Recognizing and Preventing Workplace Violence

A Guide for Companies and Private Investigators

BY **JODY O'GUINN,** CEO/PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
CALABASH INVESTIGATIVE CONSULTANTS, LLC

Workplace violence is one of the most significant threats facing businesses today. It affects every industry, from corporate offices to manufacturing plants, retail stores, healthcare facilities, and government organizations. While many think of workplace violence strictly in terms of physical assaults or active shooter events, the spectrum is much broader, spanning intimidation, harassment, verbal abuse, and threats that may escalate over time. For private investigators, who are often asked to support companies with risk assessments, internal inquiries, and training, recognizing the signs of workplace violence and advising on prevention policies is a critical function.

This article explores how to recognize potential warning signs, outlines prevention strategies and policy considerations for businesses, examines best practices, highlights the role of private investigators, and touches on the increasing importance of active shooter training.

UNDERSTANDING WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) defines workplace violence as "any act or threat of physical violence, harassment, intimidation, or other threatening disruptive behavior that occurs at the work site." This includes a wide range of incidents:

- Verbal threats or intimidation
- Harassment (sexual, racial, or otherwise discriminatory)
- Property damage or sabotage
- Physical assaults ranging from pushing to aggravated physical attacks
- Active shooter incidents
- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workplace violence accounts for hundreds of fatalities each year in the United States, making it one of the leading causes of occupational death. Beyond fatalities, thousands of employees suffer injuries or psychological trauma, while businesses face reputational damage, productivity loss, and significant liability.

RECOGNIZING THE WARNING SIGNS

While not all violent incidents can be predicted, there are

behavioral red flags that, if recognized early, may help prevent escalation. Companies and investigators should be attentive to patterns such as:

1. **Verbal aggression** – Frequent hostile or abusive language toward colleagues, supervisors, or customers.
2. **Employee history** – The employee has a history of aggressive or violent behavior, testing the limits of rules, regulations, or social norms, holding grudges for extended periods of time, and an inability to accept criticism.
3. **Sudden changes in behavior** – Withdrawal, increased irritability, extreme changes in behavior regarding political or religious beliefs, or signs of paranoia.
4. **Fixation on perceived grievances** – Employees who continually complain of unfair treatment or harbor resentment toward management.
5. **Obsession with weapons or violence** – Talking excessively about weapons, violent incidents, or displaying fascination with previous workplace attacks.
6. **Declining performance with increasing hostility** – Deteriorating job performance accompanied by negative attitudes.
7. **Bullying or intimidation of coworkers** – Attempts to dominate or humiliate others.
8. **Signs of domestic violence spilling into the workplace** – An employee being stalked, threatened, or harassed by an intimate partner who knows their work location.
9. **Family problems** – Financial, infidelity, serious illness of a family member, or custodial issues involving children.
10. **Increased stress levels** – Caused by labor problems, reductions in workforce, or the introduction of high technology.

It is important to note that the presence of one or more warning signs does not guarantee violent behavior, but they warrant attention, documentation, and potential intervention.

PREVENTION STRATEGIES

A proactive approach is always more effective than a reactive one. Prevention begins with leadership commitment and extends through training, policies, and an open workplace culture.

1. Establish a Zero-Tolerance Policy

Every company should adopt a written workplace violence policy that clearly defines unacceptable behaviors, outlines reporting procedures, and specifies disciplinary measures. Employees should understand that threats, harassment, and violence will not be tolerated, no matter how minor.

2. Foster a Reporting Culture

Employees must feel safe and supported when reporting concerns. Anonymous hotlines, confidential HR reporting mechanisms, or even access to external investigators can encourage workers to come forward without fear of retaliation.

3. Conduct Regular Risk Assessments

Companies should periodically review physical security (locks, lighting, access controls), procedures for handling terminations, and employee interaction points (such as reception areas or customer service counters). Private investigators are often retained to conduct these independent assessments, bringing an objective perspective that in-house teams may miss.

4. Provide Training and Awareness Programs

Training should cover recognizing warning signs, de-escalation techniques, reporting procedures, and emergency response. Employees should know how to react if they witness or experience threatening behavior.

5. Support Employees Facing Personal Violence

Because domestic violence frequently spills into the workplace, employers should have policies to support employees at risk. This may include flexible work arrangements, security escorts, or restraining order enforcement coordination.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR COMPANIES

Developing comprehensive workplace violence policies requires balancing employee rights with organizational safety. Key considerations include:

- **Clear definitions** of violence and harassment.
- **Step-by-step reporting processes** that protect confidentiality.
- **Investigation protocols** to ensure impartial and timely inquiry.
- **Disciplinary guidelines** that are fair, consistent, and legally defensible.
- **Termination procedures** that include risk assessment, security presence, and follow-up monitoring.
- **Coordination with law enforcement and external investigators** when necessary.
- **Post-incident response plans** addressing counseling, communication, and operational continuity.

Legal compliance must also be part of the policy framework. Employers should be mindful of OSHA's "general duty clause," which requires providing a workplace free from recognized hazards. Failure to act on credible threats can expose businesses to liability.

BEST PRACTICES IN WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Based on industry standards, the following practices consistently prove effective:

1. **Multidisciplinary Threat Assessment Teams** – Comprising HR, security, legal, management, and often an external investigator. These teams review concerning behaviors and determine appropriate responses.
2. **Access Control and Visitor Management** – Implementing badges, secure entry points, and sign-in procedures reduces opportunities for outsiders to cause harm.
3. **Background Checks During Hiring** – Conducted legally and fairly, they can reveal patterns of violence, restraining orders, or criminal history relevant to workplace safety. Private investigators often support this process.
4. **Regular Drills and Tabletop Exercises** – Preparing staff for how to respond in violent situations, including active shooter scenarios.

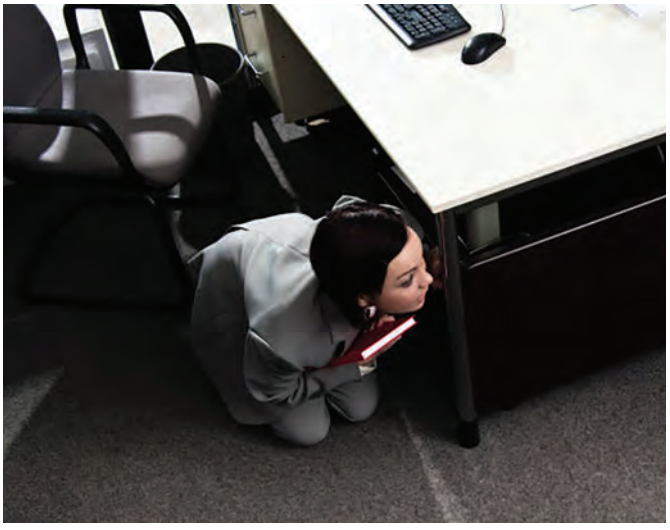
5. Integration of Technology – Panic alarms, surveillance cameras, and workplace communication systems provide real-time response capability.

THE ROLE OF PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

Private investigators play an increasingly important role in workplace violence prevention and response. Their involvement can take several forms:

- **Pre-employment screening** – Conducting thorough and lawful background checks that may uncover violent tendencies or criminal history.
- **Threat assessments** – Evaluating concerning behaviors, interviewing witnesses, and compiling intelligence for company leadership.
- **Policy consultation** – Advising businesses on developing workplace violence prevention programs and ensuring compliance with state and federal laws.
- **Independent investigations** – Providing impartial review when employees allege harassment, threats, or violence.
- **Surveillance and monitoring** – In cases where an employee or outsider poses ongoing threats, surveillance may be used (within legal limits) to assess risk.
- **Expert testimony** – Serving as subject matter experts in litigation arising from workplace violence incidents.

Because private investigators are external to the company, they often bring an objective lens, helping leadership recognize risks that internal staff may overlook.



ACTIVE SHOOTER TRAINING AS PART OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE PROGRAMS

The most extreme form of workplace violence is an active shooter incident. Although statistically rare, these events are catastrophic, and the high-profile cases in schools, offices, and factories have elevated the need for preparedness.

Active shooter training should be considered a core part of workplace violence prevention. Programs typically emphasize the "Run, Hide, Fight" model endorsed by the Department of Homeland Security:

- **Run** – Evacuate the area if safe to do so.
- **Hide** – Find a secure location, lock doors, turn off lights, silence phones, and remain quiet.
- **Fight** – As a last resort, when life is in imminent danger, incapacitate the attacker using whatever means available.

Private investigators may be contracted to deliver or coordinate these trainings, drawing on their law enforcement or security backgrounds. They can also assist companies in conducting after-action reviews following drills, helping refine policies and procedures.

Beyond training employees, companies should coordinate with local law enforcement, review emergency communication systems, and ensure facilities have clear evacuation routes and lockdown procedures.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF SAFETY

Ultimately, the most effective workplace violence prevention strategy is building a culture of respect, trust, and accountability. This requires leadership commitment, open communication channels, and ongoing vigilance. Companies that treat workplace safety as an ongoing priority, rather than a one-time training, are far better positioned to protect their employees and operations.

For private investigators, the opportunity is clear. As trusted advisors, PI's can support businesses in recognizing risks, developing policies, and responding effectively to threats. Their unique expertise bridges the gap between security, law enforcement, and human resources, ensuring that organizations not only comply with regulations but also foster genuinely safe workplaces.

CONCLUSION

The adage "Failing to plan is planning to fail" is an essential concept to remember regarding workplace violence prevention. Workplace violence is not an abstract possibility but a real and present danger that can strike any business. Recognizing the signs, implementing robust prevention strategies, enacting thoughtful policies, and engaging professional investigators are all essential steps. Adding active shooter preparedness into these efforts ensures organizations are equipped to face even the most extreme scenarios.

This field offers both a professional opportunity and a moral obligation for private investigators: to help businesses safeguard their most valuable asset, their people.

By prioritizing safety and preparedness, we can reduce the risk of violence and ensure workplaces remain environments of productivity, trust, and respect. **PI**

Jody O'Guinn is a retired police chief with 34 years of law enforcement leadership, serving as Deputy Chief in Alton and Chief of Police in Carbondale and Freeman Spur, Illinois. A veteran SWAT and Regional WMD SRT Commander, he also held key roles with the DEA and MEGSI narcotics task forces. He is a certified Workplace Violence Threat Specialist and an Active Shooter Response Instructor. A graduate of the FBI National Academy and LEEDS program at Quantico, he holds an MPA from Southern Illinois University. He pioneered the world's first board-certified cryptocurrency forensic investigator course and now serves as the Director of Law Enforcement Operations at Baker Group International.

BE PREPARED. SAVE LIVES. PROTECT YOUR WORKPLACE.

Workplace Violence Prevention & Active Shooter Response Training

By Calabash Investigative Consultants, LLC.

Workplace violence is a growing concern across industries. Whether it's recognizing early warning signs or responding decisively to an active shooter event, preparation is the difference between chaos and survival.

At Calabash Investigative Consultants, LLC, we show you how to:

- Recognize and de-escalate workplace violence indicators
- Develop policies and prevention strategies for organizations
- Develop proven Active Shooter Response protocols
- Empower employees, supervisors, and security staff with life-saving skills
- Build confidence through scenario-based, interactive instruction

Our instructors are retired law enforcement leaders, certified Workplace Violence Threat Specialists, and nationally recognized *Active Shooter Response* Trainers.

PROTECT YOUR PEOPLE. PROTECT YOUR BUSINESS.

Call: 404.772.2746
Visit: www.calabashicllc.com
Email: jog@calabashpi.com