

Guidance on Managing the Risk of Work-Related Violence and Aggression



Our Vision:

Healthy, safe and
productive lives
and enterprises

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The purpose of this guidance is to provide information and guidance on managing the risks associated with work-related violence and aggression, to raise the level of awareness around violence and aggression and to assist in strengthening the principle that work-related violence and aggression are not accepted and should not be tolerated. This is a guide aimed at employers and employees in all work sectors. Specific guidance for sectors such as healthcare can be found at www.hsa.ie.

What is workplace violence and aggression?

Work-related violence and aggression can be defined as any incident where staff are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, wellbeing or health.

An aggressive or violent act can be physical or non-physical. Physical examples can be spitting, use of force against a person; for example, pushing, hitting, punching a person or attacking a person with a weapon or object. Non-physical can be verbal abuse, threats or threatening gestures towards the person.

This guidance does not address interpersonal conflicts among staff such as workplace bullying or harassment. There is separate guidance on these matters on our website.

Important Note* Violence and/or harassment in any setting, including a workplace, is a criminal offence and may be subject to the Non-Fatal Offences Against The Person Act, 1997.

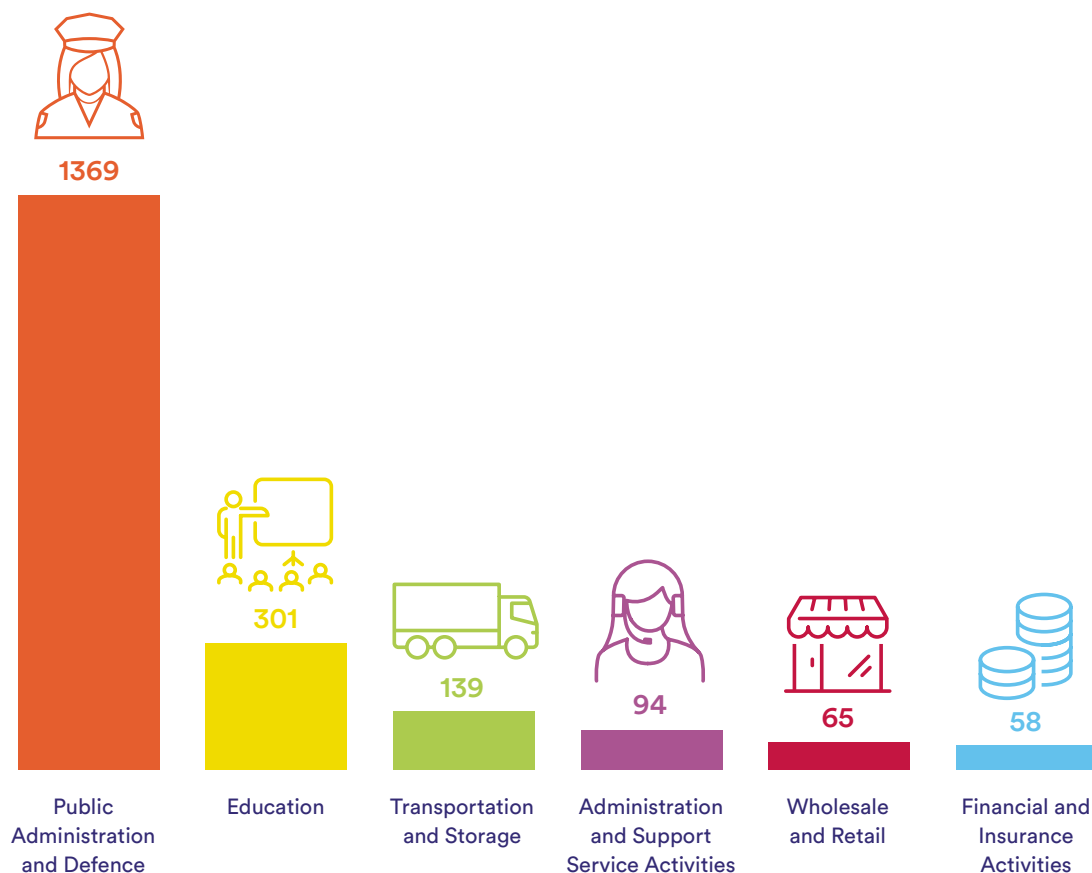
Is it common?

Over 5000 violence, aggression, and harassment incidents reported to SCA (States Claims agency).¹

Unfortunately, work-related violence and aggression is not uncommon in certain sectors. The incidents reported to the Authority tell us that close to 600 incidents of this nature are reported annually to the Authority. The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Reporting of Accidents and Dangerous Occurrences) Regulations 2016 require reporting where a person is injured due to violence or aggression resulting in the employee being unable to carry out their normal work for more than three consecutive days, therefore the actual number of incidents of violence and aggression in the workplace is likely much higher. Evidence on who is affected by violence and aggression shows that both male and female members of staff are equally at risk, and it affects all age groups in the workplace.

Outside of healthcare, the sectors where the numbers of violence and aggression present include:

Workplace Violence and Aggression Incidents by NACE Sector 2013 - 2022



1. Health and Safety Review, Vol 27 No. 8, October 2022. A five-year review of incidents and claims across the State sector (2015-2019)

What are the possible effects of violence or aggression?

A person who directly experiences a violent or aggressive incident can suffer physical and/or psychological harm and/or injury.

They can also experience anxiety, fear and depression or develop stress-related health problems which may lead to long-term conditions requiring sick leave. In addition, employees who don't directly experience the violence but work in the area or witness the violent act can also suffer psychological effects, such as reduced morale, increase in fear, anxiety and feelings of insecurity. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can also develop in severe cases.

Violence and aggression can also impact on the health, safety and financial performance at an organisational level. The consequences of unmanaged violence and aggression can impact negatively on the delivery of services to customers or clients and have financial implications for the organisation. For example, it may result in decreased productivity, increased sick leave and lower staff morale. Experiencing violence often results in loss of self-confidence and increase in fear and feelings of insecurity, loss of control and even panic. As with all ill health, incidents of violence and aggression can increase costs due to absenteeism, employer's liability premiums and compensation payments.

A figure of €3.9 million has been estimated as the cost of PTSD claims.²

2. Health and Safety Review, Vol 27 No. 8, October 2022. A five-year review of incidents and claims across the State sector (2015-2019)

What does the legislation require you to do?

Violence is a potential hazard in all workplaces where there is interaction between the general public, clients, customers or employees, and it must be risk assessed.

The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act, 2005 (the 2005 Act) places duties on employers to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, employee safety, health and welfare at work.

Employers' duties include:

1. Identifying the hazards in their workplace.
2. Assessing the risks to employees.
3. Putting in place appropriate control measures to protect employees.

This applies to the issue of violence and aggression at work as much as any other work-related hazard. Employers also have a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that others in the workplace, who are not their employees, such as customers and visitors, are not exposed to risks to their safety, health and welfare. Guidance on the preparation of a risk assessment can be found at our website

[Guide to Risk Assessment](#)

Employees' duties include:

1. Taking reasonable care for their own safety and the safety of others at the workplace that may be affected by their acts or omissions.
2. Following safety procedures.
3. Reporting to their employer any unsafe working conditions of which they are aware.



Is violence and aggression an issue in my workplace?

The answer to this question involves systematically going into the workplace and work operations under the employer’s control and finding out if there are any problem areas. This can be done by:

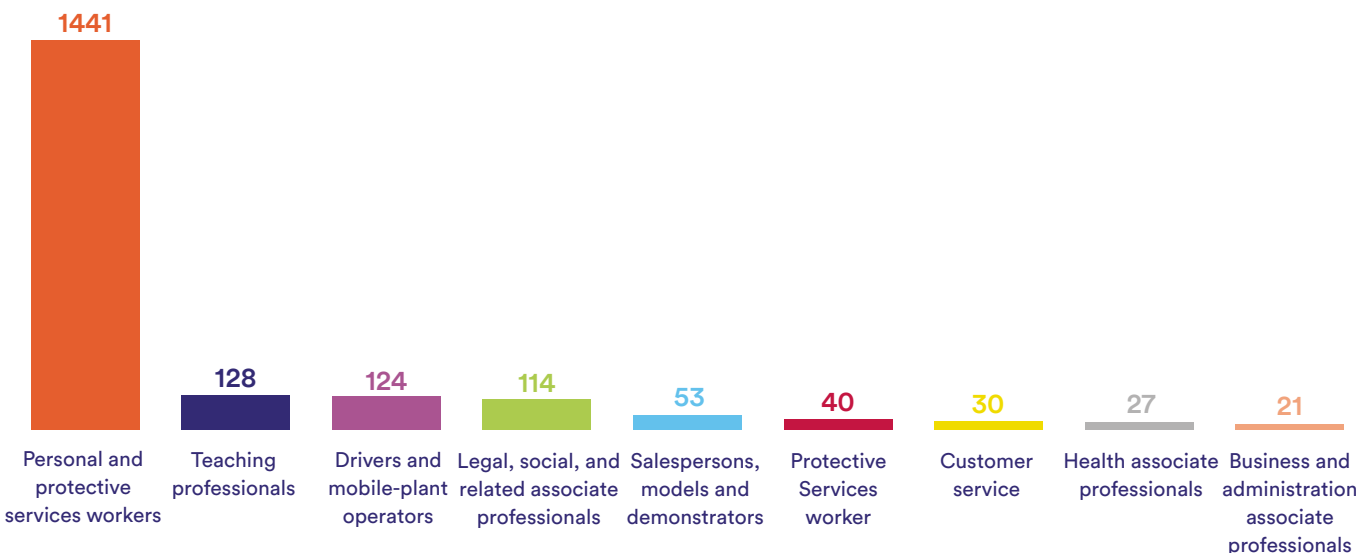
- reviewing the workplace, the work organisation and the tasks being carried out,
- discussing work practices with staff,
- looking at your incident records,
- learning from similar workplaces,
- paying attention to any incidents that have previously occurred and the circumstances under which they occurred, and
- getting relevant health and safety information and generally being vigilant on an ongoing basis.

Assessments can be done either informally by asking staff at meetings and ensuring violence is referred to at health and safety sessions or formally through questionnaires or audits. Any such assessments should ensure all employees are included, are consulted on aspects of the assessment and are informed as appropriate of the findings. Employees who are exposed to violence and aggression, if forewarned, can be assisted in many ways. It is crucial that where the risk is known, the relevant information is passed on to the employees.

Which are the high-risk areas?

Experience and data has shown that workers engaged in the following occupations may be at higher risk of being exposed to violence or aggression:

Workplace Violence and Aggression Incidents by Occupation 2013 - 2022



What situations can cause or worsen violence?

When reviewing your workplace for the potential for violence it is helpful to think about:

The aggressor

The employee

The work environment

and how these might come together to create a violent situation.



The aggressor

Someone with a history of violence/aggressive personality. Some aggressive personalities come to speedy conclusions and wrongly interpret ordinary, non-combative situations or words as threatening and react with aggressive responses. Sometimes the aggressor may be in a confused state or be suffering from an active or dormant psychiatric illness. It may be that they have recently experienced violence and are hyper vigilant to any cues which they misinterpret as another threat. People in these circumstances may react quickly and angrily. Employees exposed to this type of behaviour should not challenge the person but try to de-escalate the scenario and lead the interaction back to a cooperative one.

Any employee dealing with large numbers of the public e.g., transport workers, may encounter such people in the general population. It is important to realise that some people misread cues and so it is not always helpful to try to rationalise or to 'take on' such characters but to remove anything – including words or gestures – which they are interpreting as threatening and remain calm, repeat non-threatening phrases and refuse to be enticed into an angry exchange.

Alcohol and drugs: Alcohol is a factor in many assaults e.g., emergency departments, entertainment venues and public transport. However, premises that operate at times when intoxicated customers can be expected should take this into account when doing the risk assessment for the Safety Statement.

Violent or aggressive expectations: Sometimes members of the public will approach situations prepared for confrontation. Disputes over housing, social welfare or finance may be especially prone to such exchanges. In these circumstances training, physical barriers, security and remedial support should be available.

Immature personalities: Young people may be less restrained in their behaviour especially when gathered in groups and so where there are groups of young people extra precautions may be necessary to manage the risks.

The employee

The employee, given the appropriate training and information, may be able to positively influence the occurrence of violent behaviour and by being sensitive to changes in the potential assailant's body language or behaviour, they may be able to alter their own response accordingly and avert violent confrontation.

Previous training to deal with potentially violent situations helps staff behave in a confident manner which in turn reduces the chances of situations escalating to a physical violent stage. Referring a dispute to a line manager or offering a route of appeal to an otherwise aggrieved customer is a useful de-escalation technique.

A useful approach is to ensure the aggressor knows that there is support on site for the employee. It is also important to keep calm. If required, indirectly seek the attention of other employees or customers. Never turn your back on a potential assailant but back away to a place of safety. Always use an appeasing tone and accede to the potential assailants view until you are safe.



The work environment

This includes both the workplace and work practices.

1. Lone Working:

Isolation from colleagues may put employees at increased risk and can make them feel more vulnerable to violence even if the violence does not manifest itself.

2. Job Location:

This can affect an employee's risk of becoming a victim of assault as certain areas may have higher rates of violent crime. Employees who are mobile should be aware of locations which have a history of violent incidents. Known high risk areas should be identified to employees.

3. Handling Cash:

Handling cash means robbery may be a possibility even if only small amounts are handled. Up to date cash security systems and cashless systems can assist with reducing this risk. Contact with Local Garda station or use of online garda resources and advice may assist.

4. Long Waiting Times:

Employees who provide a public service often deal with persons who have been waiting in a queue for some time, with rising frustration.

5. Time of Day:

There are times of the day when the risks of violence or aggression can be higher. These can include times when late entertainment venues close or 'opening or closing up' when areas are not as busy as during daytime trading hours.

How to ensure adequate safeguards?

Once you have identified that there is a potential for violence, you will most likely have identified the reasons for this. In turn, this will allow you to select the most appropriate control measures for your place of work. As with all hazards employers must try to eliminate the hazard as set out in the hierarchy of controls. This is not always possible and other control measures must then be considered.

Control measures can be organisational, managerial or environmental.

Organisational

- Employers should promote a culture that does not accept violence and aggression.
- Waiting rooms and public areas should have signs/posters stating that no level of violence and or aggression will be tolerated and should request respectful behaviour towards staff.
- Employers can run safety campaigns which focus on the topic of violence and aggression towards staff.
- Encourage reporting and act on these reports. Investigate incidents and review existing controls.
- Staff training, information and instruction on customer's service and dealing with aggressive or abusive customers.

Workplace/Environment

- Workplaces can be designed or laid out to avoid areas where staff can become isolated with a customer.
- Workplace being well-illuminated, this will also assist with CCTV monitoring.
- Screens and partitions to improve protection from physical assault.
- Exclusion of the public by using coded door locks and secure refuges for employees may be used.
- The installation of video surveillance in high-risk areas.
- Avoid potential missiles.
- Waiting rooms should be designed and laid out to take account of potential long waiting times.

They can have reading material or a television and an ordered system of queuing such as numbered tickets or expected waiting time displayed.

- Chairs should be of the continuous bent metal tube form rather than four "metal spikes" form.
- If knives are essential to the workplace, they should have a smooth handle without moulded grips or notch and the blade should be non-tapering and bend when pushed along its axis. They should be stored in drawers or area not visible to the public.
- Interview rooms should have an exit behind the staff member and a desk between the employee and client and glass/perspex panels should allow visual contact of the employee to other employees or have an appropriate panic button/intercom.

Management/Systems of Work

- Have senior or experienced members of staff available to assist or refer a customer to.
- On-site security.
- Communication systems e.g., headsets, radios to allow contact between staff.
- Dress code should state that necklaces, ties and scarves should not be worn (clip on ties may be used as an alternative).
- In situations of high risk for assault with knives, stab resistant vests should be worn.
- Isolated staff can be issued with beepers or with mobile phones. Emergency code phrases are also useful.
- Cash free systems e.g., contactless payments, credit cards, tokens, etc. Time locked safes can prove useful where cash is held and signs signifying this should be posted.

In some workplaces it may also be necessary to look at arrangements for getting to and from work or moving around the workplace grounds if employees are vulnerable to attack, such as night workers, lone workers and workers in geographical areas where violence is a regular occurrence. It may also be necessary to consider those working with a group who have a history of violence or those working in diminished circumstances such as working with abusive clients in a care giving role, working with those who have mental health issues or with populations with alcohol or drug-related addictions.

There must also be consultation, as far as is reasonable, with those at risk concerning the measures to be taken and monitoring of their effectiveness. Information must be given to staff on the protection and preventive measures which are essential for their safety. Further information on training can be found in the following section.

Relevant legislation includes; the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005, in particular Parts 2 and 3, the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007, in particular Part 2, Chapter 1 and Part 6, and the Safety, Health and Welfare at work (General Application) Regulations 2016 Reporting of Accidents and Dangerous Occurrences.



Training, information and instruction

Employers must provide their employees with appropriate training, information and instruction. Employees must know how to avoid violence and aggression and what to do in the event that they are faced with violence and aggression. Training can be provided in the recognition and avoidance of violent situations. Techniques of distraction and empathy as well as break away techniques and training in physical restraint may be considered on the basis of a risk assessment. Conflict resolution and non-confrontational styles of approach can also be taught to staff. Staff should be trained in the use of any control measures that the employer has put in place to reduce the risks from violence and aggression e.g., panic buttons, alarms.

If a violent or aggressive event occurs

Adequate first aid and emergency treatment support arrangements must be available to employees who are injured at work. In the event of violence and aggression being experienced employee support and counselling should be made available. This may include members of the public if the work activity has caused or led to exposure to violence. Sometimes the employee may not be aware of the change caused by the incident and so the employer should make reasonable efforts to ensure that employees affected access appropriate support and assistance. This can initially be of an informal nature from colleagues or can be through an employee assistance programme with appropriately trained professionals. Where required this should be done soon after the incident.

Reporting of violence

Where an employee sustains a reportable injury, this must be reported to the Authority. This can be done through the Authority's website www.hsa.ie. All incidents of violence and aggression should be recorded internally on a suitable form to inform future control measures. Incidents may also have to be reported to An Garda Síochána.

Key messages for employers

1. Third party violence and aggression is a known hazard.
2. Violence and aggression as a hazard must be risk assessed.
3. Appropriate control measures must be put in place.



Recording of Incidents

Incidents of violence and aggression should be recorded by the employer. This will assist in informing future control measures and help in assessment of the employers current control measures.

The HSA has produced a form to assist with recording of incidents. This is not a statutory form and other forms may be used to record this data.

Sample form – Reporting an Incident of Violence and Aggression

1. Who was involved?

Personal data about the victim and, where possible, the assailant should be recorded separately. The victim data should include job/position and extent of training in handling violence.

(2) What happened?

A full written description, including use of weapon.

(3) Why do you think it happened?

(4) Where did it happen?

(5) When did it happen? Did anything occur prior to the incident?

(6) Which protective systems failed?

Were procedures (e.g., escort to car park or residency) by-passed?
Did a communication alarm fail to work?

(7) Forms should be completed by the employee/victim and the supervisor.

These records should be used as a basis for discussion, for devising suitable protection measures and continuous improvement. Record holders must be cognisant of GDPR where applicable. The above is not a statutory reporting form and is provided for guidance only.

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