers are to consult with staff and unions to advise staff of the degree of risk. Consideration is to be given to previous experiences in that and similar workplaces, the nature and extent of risk, and the means for recognizing the potential for violence. The survey was designed to contribute knowledge relevant to these regulatory responsibilities.

From 1997 to 2000 CSSEA members had 257 WCB claims due to acts of violence. Nearly 10,000 work days were lost, with direct claims costs over \$1,000,000. Only about 1 out of every 100 violent incidents in CSSEA facilities becomes a WCB claim. This ratio is consistent with other research in

BC and elsewhere. The violence to CSS workers is characteristic of the risks documented in health care, teaching, and social services.

Review of previous research in BC and other jurisdictions confirmed that client violence is a widespread concern. About one quarter of nurses and social service providers report physical violence by clients annually. About twice that number report some form of violence, including threats and verbal abuse. 4.5% of teachers in BC are physically assaulted annually.

In addition of types of violence, the research review identified other aspects relevant to studying workplace violence: methodological precision of the study itself, types of violence, types of clients, employment settings, staff characteristics, including occupation, gender, and age. regional and urban/rural differences, reporting versus non-reporting of incidents, physical injury and psychological stress, WCB claims and work absences due to violence. These aspects were also included the survey.

Survey ►

2,424 personnel in a stratified random sample of CSSEA member agencies replied to an independent survey of their experiences of client violence in the past year (Q3 2000 – 2001). The survey defined 12 different types of violence:

Types of violence ►

Actual physical force causing injury (abbreviated PF):

This included physical attack with bodily contact or by an object, punching, hitting, pushing, shoving, tripping, kicking, biting, scratching, squeezing, and pinching. Injuries include mild soreness, surface abrasions, scratches, small bruises or any more severe injury.

Attempted physical force (AF):

This included physical attack that did not result in injury, and attempt(s) to harm me where injury was prevented due to a physical barrier or preventive action at the time.

Statement threatening violence (ST):

This included verbal or written threats that expressed or implied intent to harm the respondent or her/his family.

Behavior threatening violence (BT):

This included threatening gestures, shaking fist, aggressive posture, displaying a weapon, menacing, being surrounded by a hostile group, confining, restraining, and stalking.

Damage to property (PD):

This included vandalism, throwing, theft or arson to the employer's or personal property.

Verbal abuse (VA):

This included remarks that demeaned, embarrassed, humiliated, distressed or alarmed the respondent, but were not threats of violence. Verbal abuse included racial remarks, shouting, yelling, bullying, intimidation, swearing, cursing, name calling, innuendo, deliberate silence ("dumb insolence"), rumour spreading, "two-faced" or back stabbing remarks, and leaving offensive messages.

Abusive Behaviour (AB):

This included rude or obscene gestures, spitting, slamming doors, unreasonably refusing contact (ostracism), trespassing, invasion of privacy, and interfering with the respondent's work, materials or equipment.

Harassment (non-sexual) (HA):

This referred to repeated and unwelcome troubling or pursuing the respondent with concerns, cares or annoyances.

Sexual harassment (SH):

This referred to repeated and unwelcome comments or behaviours of a sexual nature, but did not include physical contact.

Sexual contact (SC):

This included sexual touching, sexual assault and rape.

Improper activity or behaviour (IB):

This included horseplay, practical jokes, pranks, and unnecessary running, jumping, or similar conduct.

Witnessing violence to a co-worker (WV):

The respondent had seen or heard directly a co-worker receiving any form of violence, such as the other 11 types, from a client in the past year.

Percentage of staff experiencing any client violence in the past year ►

Overall, 74% of respondents had experienced at least one type of violence in the past year. 16% reported experiencing physical force, 22% attempted force. Verbal abuse was widespread, encountered by 56% of staff. 45% of respondents identified experiencing at least one incident in the past year of the 4 types of violence defined by the WCB *Regulation*. The percentage of staff who experienced at least one incident of each type of violence ($\% > 0$) is summarized in the following table. The values for "n" in the table indicate the number of respondents who answered that question. Blank answers were excluded, so that the " $\% > 0$ " is a percentage of "n." (An incident can include more than one form of violence.)

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS REPORTING AT LEAST ONE INCIDENT OF THE 12 TYPES OF VIOLENCE BY CLIENTS IN THE PAST YEAR

TYPE OF VIOLENCE	n	% > 0	TYPE OF VIOLENCE	n	% > 0
Physical force	2334	16%	Abusive behaviour	2270	40%
Attempted force	2330	22%	Harassment	2276	21%
Threaten statement	2339	23%	Sexual harassment	2317	10%
Threaten behaviour	2327	36%	Sexual Contact	2333	2%
Property damage	2337	27%	Improper Activity	2252	23%
Verbal abuse	2266	56%	Witnessing violence	2276	38%

Violence Profiles ►

In addition to considering what portion (percentage) of staff had experienced any incidents of the 12 types of violence, the study also determined the average frequencies of the 12 types. These relative frequencies of the 12 types of violence defined violence profiles that were used to compare violence risks for various staff and client subgroups.

All respondents answering a question were included in the violence profiles, including those who answered "zero" as the number of times they had experienced a type of violence in the past year. Survey respondents were asked to recall the number of times each specific type of violence had occurred in the past year. A few outlying responses indicated very high figures that could not realistically be recalled. To convey their sense of a high frequency, without distorting the violence profile averages with a few extreme numbers, outliers were assigned a score of 50 (indicating that a type of violence had occurred 50 times in the past year). Violence profile differences were statistically and clinically significant.

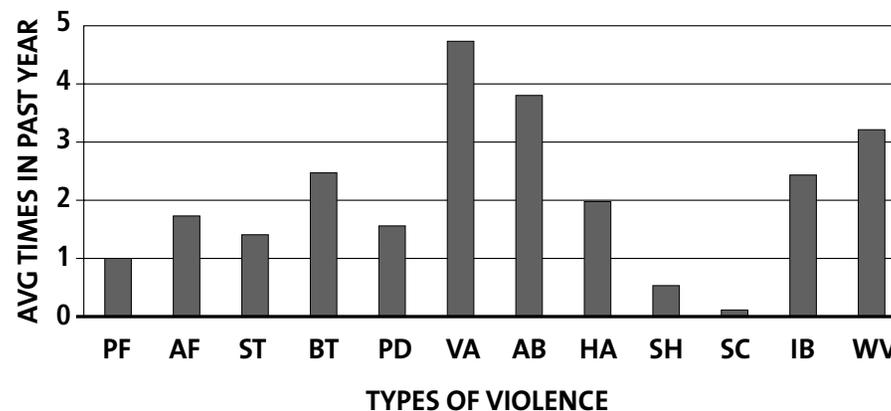
The survey also included open ended questions asking respondents to describe recent violent incidents, how the risk of violence could be recognized, their concerns, and suggestions for improving safety from violence at work.

The quantitative and written results were supplemented by three front line focus groups. These groups added valuable clarification and interpretations to the survey.

Overall violence profile and abbreviations

The violence profile on the next page is the overall average profile for all respondents. The types of violence are abbreviated: PF= Physical Force; AF= Attempted Force; ST= Stated Threat; BT= Behavioural Threat; PD= Property Damage; VA= Verbal Abuse; AB= Abusive Behaviour; HA= Harassment; SH= Sexual Harassment; SC= Sexual Contact; IB= Improper Behaviour; WV= Witnessed Violence to Co-worker.

OVERALL VIOLENCE PROFILE, ALL 2,424 RESPONDENTS



Summary and integration of results ►

There are four sources of original results in the study: WCB claims data, numerical and written survey responses, and focus groups.

WCB claims data ►

The Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) data offered several key findings:

- "Acts of violence" (AoV) as reported by the WCB refer only to accepted injury claims where at least one day of work time was lost after the day of injury. Consequently it measures, for insurance purposes, a restricted subset of aggressive acts in the workplace.
- The WCB AoV rate for members of the workplace violence Accord was 0.55% in the year 2000.
- AoV accounted for 10% of all accepted WCB claims for Accord signatories.
- AoV ranked as the third most frequent cause of claims after overexertion and falls. If combined with "acts of force," which are usually unintentional aggressive acts, AoV was the second most frequent cause of WCB claims among Accord members.
- In the four years from 1997 to 2000, Accord employees lost 9,875 days of work due to 257 AoV claims. The direct cost of these claims was \$1,099,318.
- Non-back and back strains accounted for 69% of all lost time injuries arising from AoV.

Survey quantitative results ►

- The sample size analyzed was large enough to assure highly reliable findings. If this study were repeated with a similar population, it is virtually certain that the results would be essentially the same.
- The 2,424 respondents were largely characteristic of the CSSEA membership's workforce.
- Twelve distinct types of violence were identified. Higher frequencies of physical and attempted force tended to be reported together. So too did abusive actions such as verbal abuse, abusive behaviour, and stated and behavioural threats. Sexual contact was a rare and independent process from other forms of violence.
- 74% of respondents reported at least one incident of the 12 types of violence by clients in the past year.

- Verbal abuse was experienced most commonly, by 56% of respondents, at least once in the past year.
- 40% experienced abusive behaviour.
- 36% experienced threatening behaviour.
- 16% reported at least one incident of physical force in the past year.
- 22% reported at least one incident of attempted force in the past year. (Note that one incident can include more than one type of violence.)
- Verbal abuse was the most frequent type of violence across all respondents, averaging 4.7 incidents per year.
- Abusive behaviour occurred on average 3.8 times per year.
- Physical force occurred on average once per year, and attempted force 1.7 times.
- As a general guideline, a difference of once per year between types of violence is reliable. A difference of once per year is likely to occur by chance less than once in one thousand comparisons. It is also likely to be clinically meaningful.
- The pattern of overall violence was consistent across subgroups of staff. For example, verbal abuse was virtually always more frequent than physical force. However, within the overall pattern the relative frequencies of some types of violence varied substantially across staff subgroups.
- Services for Community Living and Community Justice Services had the highest frequency of most types of violence.
- Multicultural/immigrant, and Child Care Services had relatively low levels of violence.
- Abusive behaviour was 10 times more frequent in the high risk versus low risk divisions.
- Unsurprisingly, front line workers were at higher risk for violence than staff with fewer direct care responsibilities.
- Male staff reported higher rates of all types of violence than female staff.

- The Thompson/Okanagan and North regions reported less of all types of violence.
- Victoria had the highest rates of most types of violence, followed by Vancouver. Rural and village settings almost always reported the least client violence.
- Physical forms of violence were about equally frequent regardless of facilities' number of staff. Psychological forms of violence were less frequent in larger settings.
- Union members reported about twice the frequency of all types of violence compared to non-union and exempt staff.
- 15% of survey respondents reported one or more physical injuries due to client violence in the past year.
- 49% reported at least mild psychological distress due to client violence in the past year.
- The WCB Occupational Health and Safety Regulation defines workplace violence as comprising attempted or actual physical force, and stated or behavioural threats. Forty-five percent of respondents reported at least one incident of WCB defined violence in the past year.
- Less than 3% of respondents made WCB claims due to client violence in the past year.
- Compared to all respondents, staff making WCB claims reported substantially higher frequencies of all types of client violence.
- Less than 4% of respondents lost time from work due to client violence in the past year.
- The frequency of reporting an incident correlated positively with the frequency of physical, WCB defined, and psychological violence (0.46, 0.51, and 0.52 respectively).
- 14% of respondents reported working alone during a recent violent incident.
- 17% identified a female perpetrator and 23% a male perpetrator in the most recent incident of client violence. (60% indicated no recent incident.)

- 35% of staff reported general safety training or inspections in the past year. 34% reported violence prevention training.
- Across all respondents, general safety training averaged about 2.5 hours per staff, and violence prevention training slightly less. The hours of training tended to be much the same regardless of staff size, although large settings (>= 20 staff) had on average about 0.5 hours less violence prevention training than small and medium size workplaces.
- The majority of staff felt as safe while working as they felt in general outside of work. 33% felt less safe at work, and 17% felt more safe. Staff gender and facility size had little effect on feelings of safety.

Written survey comments ►

The survey asked for written comments on recognizing the potential for violence, concerns about client violence, and suggestions for improving safety from violence.

Written comments identified typical violence risks: emotional instability, drug and alcohol abuse, history of violence, threats, escalating aggression, and dangerous situations such as transporting clients alone.

Concerns about violence fell into the three broad categories of client characteristics, organizational aspects, and personal risks. Client characteristics of concern included stalking, bullying, access to weapons, and abusive or violent individuals. Organizational concerns included the physical office arrangement. Procedural weaknesses such as working alone and lack of back up were also concerns. Some respondents described personal concerns of vicarious trauma, burnout, and mental stress.

Respondents suggested improvements in physical plant, procedures, and public policy. Some also commented on personal actions that they could take for self-protection. Possible physical plant improvements included cell phones, caller id on phones, panic buttons, video surveillance, and more secure office access. Suggestions for procedural improvements described changes in training, staff coordination, liaison, record keeping, and client screening.

Several respondents stated that society had become too tolerant of violence, and that a firmer public policy approach was desirable.

Suggestions for personal safety were practical actions such as having an exit plan, keeping a safe distance, and meeting clients in public places.

Focus groups ►

Focus groups remarks were consistent with written comments on the survey. The groups emphasized the importance of organizational procedures such as risk assessment protocols, for protecting staff from client violence. The characteristics of staff were also seen as particularly important in community social service work. Staff actions and knowledge were central to violence reduction. Ongoing staff training was therefore especially important.

One group expressed unease with the term "violence" to describe aggressive client behaviour. They thought that "violence" implied intent that in reality was physical or mental illness. On the other hand, they agreed on the importance of engaging the client and using organizational procedures to reduce violence.

Integration ►

WCB data

The WCB measure "injury rate" due to acts of violence refers to accepted time loss compensation claims. This measure is very different from recalling aggressive events, the survey measure. It is important for researchers and practitioners to be clear about the way workplace violence is measured. (Statistical reliability – whether the result would be the same if measured again – is also a critical consideration, particularly if sample size is small.)

The distinction between measures helps to make sense of these seemingly inconsistent findings: 45% of respondents reported at least one incident of WCB defined violence in the past year; 3% of respondents made WCB claims

in the past year; the WCB AoV injury rate was 0.55%; 15% reported physical injury, usually minor, due to client violence; 49% reported psychological distress due to client violence, again usually minor; and 4% reported time lost from work due to client violence.

Quantitative, written and focus group findings:

These findings are all consistent with a real hierarchy of violence in human interaction. Verbal aggression and abusive behaviour are far more frequent than physical or attempted force. Staff recognized that verbal aggression can be a symptom as well as an undesirable behaviour in some clients. Focus group comments suggest that most staff, while mindful of safety risks, are willing to work with the symptomatic nature of violence. The degree of intent to harm, or even the capacity to form intent, was a distinction that mattered for clinical practice.

None the less, violence profiles distinguished types of risk in a meaningful way between staff groups. These risk distinctions were strongly reliable between administrative (CSSEA) divisions, geographical regions, urban-rural locations, agency sizes, job types, primary clients, staff gender, and union membership.

With about one third of staff involved in a safety or violence prevention program in the past year, increased safety initiatives might appear desirable. However, hours of safety or violence prevention programming were not related to the frequency of any type of violence, physical injuries, or psychological distress.

Taken in their totality, the findings show that violence profiles are a meaningful approach to workplace risk assessment. They reliably distinguish risks among various client and staff groups. WCB data describe a small subgroup of workers encountering violence. Partly because of their infrequency, WCB claims usually indicate an extreme situation requiring attention. Staff safety concerns and suggestions encompassed practical observations on relating to clients, client features, organizational processes, personal risk, and public policy.