

## Violence in the workplace affects 74 per cent of social services workers

September 1, 2002

### The Report: September / October 2002 vol.23 num.4

by CAROL RIVIERE with YUKIE KURAHASHI



**early three-quarters** of community social services workers experienced a violent incident at their workplaces in the past year. That's part of the findings of an eye-opening survey of social service workers in BC.

HSA Steward Angela Nguyen, a women's counsellor at Victoria Transition House, said she was surprised at the high incidence of workplace violence reported by this survey. "I am surprised to see such a high incidence of workplace violence ... but I shouldn't be surprised, because I have witnessed and experienced so many incidences over the years I've worked at the transition house."

The survey was conducted as a first step in an ongoing process to find ways of addressing workplace violence. The last round of collective bargaining in the community social services sector established an accord on Preventing Violence in the Workplace. Pursuant to this accord, HSA and the other unions representing workers in the sector have been working with the Community Social Services Employers Association (CSSEA), and representatives from the provincial government and the WCB, to find ways to address ongoing problems with workplace violence. The first step in this process was to obtain as much information as possible about the violence problems encountered by workers in community social services.

#### **HSAs members in the community social services** work in various fields, including:

- child and youth care services
- family and children's services
- services for community living
- women's services

They provide crucial services as transition house workers, community-based counsellors, youth-at-risk counsellors, crisis-line workers, addiction counsellors, residential care workers, school support workers, forensic therapists, and many other important professions.

Dr. Barton Jessup, a registered psychologist who has worked with victims of workplace violence, and an experienced occupational health and safety researcher, was retained to conduct a survey during the last year to determine the extent and nature of workplace violence in community social services. The survey also sought worker input on the best ways to deal with this workplace hazard.

More than 2400 employers and workers in the sector, including many HSA members, responded to a detailed

questionnaire, designed to determine the prevalence of various types of violence in different kinds of Community Social Services workplaces. The recently completed analysis of the survey results revealed several important findings, including the following:

- 74 per cent of respondents experienced at least one incident of workplace violence in the previous year. Some respondents reported experiencing some form of workplace violence on a daily basis;
- 16 per cent of respondents were subjected to at least one incident of physical violence in the previous year. Overall, respondents were subjected to an average of one act of physical force per year;
- 22 per cent of respondents were subjected to incidents in which someone attempted to use force against them; 36 per cent experienced threatening behaviour;
- the most common type of violence was verbal abuse, encountered by 56 per cent of respondents at least once in the previous year;
- the frequency of various types of violence varied significantly among the different community social services divisions, with the highest incidence of most types of violence occurring in services for Community Living and Community Justice;
- almost half of all respondents reported some level of psychological distress due to client violence in the previous year.

Not surprisingly, front line workers, including many HSA members, were at the highest risk for violence. Many respondents reported that they had been working alone when subjected to violence.

Nguyen said that the transition house is cutting costs by reducing staffing levels, and the recent government funding cuts are only exacerbating the problem of workers feeling unsafe on the job. Where previously at least two transition house workers were on site, in recent months counsellors are spending more and more hours alone on shift. -Working alone is very scary," Nguyen said. -Working alone can be more stressful and more traumatic, as we have to deal with any violent incidents on our own. On top of that, were responsible for making sure that the other women and children in the house are safe," she said.

She described how potentially dangerous situations can develop when the spouse of the fleeing woman shows up at the shelter. -A lot of times, police involvement does help. And when a partner locates the address [of the shelter], that woman is then transferred to another safe place. But still he may not know that shes gone to another transition house, so the threat is still there for us," she said. -But most of the time, the violent behaviour directed at staff has been from our clients."

But often, the threatening behaviour is a feature of her workplace. -We often have clients who are not really physically abusive, but verbally or psychologically intimidating," she said. -And when you work in a transition house, thats your office. If someone is being threatening right in your workplace, theres no where you can go. Its very, very stressful. I can see that it has quite an emotional impact on many of my co-workers, as well as mental and physical. Many of us suffer the effects of prolonged stress and vicarious trauma, such as anxiety, guilt, physical ailments, fear, poor concentration, memory loss, and other problems."

WCB data on violence in unionized community social services worksites was collected to supplement information gathered by the survey. These data show that violence is the second most common cause of workers compensation claims in this sector. From 1997 to 2000, WCB accepted claims for nearly 10,000 workdays missed by unionized workers in community social services because of injuries caused by workplace violence. These claims cost more than \$1 million. The WCB data, however, represents only a fraction of the human and financial cost of violence in the sector, as the survey showed that very few respondents injured by workplace violence actually file a workers compensation claim.

Despite the high incidence of workplace violence in community social services, survey respondents received, on average, less than 2.5 hours of violence prevention training in the previous year. Workers in the sector identified such training as an important tool in dealing with this workplace hazard. The Accord committee is currently developing training and other tools to assist community social services workers to deal with workplace violence. The survey results and WCB data outlined above are being used to tailor the training and tools to the specialized needs of different types of worksites within the sector. The Accord Committee plans to begin offering this training early in 2003.

Occupational Health and Safety Steward Jerry Young, a counsellor at SHARE Family and Community Services in the Lower Mainland, is happy that violence in the workplace is being addressed through this accord. -I think within the community service, this has been a really good insight into how much violence that we see on a regular basis," he said. -Such a high percentage of us experienced some kind of threatening behaviour. What we can recognize is that we have situations that are often very stressful. How do we deal with it afterwards; how do you debrief afterwards? What are the kinds of things that your local Occupational Health and Safety Committee needs to be looking at to address this?"

Young said the next step is even more important. -I think its very important that we develop some programs and support the idea that when there is an incident, we have a debriefing procedure or mechanism. What can we do to prevent [the violence], and what can we do afterwards ... these are important considerations."

As a community-based counsellor, Young has many years of experience in defusing anger-laden situations. -I think that we work with a lot of clients who have anger issues. Theyre here because of their struggles, and for a lot of them, its really hard. Its really frustrating," he said.

Young has worked through HSAs Occupational Health and Safety Committee to suggest some possible solutions. -To minimize violence, some of [my co-workers] now have pagers or cell phones that they carry with them if they are going out into the community and into a persons house," he said, citing an example. -We have alarm buttons at the front desk for situations in our offices. In some areas, weve installed mirrors where you couldnt see down corridors before. Weve tried to address those concerns which we know we can do something about," he said.

HSA has sent all HSA community social services members a copy of a summary report describing the surveys major findings. HSA also has a limited supply of a lengthy report describing the survey results in more depth. If you would like a copy of either report, or if you would like more information about the survey, or the ongoing work under the Accord on Preventing Violence in the Workplace, please call HSAs Occupational Health & Safety Labour Relations Officer at 604/439.0994 or 1.800/663.2017. 

*Carol Riviere is HSAs occupational health and safety officer.*

Type:

[The Report](#)

- [Print](#)
- [PDF](#)

180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017