

KEN FIREMAN: I'm Ken Fireman, the managing editor for Sage Business Researcher, and I'm speaking with Lorna Collier who has written our report on workplace violence. Thanks for joining us, Lorna.

LORNA COLLIER: Thanks for having me.

KEN FIREMAN: When we think about violence in the workplace, the image that often comes to mind involves a shooter inflicting deadly violence on employees. But your reporting revealed that this is quite atypical, right?

LORNA COLLIER: Yes, that's right. Actually the number of shootings are only-- or they're-- shootings are only a small percentage of what happens in the workplace when we think about violence. Most of the shootings that do occur happen during robberies, for example, and they're not the kind of random or personal attack that hits the headlines.

Those are certainly horrible, of course, but we also have to think about things like threats and bullying. Workplace violence encompasses those two, and those are very frequent. Simple assault is also probably the most common type of physical workplace violence.

KEN FIREMAN: Do certain occupations have a heightened risk for this kind of violence?

LORNA COLLIER: Oh, yes. Well, law enforcement personnel, you probably wouldn't be surprised to hear that, but...

KEN FIREMAN: Right.

LORNA COLLIER: Also health care workers are very highly likely to suffer some forms of workplace violence. Also people that deal with money, exchange money with the public. You're looking at delivery drivers, taxi drivers, customer service agents, and people who work alone or in small groups are potentially more at threat.

KEN FIREMAN: Some of those are not particularly surprising, but health care workers, what makes them so vulnerable?

LORNA COLLIER: Well, there's probably a bunch of different factors involved, but if you think about it, the health care workers are working with people, both patients and their families who are in highly stressful situations. They've been maybe sick and waiting for a long time. They may not have proper insurance coverage to get preventive care, so they're really getting there at a time of

more dire need. So that's stressful. It's stressful to be in the hospital in any event.

And hospitals themselves are having cutbacks, so they are understaffed, overburdened. And then patients may just act out simply as a result of whatever illness. They can be under the influence, have cognitive disorders, that kind of thing. And then there's also nurses I talked to said that's, kind of, almost a culture, like expected that it's part of the job for a patient to yell at or physically-- or verbally or physically abuse the nurse.

KEN FIREMAN: Wow, that's really interesting. Let me ask you this. What kinds of legal obligations do employers have to try to prevent workplace violence, and what sorts of penalties can be imposed on them if they fail to meet those obligations?

LORNA COLLIER: Yeah, this is a really complicated area, and I think any employer needs to consult an employment attorney. First of all, I want to say that, because there's lots of complicated situations with different laws. But the basic one covering employers federally is OSHA's so-called General Duty Clause, which was passed in 1970. And that basically requires employers to provide a safe work environment.

The US doesn't have a federal policy for all states specific to workplace violence. I mean, some countries like Canada do. But they've interpreted this OSHA General Duty Clause to apply to employers, so that's federally. And there are other also, like the Americans with Disabilities Act, which covers people with mental illness comes into play and so forth.

Statewide, some states have their own OSHA departments, so some have had regulations about that and others don't. And then in terms of penalties, you could be fined by OSHA or these other agencies if they find you're not in compliance with an employer, or you could be subject to civil lawsuits by private citizens, maybe their family members of people that were killed by workplace violence that the employer has been found to be negligent in some way. Like, maybe you hired somebody who had signs of violent behavior, or you didn't pay attention when your employee told you her ex-spouse was stalking her and threatening her, things like that, and companies have been sued.

KEN FIREMAN: Do we have a sense of what steps work to prevent workplace violence?

LORNA COLLIER: Well, there are different models out there, but basically having a workplace violence prevention program and actively engaging in it. Don't just form it, check that off the list, and then put it on the shelf. But actively engage and have regular meetings with staff to tweak it.

And it's, kind of, some of the common threads would be having a threat assessment team with people from various departments and widespread training of all employees, especially for front line managers.

But all employees need to know the warning signs, who to submit any complaints or warnings to, and to feel like they're going to be heard and they'll be acted upon and even anonymous if that's a situation that needs to happen to have that available. An early intervention for troubled employees before they become troubling, as one person I spoke to said, it really can help. Also employers can be aware of external threats by monitoring social media and making sure their workplace is safe, and that would depend on their specific industry what needs to be done.

KEN FIREMAN: There's been a lot of talk in the wake of the Parkland school shootings in Florida about arming teachers to deter other shooters and other incidents like that. What are some of the implications of doing this?

LORNA COLLIER: Well, there's concerns about how to train teachers to handle situations that even trained law enforcement personnel can find challenging. I mean, ongoing things like making sure their firearm abilities are up to snuff. They'd have to go in repeatedly, just that alone, as well as the situational awareness.

There's concerns about accidental shootings by teachers. One person I talked to said what happens during the chaos of a shooting situation if a teacher accidentally shoots a student, and then also just bringing a lethal weapon into schools where they could perhaps be taken by someone-- a student or even another teacher that had violent intent. And those kinds of liability concerns have prompted companies that insure school districts to threaten to withdraw the liability insurance coverage or raise rates really highly. After Sandy Hook, there were proposals to arm teachers, but a lot of those fell by the wayside because of these insurance issues. So, and smaller rural districts might not have law enforcement who would get there quickly enough. But one solution that's been proposed for that would be to have armed trained security guards rather than the teacher.

KEN FIREMAN: Right, right.

We've been speaking with Lorna Collier, the author of the Sage Business Research Report on workplace violence. Thank you for speaking with us, Lorna.

LORNA COLLIER: Thank you so much, Ken.