



Work-related violence and aggression in the construction industry

Work-related violence and aggression (WVA) can create a fearful environment that affects the worker and those who witness it, often resulting in serious psychological and physical injuries. There are other consequences from WVA including economic and social costs to the victim, their family, their business and the wider community. Like all work health and safety risks, WVA risks must be managed.

Under-reporting of WVA incidents in the construction industry points to a larger problem. WVA between workers at a construction site can place workers at risk.

Construction industry claims for WVA injuries have more than doubled over the past five years, predominantly affecting men under 44 years of age.

Construction workers' national suicide rate is higher than other workers. MATES in Construction commissioned research into the impact of workplace bullying, a form of aggression, on mental health and suicidality in Queensland construction industry apprentices. This demonstrated that:

- **20 per cent** of construction apprentices reported experiencing severe workplace bullying
- **13 per cent** had high levels of psychological distress, indicating probable severe mental illness
- **nearly 30 per cent** had poor quality of life that may indicate depression
- **30 per cent** of apprentices reported having experienced suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months.

Exposure to WVA can lead to psychological harm and must be considered as a potential contributing factor in the increased suicide rate in construction. During 2001-18 the construction industry represented 28 per cent of all male worker suicides in Queensland.

In the last five years



Sources:

- Queensland Scheme Analysis database (QSA) –claims data provided by insurers with database maintained by Office of Industrial Relations. Data as at 31 January 2021.
- “Suicide in the Construction Industry”: 2001-2018 The University of Melbourne
- The impact of workplaces bullying on mental health and suicidality in Queensland construction industry apprentices, The Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, Griffith University for Mates in Construction, February 2020.

Legal Duty

Work health and safety laws are designed to ensure the health and safety of workers and others in the workplace. ‘Health’ includes physical and psychological health.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (the Act) places the primary health and safety duty on the business owner or employer—this is referred to in the Act as a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU). The PCBU has the primary duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the health and safety of workers and other people is not put at risk from WVA.

This includes ensuring:

- the provision and maintenance of a work environment without risks to health and safety
- the provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
- the provision of any information, training and instruction or supervision necessary to protect workers from risks to their health and safety arising from work.

In short, PCBUs must manage risks from WVA. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate them, they must be minimised.

Workers have duties too. They must take reasonable care of their own health and safety and ensure their actions and omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of others. They must comply with any reasonable instruction and co-operate with any reasonable policy or procedure given to them by the PCBU that relates to managing the risks to health and safety from WVA.

What is work-related violence and aggression?

Work-related violence and aggression is any incident or behaviour in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. WVA covers a range of actions and behaviours that create a risk to health and safety. This may include:

- physical assault, such as biting, scratching, hitting, kicking, pushing, grabbing, or throwing objects
- intentionally coughing or spitting on someone
- sexual assault or any other form of indecent physical contact
- harassment or aggressive behaviour that creates a fear of violence or aggression, such as stalking, verbal threats and abuse, or yelling and swearing
- hazing or initiation practices for new or young workers
- gendered violence and aggression, including sexual harassment (gendered violence and aggression is any behaviour directed at or affecting any person because of their sex, gender or sexual orientation, or because they do not adhere to socially prescribed gender roles, that creates a risk to health and safety)
- violence or aggression from a family or domestic relationship when this occurs at work.

In construction workplaces WVA is generally perpetrated by workers at the workplace and can occur between all levels of workers, including supervisors, managers, apprentices and volunteers. WVA can also occur between workers engaged by different employers, for example, building contractors at the same site, tradesmen, or delivery workers.

It can be:

- physical or psychological harm
- in person, such as verbal or via gestures or threats
- through written correspondence, electronic means or online (such as via social media platforms or text messages)
- one-off or repeated incidents
- perceived lower level behaviour, such as name-calling
- physical assault and other criminal offences.

Who is at risk of work-related violence and aggression and what are the consequences?

Although all construction workers are at risk of WVA, new and young workers (15 to 24 years) are particularly vulnerable and can also be the target of hazing. Hazing activities involve harassment or abuse of someone as part of a ritual to recognise or accept them as part of the group. It commonly involves negative, humiliating or distressing experiences for new and young workers, which can result in physical and psychological harm. These can include being sworn, yelled, or screamed at, being abused or humiliated in front of their work team, or even physical abuse, such as having tools thrown at them or being physically threatened.

Victims and their families can suffer the personal costs of emotional trauma from WVA incidents. It can contribute to both psychological harm and physical injury and illness to victims and witnesses. Even lower level but frequent aggression exposure, such as name calling, can have a lasting effect on workers' health.

WVA can lead to:

- feelings of isolation, social isolation or family dislocation
- loss of confidence and withdrawal
- physical injuries as a result of assault
- stress, depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- illness such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, immune deficiency and gastrointestinal disorders e.g. as a result of stress
- misuse of alcohol and other drugs
- suicidal thoughts.

Workers and their HSRs have the right to refuse to carry out or stop work if there is a reasonable concern that the worker will be exposed to a serious risk to their health and safety from an immediate or imminent hazard.

Why is work-related violence and aggression under-reported?

Sometimes, workers may be deterred from reporting WVA because:

- there is normalisation of verbal and physical abuse as part of the construction industry culture and it is therefore seen as something that has to be tolerated
- it is seen as a rite of passage for apprentices to endure
- apprentices fear losing their apprenticeship/their job
- embarrassment or difficulty in talking about the emotions they might have felt as a result of being poorly treated
- their direct supervisor may be the aggressor
- workers may not categorise their experiences as serious enough to be reported
- workers do not understand or know their workplace rights, what behaviour should be reported or how to report it, particularly if workers are culturally or linguistically diverse
- there is a perception that nothing will happen if the incident is reported
- they would rather forget about it.

How can work-related violence and aggression be prevented?

WVA can be prevented in the construction industry by using the following approaches:

1. Undertake a risk assessment

Identify the hazard

Look for indicators of WVA at your work. You should:

- talk to workers directly or consider using anonymous surveys, such as the [People at Work](#) psychosocial risk assessment tool
- observe worker behaviour and how they interact with each other, including how supervisors and managers interact with apprentices
- consider whether issues already identified between co-workers, clients or others could escalate further e.g. to violence
- observe the culture of the workplace to determine whether WVA is accepted as a workplace norm - workers may take on this behaviour to participate in the workplace culture without thinking about the consequences to others e.g. name-calling, swearing,



sexual or gendered jokes, or hazing new or young workers

- refer to industry standards and guidelines which may highlight risk factors for the construction industry
- review relevant records such as incident and injury records, first aid reports, workers' compensation claims and absenteeism rates.

Assess the risk

After identifying the hazards, assess the risks in consultation with your workers.

- How likely it is that WVA will occur?
- Could it cause injury, illness or death?
- Do particular tasks increase or decrease the severity of potential harm?
- Could a small event of aggressive or violent behaviour escalate to a much larger event with more serious consequences?
- Are there conflicts between team members within a workgroup?
- Have WVA incidents happened before, either in this workplace or somewhere else but related to work (e.g. at the pub or via social media)?
- Do control measures exist and are they adequate?



Effectively control the risk

PCBU's must first attempt to eliminate the identified WVA hazard. If elimination is not possible, it is vital to minimise the risk so far as is reasonably practicable. Preventing and responding to WVA will usually require multiple control measures, such as environmental controls and having safe systems of work.



Environmental controls

The likelihood of WVA and how workers can respond to incidents is affected by the physical work environment. The following control measures may provide workers with the highest protection:

- security measures, such as video surveillance or alarm systems
- facilities and amenities which give privacy and security, such as secure change rooms
- adequate lighting in all work areas
- supervision of work and support for workers, especially new, young and other vulnerable workers.



Safe systems of work

Work culture, behaviour standards, policies and procedures can address inappropriate behaviour early, and ideally before it escalates. This may include:



- a clear statement that the workplace will not tolerate any form of violence or aggression
- highlighting the duties of all levels of workers, including managers and supervisors and your responsibilities as the employer
- codes of conduct or standards of expected behaviours at work
- processes and systems for reporting WVA
- training workers in safe responses if WVA is directed at them, what they should do if they witness an incident, and how to report an incident
- highlighting the consequences of breaching policies, including disciplinary procedures
- tailored training for managers in managing WVA risks.

Ensure work systems and procedures are well understood by all workers (e.g. through training, providing policies electronically or on noticeboards) and implemented consistently across all areas of the business and all levels of workers, including apprentices.

2. Demonstrate strong and committed safety leadership

To develop a positive safety culture in your business, you need to show strong safety leadership, influencing others to adopt health and safety as an important work goal and leading by example. It is important to foster a positive and respectful work culture where violence (including gendered violence) and aggression is not tolerated.

Leadership teams demonstrate a commitment to a culture where WVA is not accepted as part of the job by:

- setting health and safety objectives and accountabilities
- ensuring effective health and safety systems of work are in place to identify and control risk
- allocating resources to the prevention and management of WVA
- developing and promoting policy and key initiatives
- encouraging and empowering workers to speak up if they are feeling unsafe or experience WVA
- consulting with and supporting workers
- monitoring and reporting on performance outcomes and acting on issues and opportunities for improvement.

3. Provide effective consultation

Consult with workers and health and safety representatives (HSRs) when:

- identifying WVA risks in the workplace
- making decisions about ways to control WVA risks
- making decisions about WVA information and training
- proposing changes that may affect the health and safety of work
- investigating WVA incidents.

4. Respond appropriately to incidents

Immediately after an incident, ensure that everyone is safe and provide first aid or urgent medical attention where necessary. In the event of a WVA incident:

- encourage workers to report aggressive or violent behaviour formally, informally, anonymously or confidentially
- provide individual support where required, including practical and emotional and social support
- address inappropriate WVA behaviour early
- provide a supportive, consistent and confidential response to reports of WVA, and consult, co-operate and co-ordinate with other PCBUs who you share a duty with to identify and control risks and resolve issues as they arise
- monitor the worker, and other workers who witnessed the incident that might be affected, for symptoms of physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural distress (particularly if they persist longer than 4 weeks)
- investigate what led to WVA and review control measures and make any changes necessary to reduce the risk.

PCBUs must also manage the risk of work-related violence and aggression from members of the public.

In some circumstances you may be required to [report the incident](#) to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland and to Queensland Police.

Further resources

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland
(worksafe.qld.gov.au)

- [Work Health and Safety Act 2011](#)
- [Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011](#)
- [Work health and safety consultation, co-operation and co-ordination Code of Practice 2021](#)
- [How to manage work health and safety risks Code of Practice 2021](#)
- [Managing the work environment and facilities Code of Practice 2021](#)
- [Preventing and responding to work-related violence guide](#)
- [People at Work](#) – Psychological risk assessment tool
- [Violence and Aggression Incident Investigation Tool](#) – a tool that can help support a systematic investigation following a violence incident.
- [Workplace package for domestic and family violence](#) – a package containing useful materials to strengthen support for employees affected by domestic and family violence (DFV) at your place of work.

Safe Work Australia (safeworkaustralia.gov.au)

- [Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties](#)
- [Preventing workplace violence and aggression – National guidance material](#)

MATES in Construction (MIC) is a charity established in 2008 to reduce the high level of suicide among Australian construction workers. MIC provide suicide prevention through community development programs on sites and support workers in need through case management and a 24/7 help line 1300 642 111.



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