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## **Workplace Violence: A Modern-Day Crisis**

### **Part I: “I thought it would be better by now...”**

The year is 2025. The place is the 23<sup>rd</sup> floor of a sky-high building in New York City. After hearing the ding of the elevator indicating that I have reached my designated floor, I step out through the sliding metal doors and walk across the marble lobby. I smile at the receptionist while she holds the door open and welcome’s me to my new job. I thank her and tell her that I’m excited to be here and to start this new journey. As I make my way down the carpeted aisles of the office, I begin to search for the door engraved with my name. I try to unfold the tiny piece of paper I carry that has my new office’s room number on it, while I try to teeter the large box of my desk supplies on my thigh. Although try as I might, gravity wins, and I lose control of the box. The box falls off my thigh and topples over, sending my belongings scattering. I take a deep sigh as I kneel down to start the process of collecting the fallen contents.

As I begin to put the recovered items back in the cardboard box, a pair of feet wearing hand-stitched Italian leather business shoes stands before me. I am still on the ground, when all of a sudden, a hand descends from my above peripheral vision and picks up the stapler that is right out of reach on the carpet in front of me. I look up to see who the shoes and the hand belong to, but the fluorescent overhead lighting of the office blocks my view, so all I can make out is a male silhouette.

“Woah, easy there.” A confident low voice comes out of the silhouetted man, his facial features still blocked from the fluorescent light overhead. I stand to my feet—with my box in hand—to see a tall handsome man with dark features. He’s about 6 foot 4, with a short haircut

of thick black hair. His mouth is open in a smile to reveal two rows of white teeth. He hands me the stapler that he picked up seconds before this exchange. I apologize and thank the man as I take the stapler from him. As my hand grazes his to gain control of the stapler, the man's thumb spends a little more time than expected leaving the contact of my skin. My eyes look down at my hand and then back up at the man, who is still smiling with his bleached smile.

"You're new here, aren't you?" the toothy man inquires to me. I tell him that today is indeed my first day on the job and I was actually in the middle of looking for my new office. The man's eyes light up as he takes the box from my hands and turns on his heel to walk further down the carpeted aisle.

The man continues to tell me that my new office is two doors down from his. As we walk, the other people in the office turn and look at us. I turn and see several men at a watering fountain turn and whisper to each other as they continue to stare. The one man laughs as he looks me up and down and then proceeds to take a drink of water. Two of the other men share a glance with the toothy man helping me with my box and I see the man helping me wink to the two men he was sharing a glance with. I look back at the two men as they smirk and high five each other. I'm confused as I turn my attention back at the man in front of me as he carries my box further down the hall.

We make a sharp left and the man abruptly stops in front of a door engraved with my name and new job title. He turns the silver handle, pushes the door open and gestures for me to walk into the room. I walk across the carpeted floor and stop in front of my new desk. I look out the large window at the many skyscrapers that surround the one I'm in. I can't believe after all of my years of hard work in college and countless serving jobs, I've had to rely on to feed me and

my cat, I've finally made it to a job with my own office, a coffee maker, and a view of the city. I was so excited to get started.

While I continue to look out the glass window to the city below, I hear my cardboard box of desk items be gently put down on a chair next to my office door. Still dreaming over the many years of hard work that I had to do to get where I am standing, I feel a hand gently glide up and over the lower back of my suit jacket and then rests on the small of my back. I step back startled and swiftly turn around to see the toothy man that had been helping me, grinning as he put his hands up as if he was under arrest.

“Woah there, I'm sorry. There was something on your jacket and I was just trying to get it off.” He chuckles.

I look at him warily as I let out a light laugh and apologize for my jumpiness. I then continue to inform the man that normally people just point things like that out to the person instead of touching them. The man's eyes squint as his grin ever so slightly curls down as if to give a disapproving look. He then quickly softens his face and gives out another small chuckle.

“I guess you're right, and I'm sorry to startle you. I'll leave you to get your new desk set up.” He says as he extends a hand. I take his hand in mine and shake firmly as I thank him for the help. He smiles his toothy smile as he continues to shake my hand. I smile back, unsure of the mood he is putting off. Is he angry? Disappointed? Or overly friendly? I couldn't pick up on any signs if he indeed was showing some. While the handshake continues, the man all of a sudden tightens his grip and briskly pulls me closer to him, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I'll be right down the hall, so do call out if you need any help. Anything at all.” He says firmly continuing to shake my hand. I look at him surprised but meekly nod my head and look to my feet. At the flick of a switch, his mood changes and he softens his face and the grip he has on

my hand. He chuckles and says he'll see me around and once again welcomes me to the office. I smile and laugh shyly and thank him yet again. The man steps back, looks me up and down one time, smirks and walks out of my office, softly closing the door behind him. I take a deep breath and collapse into my office chair. I spin the chair to face the glass window and stare out to the city. Thoughts racing through my head I look at my reflection in the glass and shake my head. *This is just like the last time. Nothing's changed.* I think to myself as I spin the chair back to face my desk.

I couldn't believe that the office culture I had just experienced was no different when I was peddling for tips at the many restaurants I've served at. The unwanted looks. The intentional stares. The uneasy feelings. Everything that I had endured in my younger years came flooding back. The feeling of having to still continue to walk on eggshells in fear that I would be reprimanded for someone else's actions, came crashing back. The thoughts of unwariness and always wondering what someone's hidden agenda could be, hit me harder than a city bus. I never thought I would have to deal with disempowering culture like this when I left the service industry. I never thought that I would once again be exposed to a hierarchal status ruled by a patriarchy. I just thought that this wouldn't actually happen in such a professional environment. I just thought—when I researched workplace violence back in my senior year of college back in 2019 –that society would've made some progress on this modern-day issue.

"I just thought it would be better." I say out loud to myself as I continue to slowly take out the contents of the cardboard box and unpack my office.

## **Part II: Defining the Problem**

There are a lot of definitions when it comes to workplace violence. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) of the United States Department of Labor, workplace violence is “any act of threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site.” (United States Department of Labor) Workplace violence can range from any acts that resemble threats, verbal and physical abuse. Workplace violence can also go so far as homicides or death. In 2017, OSHA reported that “According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI), of the 5,147 fatal workplace injuries that occurred in the US of that year, 458 of those cases were deemed intentional injury by another person.” (OSHA Workplace Violence Report, 2017) Now there are many different ways that workplace violence can manifest itself, but before we dive into what causes workplace violence, we must first define it. Although the US Department of Labor has already given the definition previously stated above, throughout my research, I have concluded that the OSHA definition of workplace violence is extremely vague. In this second part of the research, I will now begin to define and explain my thoughts on what workplace violence is. It is only then that after we have a better understanding of what the problem is and its many faces, that we can begin the process of finding a solution.

## **The Stages of Workplace Violence**

In my opinion and according to the research that I have done over the course of the Fall Semester, I have organized the definition of workplace violence and all actions that resemble it into a hierarchal system, ranking the violence from the primary beginning to the escalation of more drastic events.

The first part and most common form of workplace violence, in my opinion would be mental abuse. This first surfacing of workplace violence is small, and—most of the time—could not even be defined as workplace violence. However, after studying that most drastic events could've potentially been avoided if one had just recognized the beginning of a situation, I have made the decision to include this type of workplace violence in my final report. This mental abuse seems small, but can be psychologically damaging, and is what I like to call “psychological warfare.” Examples of this kind of workplace violence could possibly include unfair treatment at work, passive aggressive behavior, and favoritism among equal level coworkers from higher management. One example of this favoritism could be sexism, where higher management could decide to promote/demote a worker based solely on their sexual identification or gender performance.

An easy way to understand this type of workplace violence is the infamous “boys club” reference, which often refers to an environment majorly dominated by men. environments like these could potentially be uncomfortable for women and transgender individuals to work in. Along with sexism, other forms of mental workplace violence could also be racism and stalking. The key to potentially identify this type of workplace violence is that these types of acts are often subtle and difficult to determine whether they were committed intentionally or vice versa. These types of acts play with the victim's mind and often the main objective is to make the victim

paranoid as well as to make the victim feel like they have nowhere to report their abuser since the acts cannot specifically be considered “abuse”.

To continue on the hierarchal scale of workplace violence, is now the escalation to verbal abuse. This type of workplace violence takes all the damage of what mental abuse ensues and puts a mouth on it. Examples of verbal abuse can be—to no surprise—racial slurs, sexist comments, inappropriate gestures, etc. This form of abuse—like mental abuse—can be difficult to determine, because the abuser could potentially use the defense that one was joking and meant nothing that could actually come off as insulting. Although this form of workplace violence can be vexing, in my opinion this is still considered workplace violence and should be addressed.

Continuing up the rings of the workplace violence ladder, we find ourselves at the first level of physical abuse. Throughout my research, I only saw one level of physical abuse. One example of research that shows this is in the Bureau of Labor Statistics table for Fatal Occupational Injuries for Selected Events/Exposures, 2011-2017 (Appendix A) After analyzing the table, I noticed that the only characteristic for physical violence was homicides, including acts of shooting, stabbing, slashing, etc. Although workplace homicides were the primary reported characteristic, I hypothesized that there must be other levels of physical abuse, not just inevitable death. I decided to take it upon myself to organize these levels, based on the many articles and statistics I viewed during my semester of research. I concluded that physical abuse has two levels. Attempting to continue with my hierarchal theme, I titled the beginning stage of physical abuse “1<sup>st</sup> level Physical Abuse.” I decided to include workplace violence acts like hitting, slapping, and unwanted sexual advancements in this the first level, because these acts are the beginning signs of further escalation. This level of abuse—similar to mental abuse—can be subtle, especially in the case of unwanted sexual advancements.

These advancements can also be ranged from subtle to extreme as well. In the original story I included at the beginning of this report, there is a scene where the main character drops her office supplies and a man begins to help. In this scene, I write that the man's thumb lingers on the main character's skin a tad longer than a thumb should linger. This makes the main character feel uneasy and secretly uncomfortable, but she then she chuckles and plays it off. The scene that has been previously mentioned is an example of 1<sup>st</sup> level physical abuse in the case of a potential unwanted sexual gesture. The primary objective of these acts is to make the victim feel uncomfortable; however, it is not uncommon for victims of these types of physical abuse to feel the pressure to—for lack of better terms—shrug it off and attempt to make the gesture seem harmless. These types of physical abuse are not meant to cause any real damage. Furthermore, I conclude that this first level is meant to be a further escalation of psychological abuse.

The next level of physical abuse is entitled “2<sup>nd</sup> level physical abuse” Unlike the previous levels of abuse that have already been mentioned, the objective of this abuse is primarily to cause damage to the victim. Forms of this workplace violence could include beating, kicking, punching, intentionally tripping, and rape/sexual assault. This level of physical abuse is a continued escalation of the first level, and acts of this nature are much more drastic. Results of acts like these can include psychological as well as physical damage to an individual. These types of acts are no doubt intentional acts of workplace violence and must be reported.

If acts of 2<sup>nd</sup> level physical abuse are not reported, or any of the previous levels of abuse go unnoticed in the workplace, this could potentially be the cause of the most drastic and final level of workplace violence; homicide. Workplace homicide can be defined as any cause of action that results in the death/serious injury of an individual and is also primarily an intentional act caused by another person. Examples of workplace homicide can include but are not limited to



beating, stabbing, slashing, shanking, or shooting. For the majority of the rest of this paper and my predominant focus throughout my research during this semester, the analysis of the statistics of workplace homicides will be the main discussion.

### **Part III: Workplace Violence & What the Research Reveals**

Throughout the years, workplace violence—the primary focus being homicides—have continued to be a growing problem. According to an OSHA Workplace Violence Report, “workplace homicides made up 11% of all fatal work injuries that occurred in 2010.” (OSHA Workplace Violence Report, 2006-2010) In that same year, the Census for Occupational Injuries reported 518 workplace homicides, and 77 of those 518 were cases of multiple-fatality incidents, cases where two or more workers were killed. In the events of workplace homicides by firearms, shootings accounted for 78% of all workplace homicides in 2010. (OSHA Workplace Violence Report, 2006-2010) In that same year, 83% of these workplace homicides by firearms occurred in the private sector, and 17% occurred in government occupations. These findings are supported by research from a pie-chart graph from the OSHA 2010 report. (Appendix B) According to the chart, the largest industry affected by workplace homicides were in the retail industry (27%). The second largest being government occupations (17%) and workplaces in leisure/hospitality coming in third. After observing the data, it is safe to make the assumption that individuals who are employed in lower income occupations such as minimum wage jobs, customer service, and civil servants were at the greatest risk for workplace violence by firearms in 2010.

Another research report from the Bureau of Labor Services was found to reveal the workplace homicide rates between the years 2011-2015. (Appendix C) This report showed that homicides represented 18% of fatal occupational injuries to women and 8% fatal occupational injuries to men. This data also shows that workplace violence was the highest in 2010/2011, had

a significant drop from 2012-2013, and has been steadily increasing with each passing year from 2014.

In 2015, The Bureau of Labor Services came out with research on the percentage of Work-Related Homicides by Gender of Decedent and Assailant Type. (Appendix D) According to the bar-graph, coworkers were the assailants in 50 workplace homicides. The chart also shows that women were more likely to be killed in a workplace homicide by a relative, domestic partner, or work associate. In a following workplace report from OSHA in 2016, “homicides accounted for 10% of all fatal occupational injuries in the US of that year. (OSHA Workplace Violence Report, 2016) There were 500 workplace homicides in 2016, which was an increase of 83 cases since 2015. The report stated that the 2016 total homicide count was the highest total since 2010. The report also showed that of the workplace homicides in 2016, 82% were homicides to men and 18% were homicides to women. (OSHA Workplace Violence Report, 2016) Homicides in 2016 also represented 24% of fatal occupational injuries to women compared to men with 9%. This data concludes that although most victims of homicide (death or serious injury) in 2016 were men, women were more likely to be killed by workplace homicides.

According to this research, one could make the argument that workplace violence in the case of homicides could potentially be an issue for academics of Gender Studies to observe. After observing the following reports out of the extensive research I have done on workplace violence, it is safe to assume that gender could potentially play an important role in the workplace violence crisis. The research discovers that throughout the 2010s, workplace homicide—primarily by firearm—claims more men than women as its victims. However, this research does not determine whether the workplace homicides had fatal consequences or not. The research also shows that in 2015 and 2016, workplace homicides claims more women than

men as its victims and it also reveals that these incidents have resulted in death. After summarizing the research presented, I have concluded that workplace violence potentially involves a gendered aspect for both men and women. Now that research has been shown to support the primary argument that workplace violence is an issue that demands attention, we must now provide evidence that this information is relative and how this research is received in the workplace, the primary focus being the Human Resources Department.

#### **Part IV: Putting the Human, Back into Human Resources**

A skeptic might argue that the research previously mentioned is insignificant since the reports were from 2016 and later. One could ask the question “What does this have to do with me and why should I care?” This next section of my report hopefully will answer that question for those in denial. In 2019, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) came out with their annual workplace violence report. The organization conducted a nationwide poll from February 28<sup>th</sup> to March 4<sup>th</sup> of this year, where online and telephone interviews were taken majorly using landlines and cell phones. The survey asked employees questions like if their workplace had any incidents of workplace violence and when, as well as if their organizations have a workplace violence prevention program installed. A total population of 545 employees from organizations with more than one employee were surveyed. Of those 545 employees, 24% were aware that any incident of workplace violence occurred at their workplace. (SHRM Workplace Violence Report, March 2019) 14% of employees said there was at least one instance of workplace violence at their occupation in the past year, and 19% said that they were not sure if any incidents of workplace violence ever occurred at their place of employment.

SHRM also conducted a study on workplace violence from the opinion of Human Resource professionals. This study was conducted online from February 18-20, 2019. There was

a total population of 1,416 SHRM members who work in organizations with more than one employee who participated in the survey. Of those total members, 48% of HR professionals say there has been an incident of workplace violence at their organization. Twenty-five percent of HR professionals said there has been an incident of workplace violence within the past year, and 16% were not sure whether there has ever been an incident of workplace violence at their organization. The report states that “While this type of screening is common, organizations are less likely to have programs to prevent workplace violence or train workers on how to respond to such incidents.” (SHRM Workplace Violence Report, March 2019) The survey also discovered that only 45% of American workers are aware of workplace violence prevention programs installed in their companies, and 30% of employees as well as 19% of HR professionals feel ill-equipped to deal with workplace violence.

Research also indicates that 71% of workers say their workplace is safe, but those who are employed by organizations with programs to deal with workplace violence feel slightly more secure. (SHRM Workplace Violence Report, March 2019) In contrast to these statistics, the research also found 86% of employees who are unaware of any past incidents of workplace violence at their company said that they feel very safe or safe, and 64% of those who said there *has* been an instance of workplace violence at their organization within the past year still feel secure in their workspace. (shown in Appendix E)

The findings from the 2019 workplace violence report conducted by SHRM strengthens the research mentioned in Part III of this report about violence in the workplace and helps make the research relevant to workplaces in today’s modern age. After observing both the workplace violence reports from 2010-2016, as well as summarizing the SHRM 2019 report, it is safe to assume that although there is no doubt workplace violence is an issue, a majority of employees

as well as HR professionals—whether they are aware of incidents that have occurred at their workplace or not—still believe that their lives are safe in their companies hands. However, the research also suggests that companies that already have a workplace violence prevention program in place, feel slightly more secure than those who do not.

### **Part V: The Cost of Domestic Violence**

When having the discussion of workplace violence, visuals of incidents between coworkers/bosses are the examples that most often come to mind. However, after the extensive research that I have found throughout the semester, it is safe to determine that one of the most damaging and cost-intensive forms of workplace violence may come as a surprise. The Society for Human Resource Management states “The Department of Labor has reported that victims of domestic violence lose nearly 8 million days of paid work per year in the US, which has resulted in \$1.8 billion dollars lost in productivity for employers.” (SHRM Domestic Violence Research) Domestic violence continues to be a growing problem in our country. According to SHRM, 21% of full-time employed adults have said they have been victims of domestic violence and 74% of that total group said they’ve been harassed while at work.

This research can furthermore help support the argument that a large part of workplace violence—especially for female victims—is caused by domestic partners or relatives coming to the victim’s workplace and harassing them. In fact, the research found by SHRM is also supported in a 2015 bar-graph from the US Bureau of Labor Services. The bar-graph organizes the percent of work-related homicides by gender of decedent and assailant type (Appendix D). According to the data, women were much higher victims of workplace homicides caused by a domestic partner or relative (roughly in the 43% range) than compared to men which were less than 10%. Domestic violence also cannot just be categorized in cases that have resulted in death

to the domestic violence victim. Incidents of domestic violence can also include threatening phone calls or visits from their abusers at work, and from a study from the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), 74% of women who are victims of domestic violence have received threatening phone calls or visits from their abusers while at work. (OSHA Domestic Violence Research)

Incidents of domestic violence also do not know the bounds of sexual identification. Although one in four women are victims of domestic violence, one in nine men are victims as well; and both sides experience the consequences caused by domestic violence. Domestic violence to both women and men can lead to increased absenteeism, turnover and health care costs, as well as a decrease in productivity. According to the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention or the CDC found domestic violence to cost companies \$5.4 billion dollars annually, and whether one is male or female, domestic violence hits everyone where it hurts...their wallets.

### **Conclusions of a Semester's Worth of Research**

Throughout the course of the 2019 fall semester, there are several conclusions that I have come to understand. After extensive research from sources such as the US Bureau of Labor Services, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Society for Human Resource Management, it can be determined that workplace violence is a significant issue in the workplaces of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the growing increase of incidences such as mass shootings, hate crimes, and violent tendencies in response to political and social divisiveness, workplace violence must come to the center of the stage of discussion if our society wants to experience a more empowered culture and a peaceful environment. Throughout my internship, I have done much research supporting my main argument that workplace violence is a crisis for both men

and women, and the effects cause by it can range from psychological, physical, and financial damages.

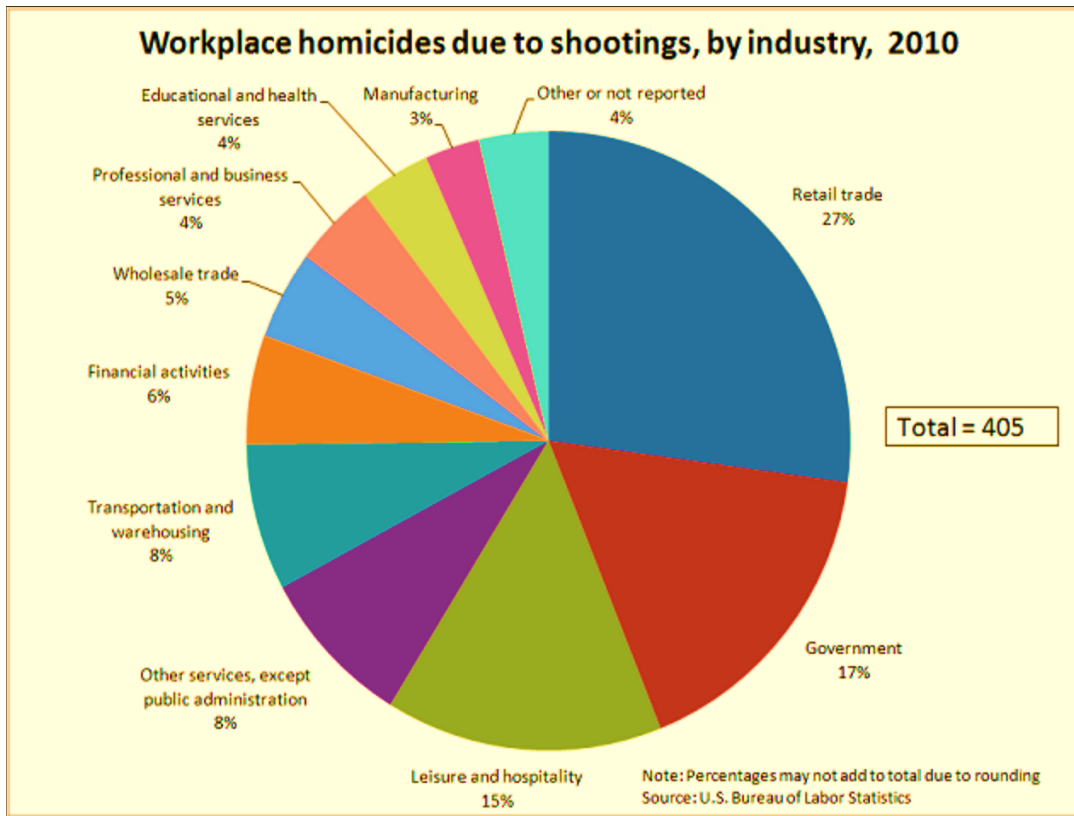
According to the research, I can also conclude that both employees as well as professionals in Human Resources acknowledge that workplace violence is a growing problem, however it seems that they do not feel a sense of urgency to establish an effective policy in an attempt to decrease violence in the workplace and the gendered issues associated with it. During my semester-long internship, I used the research that I have found to help a potential start-up company whose primary objective is to provide a new type of training program(s) to support the creation and development of an empowered workplace culture. This has been no small task, and sure enough the research that I have done has inevitably bled into my personal life in regard to my current occupation in the service industry. Having all too well experienced a disempowered, passive-aggressive, toxic environment in my own workplace, the research that I have done has had great personal significance to me and has helped me to identify the signs and indicators of a potentially disempowering workplace. With the research that I done, and my long-term goal of creating my own business, I intend to use what I have learned to help create a workplace that is empowering and supportive for all individuals, and to aid in the Transforming Culture Movement to create a space that is positive and respectful.

## Appendix

Table 2. Fatal occupational injuries for selected events or exposures, 2011-17

Characteristic	Counts						
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Total(1)	4,693	4,628	4,585	4,821	4,836	5,190	5,147
Event or exposure							
Violence and other injuries by persons or animals	791	803	773	765	703	866	807
Intentional injury by person	718	725	686	689	646	792	733
Homicides	468	475	404	409	417	500	458
Shooting by other person-intentional	365	381	322	307	354	394	351
Stabbing, cutting, slashing, piercing	42	35	38	40	28	38	47
Suicides	250	249	282	280	229	291	275

### Appendix A



### Appendix B

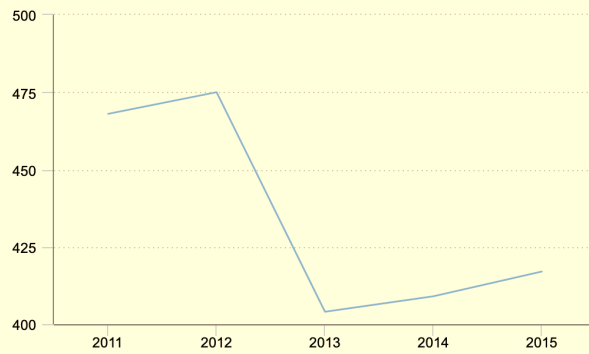


## Workplace homicides

Homicides accounted for approximately 9 percent of all fatal occupational injuries in 2015. There were 417 workplace homicides in 2015, a slight increase from 2014 but down 12 percent from the 475 reported in 2012.

Workplace homicides are classified using the 2011 Occupational Injury and Illness Classification System (OIICS), version 2.01. More on OIICS 2.01 is at [www.bls.gov/iif/osh/oic.htm](http://www.bls.gov/iif/osh/oic.htm).

**Workplace homicides, 2011-2015**



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

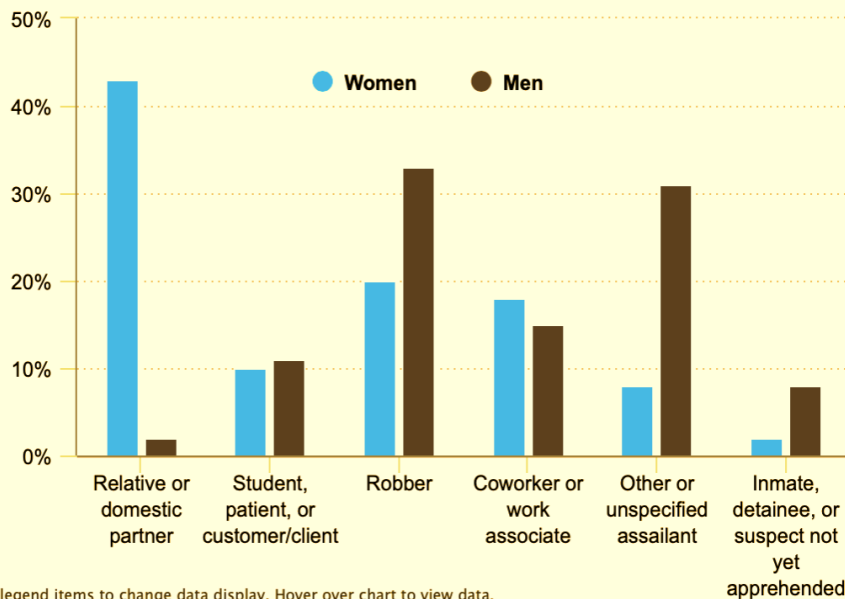


[View data](#)

Eighty-five percent of workplace homicide victims in 2015 were men. Of the 417 workplace homicides in 2015, 356 were homicides to men and 61 were homicides to women. Homicides represented 18 percent of fatal occupational injuries to women in 2015 compared with 8 percent of fatal occupational injuries to men.

## Appendix C

**Percent of work-related homicides by gender of decedent and assailant type, 2015**



Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.



[View data](#)

## Appendix D

American workers feel safer with violence prevention programs at their companies.



Appendix E

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