

## Retailer's Guide to Defending against Workplace Violence

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Violence is a leading cause of workplace deaths in the last 15 years and causes 48 percent of worker deaths in the retail industry, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Protecting retail stores is particularly challenging because they are open, public, high-traffic spaces with cash on hand, sometimes late-night operations, and with high employer turnover and stress. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2013, 85 percent of retail industry workplace violence involved some sort of crime. The rest may occur because a customer targeted a store or employee, an employee attacked coworkers or the company, or domestic or gang violence followed an employee to work. Moreover, violence may not always mean physical violence. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration defines violence to include intimidating and threatening conduct, and California recently passing a law that targets "abusive" behavior.

Whatever its source, when violence occurs at a retailer, the media and government enforcement agencies pay close attention. OSHA is ready to enforce the broad "General Duty Clause" requirement that every employer provide a workplace that is "free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm" to the employer's employees. Section 5(a)(1) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The agency and its state counterparts continue to sharpen their focus on workplace violence.

What can retailers do to improve safety and minimize the risks of violence and resulting citations and penalties? Retailers should plan to minimize these risks and train staff on handling any violence that does occur.

- 1. Conduct a hazard assessment of physical security and employee vulnerabilities at work.** Examine the physical layout of the store, the public and restricted areas, parking lots, and even the back-alley route employees travel to take out the trash at night. What risks of violence do these areas pose? How can they be made safer? Review prior incidents at your store, at similar stores in your company, and at other stores in the same area. What lessons can you learn to protect employees better?
- 2. Implement engineering and administrative controls.** Use the results of the hazard assessment to identify and take measures that will reasonably protect employees. Can you improve safety with better lighting, security cameras, access control, mirrors, or communications devices (*e.g.*, radios or panic buttons)? Will employees be safer if you require visitors to sign in and wear badges, closely monitor visitors' movements, or implement a buddy system for employees to enter riskier areas (*e.g.*, alley) in pairs? Is a list of emergency contacts available to summon help?
- 3. Develop a comprehensive workplace violence policy.** Define workplace violence for your store. Does it include physical attacks? Threats of violence? Insults or practical jokes? Spell it out. Then, be clear in a policy statement that your company does not tolerate violence by or against any employee, visitor, customer, contractor, or anyone else on the premises. Provide clear and appropriate consequences and outcomes for violations, such as calling law enforcement, removing and barring offending customers from the store, or disciplining employees. Finally, encourage prompt reporting of violence, offer a procedure for thorough investigation and resolution of reports, and require employees to record such incidents so you can assess progress and risks.
- 4. Train and empower employees (and even visitors).** As with any policy, a workplace violence program is only as good as its implementation and training. Ensure that employees understand the rules and consequences regarding workplace violence, as well as the resources, protections, and tools in place to ensure their safety. Make sure they have a safe, non-retaliatory complaint process for raising concerns.

Retailers can train and drill employees on how to respond to shoplifters, robberies, and active shooters, if appropriate. Make sure employees know how to access and operate safety and security mechanisms, such as panic buttons or emergency locks. Further, as needed, train your customers and visitors, too, with signage or other messaging that makes clear that the safety of employees and customers is your top priority — violence or abusive conduct is banned.

Practices

Workplace Safety and Health

Industries

Retail

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The retail workplace faces violent threats from many directions, compounded by the watchful eyes of the media and government enforcement agencies. Employee safety, your store's image and reputation, and business itself are all on the line. While there is no way to guarantee safety, planning, preparation, and training can lower risk.

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