

Violence is a problem in the workplace, study shows

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A survey on the incidence of violence in the workplace has indicated that one in three employers have had problems with their staff being attacked or assaulted in the past year.

Healthcare workers, such as doctors and nurses, and passenger transport workers reported the most number of incidents.

Massey University's Healthy Work Group has conducted what is thought to be the first independent study of workplace violence and concluded that more work needs to be done to identify the extent of the problem and the best ways to deal with it.

The group consists of three researchers from the Department of Management and International Business and specialists from other New Zealand universities. They approached human resource departments at organisations nationwide and received responses from 62 organisations.

Respondents reported 143 cases of employees being physically assaulted in the workplace in the previous year and 254 attempted assaults. Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported no cases of violence, meaning the majority of attacks were on healthcare and passenger transport workers.

Although a wide variety of sectors responded, police were not among them. The authors will encourage more organisations to participate in a planned follow-up study, particularly employers in areas regarded as a higher risk, such as social work, medicine, corrections, police and

security guards.

Associate Professor Tim Bentley, who undertook the study with Dr Bevan Catley and Dr Duncan Jackson, says: “There is a big problem and businesses are not understanding the problem or the need to report it effectively. It was surprising to find that no-one had carried out an independent survey into this before.”

Dr Bentley believes these figures could be the tip of the iceberg because not every organisation has reporting systems in place.

“There is a level of awareness in organisations where they have had a lot of problems in the past,” he says. “But our goal is to encourage everyone to address this issue.”

The study, funded by the Massey University Research Fund, showed that workload and stress were rated significantly higher risk factors than physical factors such as cash on the premises.

Alcohol or drug use, mental instability and prejudice or harassment were identified as the main issues leading to workplace violence.

Dr Catley adds: “Workplace violence has been found to be a major cause of serious harm and death in the US and other Westernised countries. Despite several high profile incidents of workplace violence, the nature and extent of the problem in New Zealand remains largely unknown - this study begins to redress that.”

The team is following up the study with an online survey of the perceptions of New Zealand occupational health and safety professionals in relation to workplace violence. It is hoped that this work, supported by the Human Resource Institute of New Zealand, will lead to a national violence monitoring study.

“We want to focus on working with industries to understand what they are doing and identify best practice for prevention of violence in the workplace,” says Dr Bentley.

The Healthy Work Group is also carrying out a study funded by the Department of Labour and the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC) into workplace stress and bullying, in conjunction with the universities of Auckland, Waikato and Canterbury.

Provided by Massey University

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