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WORKPLACE VIOLENCE POLICIES OF U.S. LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Workplace violence (WPV) has received increasing attention in the public and private sectors as employers confront disturbing information about the risks it poses to workers on all levels of their organizations. During the 1990s, for example, managers and policy-makers have learned that: (1) during the average year, about 15% of violent crimes occur in the workplace; (2) homicide accounted for about one in six fatal work injuries in 1995; (3) Department of Justice statistics for 1995 revealed that the over 1 million violent crimes took place in the workplace; and (4) federal, state, and local workers were about 30% of the victims while being about 18% of the U.S. workforce (Nigro and Waugh, 1996; U.S. Department of Justice, 1994; U.S. Department of Labor, 1996).

Agencies such as the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Federal Protective Service (FPS) have urged employers in all sectors to recognize the risks posed by WPV and to take steps designed to prevent it as well as to deal with its consequences if it should happen (OSHA, 1996; Lewis, 1995; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993; U.S. Department of Justice, 1994; General Services Administration, 1996).

Until the 1990s, most public employers had been slow to adopt policies and related programs specifically addressing WPV risks, prevention, and responses. Unfortunately, most of the exceptions to this pattern were reactions to tragic and widely-reported events such as a series of multiple murders in and around facilities of the U.S.

Postal Service (Baxter and Margavo, 1996). Over the past ten years, however, public employers have begun to recognize WPV as a meaningful safety and liability issue, one that now requires more than a passive or reactive approach to prevention and mitigation (Nigro and Waugh, 1996). The available literature on the subject suggests that WPV, particularly homicide, is a hazard to be taken seriously (Kelleher, 1996).

There is, however, a broadening recognition among employers that WPV involves far more than murder by coworkers, client-customers, and intruders (Yohay and Pepe, 1996). A Florida city, for example, has set forth a typical definition: "Violence in the workplace shall be defined as making threats, exhibiting threatening behavior and/or engaging in violent acts on City property by an employee, contractor/vendor, spouse and ex-spouse, family member, friend or any member of the general public" (City of Coconut Creek, 1996). The degree to which U.S. local governments explicitly are addressing WPV in policy terms has not been systematically explored. This article describes the findings of a survey of cities and counties intended to fill some of the gaps in our understanding of the status of WPV policies and programs on the local level.

An exploratory 1996 study of 38 cities and counties with populations of 50,000 or more in Georgia revealed that only 4 had WPV policies and related programs in place. Almost 75 percent of the respondents (chief executive officers) indicated that there had never been a WPV "problem" in their jurisdictions and about 50 percent expressed the belief that existing personnel policies on employees conduct and discipline were sufficient. In the 4 cases where policies of some sort existed, they had originated in and were administered by the human resources office or department. Policy coverage typically included violence by clients, by employees and their families, against women, and related to drug and alcohol abuse.

These policies were not comprehensive, dealing with a limited range of topics such as reporting and handling of complaints, documentation of cases, conflict management training, and a "zone tolerance" statement. While these findings suggested that local executives in Georgia did not see WPV as a high-priority matter requiring specific policies and programs, it was unclear how typical this point of view was of the rest of the country. Accordingly, a national survey of local governments with populations of 100,000 or more was conducted in 1997 and the following is a report on a number of the findings.

METHOD

Using lists provided by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), questionnaires were mailed to the human resources directors (or their equivalents) of all cities and counties in the United States with populations of 100,000 or more ($N=472$).¹ The findings reported below, therefore, may not be descriptive of smaller cities and counties. Overall, a 65.6 percent response rate was achieved through two rounds of mailings. Table 1 summarizes the survey response.

The questionnaire probed several areas, including: (1) the respondents' assessment of the level of threat posed by a number of potential sources of WPV; (2) whether or not the city or county had a formal written policy on WPV and, if so, what kinds of violence were covered by the policy statements; and (3) the extent to which the jurisdiction had established an administrative program or set of formal procedures to deal with one or more kinds of workplace violence.

Table 2 summarizes the survey's findings with regard to the perceived level of the threat posed by 8 potential sources of WPV. The sources of WPV identified by 40 percent or more of the respondents as being "high" or "medium" in intensity are by far the most frequently addressed in the professional and mass media. The very low level of threat assigned to domestic and international terrorists is noteworthy, especially since the survey was conducted after the bombing of a federal facility, the Murrah Building in Oklahoma City. Approximately 85 percent of those who responded believed that WPV was at least something of a problem for their jurisdiction. Over half (57.6%) saw it to be a minimal threat at worst while about a third (34.9%) characterized it as "a problem." Only 1 percent described WPV as a "very serious problem."

For the most part, as Table 3 shows, cities and counties with policies of some sort also had at least a minimal program in place but a few did not. Some, on the other hand, reported having no system-wide policy but noted that they did have one or more programs such as facilities security and employee assistance offices in operation.² Overall, roughly one-third of the responding jurisdictions reported having policies and/or programs with most of them having both. The vast majority of the WPV policies had been adopted within the past five years. This trend parallels the growing attention to and expressions of concern about WPV by government agencies

Table 1
Survey Response
N = 309

<u>Classification</u>	<u>Number Surveyed</u>	<u>Number Responding</u>	<u>%</u>
Cities	170	116	68.2
Counties	302	193	63.9
<u>Population</u>			
One Million or More	28	19	67.9
750,000 to 999,999	16	13	81.3
500,000 to 749,999	41	28	68.3
250,000 to 499,999	108	75	69.4
100,000 to 249,999	279	172	61.6
<u>Region</u>			
Northeast	72	36	50.0
North Central	109	76	69.7
South	174	113	64.9
West	117	83	70.9

Overall Response: 309 of 472 or 65.5%

Northeast = New England and Mid-Atlantic Census Regions

North Central = East North Central and West North Central Regions

South = South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central Regions

West = Mountain and Pacific Coast Regions

Table 2
Perceived Sources of WPV in Local Governments
(N = 309)

Source	Level of Threat			
	%High	%Medium	%Low	%MD
Clients	9.7	46.0	40.8	3.6
Coworkers	2.9	30.7	63.1	3.2
Strangers	3.6	27.5	65.4	3.6
Former Employees	5.2	35.3	55.7	3.9
Inmates/Prisoners	15.2	26.9	49.8	8.1
Relatives/Family	4.5	38.5	52.8	4.2
Domestic Terrorists	0.6	9.7	84.5	5.2
International Terrorists	0.3	2.9	90.9	5.8

MD = Missing Data

Table 3

Local Governments with WPV Policies and Programs*

Type	% With WPV Policy	% With WPV Program
Cities	48.3	44.8
Counties	31.3	30.7
Total	37.9	35.9
Population		
One Million or More	63.2	63.2
750,000 to 999,999	38.5	46.2
500,000 to 749,999	46.4	42.9
250,000 to 499,999	44.0	37.8
100,000 to 249,999	31.0	30.8
Region		
Northeast	13.9	16.7
North Central	31.6	30.7
South	33.0	30.1
West	60.2	57.8

*Programs are formal administrative, procedural, and organizational actions taken to implement WPV policies.

and the mass as well as the professional media.

Large cities in the western U.S. are the most likely to have policies and programs in place. Cities, especially big cities, historically have faced urban problems associated with violence of all kinds. Large urban counties, of course, also must deal with the same kinds of problems, therefore it was anticipated that population size would be associated with whether or not a jurisdiction had a formal WPV policy and associated programs.

As Table 3 shows, this expectation was borne out by the results of the survey. Larger cities and counties are more likely to have both. The relatively high proportion of western cities and counties with policies and programs may be a reflection of this region's tradition of strong executive leadership by city and county managers and highly professional personnel or human resources offices. This interpretation is supported by the survey's findings with regard to who the major actors were in developing a WPV policy. As Table 4 shows, for all cities and counties with policies, the director of human resources was most likely to have been the major force behind the implementation of a policy specifically addressing WPV.

Appointed chief executive officers, city and county managers, were also important actors, particularly in cities. Similarly, legal counsels were frequently identified in this area. The rather wide variety of "other actors" given credit for leadership in the development of a policy appeared to share at least one common attribute with the others: professional expertise and training (Table 4). Responsibility for employee and citizen safety, liability concerns, and a position-based interest in city or county human resources issues were also themes linking these actors. In sum, the typical coalition advocating a WPV policy should include the director of human resources, the appointed CEO, the legal counsel, and one or more specialists in security, liability, and employee services.

For those cities and counties without policies (over 60 percent), the typical reasons given for not having a policy were the same as those given by Georgia executives. WPV was not seen to be a problem for the jurisdiction and existing rules and regulations were sufficient to handle any episodes of violence. Table 5 lists the top six reasons given by respondents to the national survey.

Perceived problem salience for the jurisdiction, therefore, appears to be a factor in the explanation for why cities and counties do or do not have WPV policies/programs. In many jurisdictions, WPV simply did not seem to be a serious threat or one that could not be

Table 4
Major Actors in Developing a WPV Policy

Actor	Combined %	City %	County %
Elected CEO	16.4	23.6	10.0
Other Elected	12.1	9.1	15.0
Appointed CEO	29.3	34.5	23.3
Legal Counsel	28.4	30.9	25.0
Director of HR	79.3	83.6	75.0
Other Appointed	9.5	12.7	6.7
Employee Groups	7.8	7.3	8.3
Employee Unions	6.9	5.5	8.3
Community Groups	1.7	1.8	1.7
Other Actors*	32.8	25.5	38.3

*Most frequently cited "others" were: risk manager, security/safety manager, employee assistance program manager, and police department personnel. Of the balance, most were offices or personnel directly related to human resources or personnel management.

Table 5

Reasons for Not Having a WPV Policy

<u>Reasons</u>	<u>% Giving as a Reason</u>
WPV has never really been a problem	54.1
Existing Personnel Rules and Regulations are adequate	46.9
Exposure to WPV is too low to worry about	21.1
Nobody has ever suggested a WPV policy is needed	23.7
WPV is generally seen as a law enforcement problem	15.0
Cost of implementation are too high in light of projected benefits	3.6
Organized labor has opposed such a policy	.5
Other reasons	31.1

Table 6
Types of Violence Addressed by
Existing City and County Policies and Programs

Type of Violence	Overall %	City %	County %
Co-Worker Conflict	79.1	84.6	74.1
Worker-Manager Conflict	78.2	86.5	70.7
Employee-Intimates Violence	71.8	69.2	74.1
Discipline-Related Violence	73.6	78.8	70.0
Family-Personal Problems Conflicts	70.0	76.9	63.8
Violence by Intruders	72.7	73.1	72.4
Drug-Alcohol Abuse Related	65.5	65.4	65.5
By Employees Against Clients	62.7	65.4	60.3
Related to Dismissals	67.3	73.1	62.1
Violence Against Women	64.5	65.4	63.8
Related to RIFs	50.0	55.8	44.8
By Clients Against Employees	45.4	47.1	43.1
By Prisoners or Other			
Institutionalized Persons	30.9	25.0	36.2
By Terrorists Against Employees	27.3	28.8	25.9
Other Sources of WPV	10.9	3.8	17.2

handled by the existing human resources program. Here, a crosstab analysis revealed that the chance that a policy/program existed was associated with a respondent's characterizations of the situation faced by the jurisdiction (Cramer's $V = .301$; $p < .001$). Inspection of the tables showed that, as those perceptions moved from WPV as "no problem" to WPV as "a very serious problem," the likelihood increased that a policy/program existed.

A major goal of the survey, in addition to finding out how many of these cities and counties had policies, was to get some idea of what they covered. Based on a review of the WPV literature, some 14 possible types of WPV were isolated and the questionnaire asked the respondents to identify which of these were covered by their policy. Table 6 presents the findings in this area.

The typical policy, as Table 6 reveals, will cover violence arising from interpersonal conflicts involving workers and their families, acts related to drug and alcohol abuse, violence precipitated by adverse actions, and assaults and homicides by intruders. They are less likely to cover attack by clients against employees, violence stemming from reductions-in-force or violence by persons being held against their will by the employer (prisoners and persons institutionalized for medical or psychiatric reasons).

Preventing and responding to attacks by terrorists of all kinds is covered in only about 27 percent of the cases. At least with regard to the threat posed by terrorists, coverage in those cities and counties with WPV policies seems to be a reflection of a general tendency (Table 2) to believe that terrorism, domestic as well as international, are not much of a threat to local governments. No obvious explanation for the relatively high coverage in the area of violence by employees against clients (in comparison to clients against employees) was readily available since the literature does not suggest that this is a major problem.

Overall, however, the pattern of policy coverage was very much in line with the content of professional publications in the human resources, risk management, and security fields. Specialists in these fields are likely to have read discussions of WPV by publications in one or more of these fields and, given the relatively high level of participation in the policy-making process, this pattern is not surprising.

Table 7 addresses the extent to which these cities and counties reported having more or less comprehensive policy coverage in terms of the 14 types of WPV. This distribution suggests that there is

Table 7

Extent of WPV Policy Coverage in Cities and Counties

<u>Number of Policy Areas Covered</u>	<u>Number of Cities and Counties With This Coverage</u>	<u>%</u>
1	17	14.5
2	2	1.7
3	5	4.3
4	5	4.3
5	6	5.1
6	9	7.7
7	7	6.0
8	10	8.5
9	7	6.0
10	8	6.8
11	11	9.4
12	5	4.3
13	12	10.3
14	13	11.1

N = 117; See Table 6 for Areas of Policy Coverage

no one, widely accepted, model being followed by city and county governments. On this level of government, the most accurate description of the comprehensiveness of WPV policies is that about one-third of these jurisdictions have relatively extensive coverage (18 to 14 items), another third has moderate coverage (6 to 9 areas), and the balance has fairly low coverage (1 to 5 areas). Beyond a tendency for very large jurisdictions to have extensive coverage, no statistically significant association between population and policy coverage was found to exist.

CONCLUSION

Just over one-third of the local governments that responded to the survey had some form of WPV policy/program in place by 1997. Among the majority without policies, many of the respondents did not see a serious threat to their city or county and believed that episodes of WPV could be handled through existing personnel rules and procedures. The demographics of a jurisdiction were in some respects associated with the likelihood it would have a policy and related programs. Large, urban, western cities and counties are more likely to have them. Level of threat from WPV, as seen by the respondents, was also found to be associated with the jurisdiction's having or not having a policy. Since the respondents were mostly directors of offices of human resources or personnel and typically identified themselves as major actors in the process of getting a policy implemented, the connection between the degree to which they saw WPV as a problem and the presence of a policy and related programming is not surprising.

The survey revealed that the types of violence addressed by these policies and programs focus on interpersonal conflicts, violent reactions to personnel actions, and crimes by intruders. Violence against public employees and citizens in public facilities is not a major concern and is covered by only slightly over one quarter of the policies/programs reported to be in place. Although the Oklahoma City tragedy may have underscored in the minds of some the need to take steps designed to prevent WPV in general, this survey's results suggest that violence by terrorists, in the main, is seen to be a largely federal problem.

The risk of violence from many sources is having cumulative effects showing up in a variety of statistics, including those on workplace homicides and assaults but it appears that local governments

are inclined to believe that terrorism is not a threat meriting major investments in scarce resources that otherwise could be used to deal with other more immediate sources of violence.

Most of these local governments had not implemented comprehensive policies and the general pattern of policy coverage suggests that they are proceeding incrementally. The vast majority (over 90%) of these policies had been promulgated since 1993, according to the respondents. Given growing concern in professional circles and media attention, the pace of change in this area is likely to accelerate and the percentage of local governments with broadly framed policies and programs will almost certainly increase significantly over the next 5 to 10 years.

These findings also suggest that the city or county office of human resources will play a major role in both the formulation and implementation of WPV policy. Workplace violence, in other words, has been added to the long list of controversial issues, complex problems, and difficult challenges confronting local government administration, particularly those professionals specializing in human resources policy and management.

NOTES

1. The study was conducted with the assistance of the ICMA which provided the names and addresses of the directors of human resources surveyed. Georgia State University's Applied Research Center provided financial support and the university's Department of Public Administration and Urban Studies supported several graduate research assistants' work related to development and mailing of the questionnaire, coding of responses, and analysis of the data obtained. In particular, the authors wish to thank June Hunt, Lisa Wilson, Mark Abraham, and Pete Hortman for their help on this project.
2. The questionnaire asked if the city or county (not just certain departments or agencies) had a "formal written policy dealing specifically with workplace violence" and then asked those who responded "yes" to respond to the following question: "Is there a workplace violence program or set of administrative procedures designed to implement the policy in operation now?" Subsequent items asked for specifics on policy coverage on the city/county level. In a few cases, the respondents indicated that no WPV policy existed on the city or county level but that certain departments or units had personnel policies and/or programs of some sort that could be applied to incidents of violence or its prevention such as security and employee assistance programs.

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