

VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE: AWARENESS, PREVENTION, AND INTERVENTION

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Abstract

Since September 11, 2001 the topics of Violence in the Workplace (VITW) has been superseded by today's headlines. We are overwhelmed by the media with images of War on Terror, War in the Middle East, and Child Pedophiles. However, the U.S. Government Agencies from the past and present and academic university research did extensive research on the subject of Workplace Violence since the early 1990's.

In the early 1990s VITW was classified by the U.S. Center of Disease Control (CDC) as a U.S. epidemic. We start with three different cases that have occurred in the workplace. The literature will demonstrate the actual events as they unfolded. Research findings are shown from 1993 -2005 using many government agencies that published results they have been following for close to two decades. The charts and graphs are used to highlight the high estimates of mass murder occurring in the workplace. Who is carrying out such acts of violence? Why do these extreme, sometime random killers seek revenge? Is it revenge they seek? We will try to answer these questions through secondary research that shows commonalities among mass murders and violence; and a list of behaviors that may alert workers to an approaching catastrophe. What we learn through the media is only one small percentage of workplace violence and it usually includes many deaths. Statistics show that companies pay out billions of dollars each year due to law suites from mass death in the office.

The problem with finding deterrents on reducing Violence in the Workplace is that it can happen at any time and at any place of employment. It is the value of surprise that makes workplace violence and death even more profile. Research has suggested that the reason is known but cannot be retrieved because mass killers usually kill themselves or there is no apparent reason at all. This may be why VITW is still at epidemic proportion. This paper is exploring five factors of workplace violence; they are employees, ex-employees, customers, domestic spillover, and strangers.

Three interviews were conducted in three different industries, government, service, and big box retail and we will cover those results as well. Researchers search for answers to this problem so the government, companies, and academic universities can focus on ways of reducing the number of violent killers at work. Awareness, Prevention, and Intervention is one prevention measure. Some statistics may help with a small conclusion that has reduced and maintained lower acts of Violence in the Workplace in the past six years.

1 Introduction

In August 1986, the first landmark case regarding Violence in the Workplace (VITW) took place in Oklahoma. A postal worker, Patrick Sherrill, killed 14 postal workers and then turned the gun on himself. Prior to his killer rampage he had been demonstrating strange behavior at his job and was about to be fired. People who knew him said that he was odd and reclusive and had been since childhood (Newman, 2000). Sherrill had worked in the postal service through 1985, when he was let go for

incompetence. The following year, he was hired back part-time. Again, his behavior towards his co-workers was “rude and uncooperative” (2000, p. 3). Sherrill began thinking his supervisors were out to get him. On August 20, 1986, Sherrill entered work with two 22-caliber pistols in his postal bag. He approached two of his supervisors and, using both guns, shot them at point blank range. Sherrill then walked through the postal facility shooting anyone in sight, according to some of the survivors. “After have killed 14 men and women, Sherrill had shot himself” (Newman, 2000). At the time, this was the largest mass murder by a single gunman in US history.

To debunk the growing myths regarding violence in the postal service, Bob Dart wrote an article “Go Postal: Stereotype Mere Myth” in 1999, which showed statistically that the postal service was less prone to shooting sprees than any other industry. Yet, even postal workers still “believe that the myth is true” – there are many types of mass murders for which the term “going postal” would not fit. However, there was a shooting by a female, ex-employee, in a post office located in Goleta, CA in 2006. This incident did not remove the myth (postal shootings occurs more frequently in the postal service than any other industry) by the public or current employees that still believe in the postal myth (Ramsland, 2006).

Two other incidents help illustrate the crisis of violence and death in the American workplace.

On the day after Christmas in 2001, an office rampage took place at Edgewater Technology Inc. in Wakefield, Massachusetts. Michael McDermott, who was under psychiatric care at the time, went to the office on Christmas Day to leave weapons around the office (CBS News.com, 2001). The following workday, McDermott entered the office, retrieved his weapons, and began shooting, killing seven co-workers. McDermott’s reasoning for the office attack was because, “he was angry over a government demand the company withdraw taxes from his paycheck” (CBS News.com, 2001, p. 1). All the victims of his rampage consisted of multiple gun shot wounds from an AK-47. Surviving co-workers described McDermott as “odd and quirky” (CBS News.com, 2001, p. 1). McDermott had a prior history of employment termination due to mental instability in a nuclear plant. This prior job at the nuclear plant McDermott attempted suicide but survived; he then sued the nuclear company for his stressed-induced suicide attempt and won a settlement (CBS News.com, 2001).

The last case is a massacre that took place in Atlanta on July 27, 1998 (S. London, 1999). There are many factors other than work-related issues that can cause tragic outcomes in the workplace. In this case, domestic violence was a factor. Mark Barton murdered his wife and children; the next night he killed his two children from another marriage. Both families were bludgeoned to death. The murder six years earlier of his first wife and her mother had also gone unsolved.

Then, in the late afternoon of August 29, 1998, Barton barged into the offices of Momentum Securities, where he had been fueling an addiction in stock market day trading. He had been making high risk, fast paced trades and losing everything, and his trading privileges were suspended several times in the last few months. On this day, Barton was supposed to drop off a check for \$50,000 to cover his losses. When the manager arrived, Barton pulled out a 9-mm semiautomatic and a 45-colt and with a smile said, “It was a bad day for trading and about to get worse” (S. London, 1999, p. 1). He began shooting people at close range, killing four. Barton then crossed the street to another brokerage firm where he also did business. He entered the manager’s office and began shooting, killing five more people in the main trading room. One survivor recalls Barton shooting and screaming that he hoped this did not ruin their trading day.

Five hours later, surrounded by police, Barton turned the gun on himself. His murdered family was discovered in his girlfriend’s home (S. London, 1999). Barton had left insane notes around the bodies justifying his actions (S. London, 1999). In three days, he killed nine office workers and five family

members, and wounded 22 to others. The reaction of the public to this event was shock. It awoke people to the fact that murder can happen in anyone's workplace at any time (S. London, 1999).

Still, more recent cases have occurred. On February 2, 2006, the first female went postal, killing her neighbor, and then went to her last place of employment and killed six more past co-workers with a 9-mm semiautomatic. Several other mass murders in the workplace occurred in 2006 with similar characteristics, no reason or reasons unknown. (Crime Library, 2006).

The research and results that has been discussed include only five subjects that may commit Violence in the Workplace (see Fig. 1):

- Employees
- Ex- Employees
- Strangers
- Customers
- Domestic Spill-Over.

The theory of disgruntle employees as the main perpetrator for the violence and multiple murders in the workplace has been debunked by the statistical chart below:

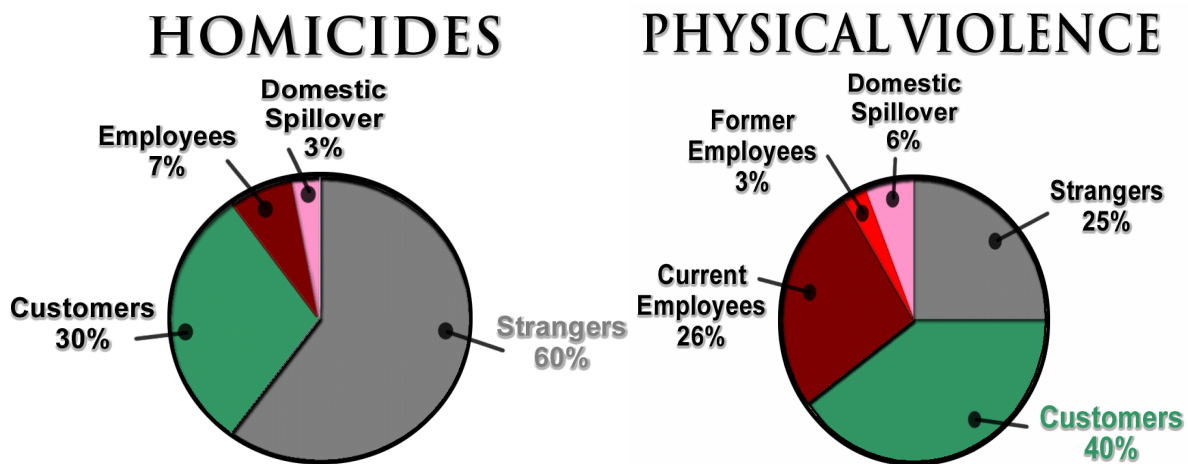


Figure 1: Victims of Workplace Homicide and Violence (D. Grimme and S. Grimme, 2001).

There are especially high risk industries that were not directly focused on. Occupational risks are much higher for:

1. Healthcare workers
2. Police officers
3. Corrections officers
4. Taxi drivers
5. Bartenders
6. Mental Health professionals
7. Convenience and Liquor Store workers.

The list is very long and the people who work in these industries make the decision to take the risks every time they enter their workplace.

2 Methodology

Prior to 2001, there has been a crisis of Violence in the Workplace. In the 1980s and 1990s it received the attention of the U.S. Government and Academia research. The Workplace Violence declined from 1993 through 1999 (Fig. 2).

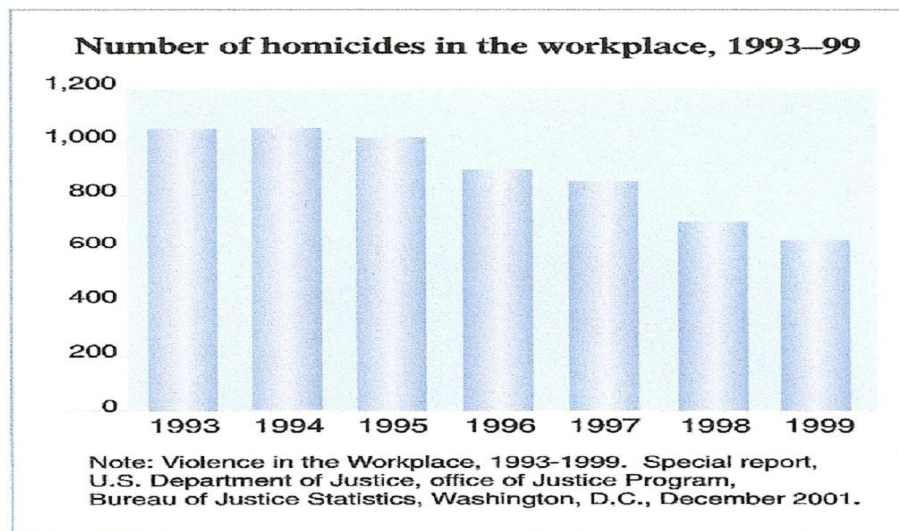


Figure 2: Homicides in the Workplace (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001).

It is not clear what the cause of this reduction was, but the government requirement that businesses provide education to their employees may have played a role. Statistics from 2000-2006 show that VITW has stopped falling (Department of Labor, 2006), and maintain its current level for the past six years. However, the current level is still unacceptably high.

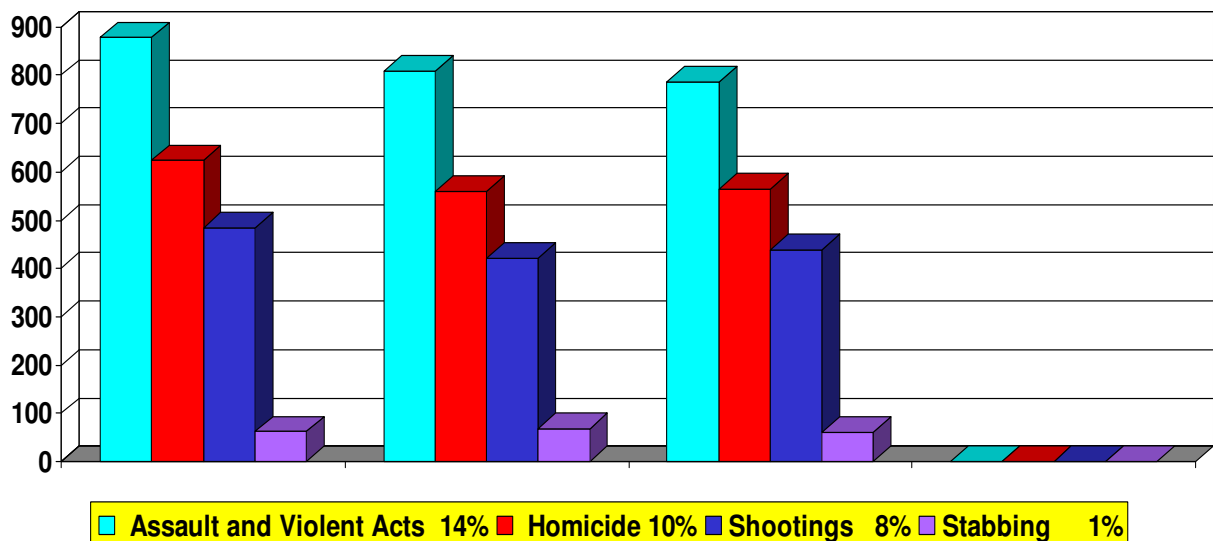


Figure 3: Assaults and Homicides in the Workplace — most recent statistics.

Yet, it appears that VITW is no longer a crisis in the eyes of the media or people in the workplace. Over the previous five years, there has also been minimal activity, very few publications, alternative methods, or general concern about VITW unless you include the deaths of military and civilians killed at work through terrorism.

The Federal Government Agency, Central of Disease Control (CDC) determined that Violence in the Workplace is an epidemic (NIOSHA, 1992). Researches and case studies were conducted by several academic and government agencies, through out the 1990's and up to 2005. Cases of VITW declined in the late 1990s (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001), and have been stable for the last six years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006).

These trends raise some questions. Was the initial decline observed in VITW due to government programs of awareness, prevention, and intervention? Is the subsequent leveling off in these declines due to the government mandated educational programs put in place and followed up by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) called Occupational Safety and Health Association (OSHA)? Have private and public companies introduced classes or publications on prevention and intervention of violence in the workplace that helped level off the past six years? The numbers are still high, an average of 600 people are killed every year by ex-employees, employees, customers, and strangers.

While researching these case studies through out the years of this epidemic, the results are available from Iowa University, Kansas State University, Ohio State University, the FBI, CDC, U.S. DOJ, U.S. DOL, OSHA, and NIOSHA. (There are more colleges of research not mentioned but have contributed to results and resolve with the issue of Violence in the Workplace). All of this research and implementation of avoiding VITW were due to \$11 million dollars of grants distributed by the U.S. Department of Labor.

There are some common factors that can be "red flagged" or identified by others in the workplace:

1. History of violence
2. Psychosis and/or projection
3. Romantic obsession
4. Chemical dependence
5. Depression
6. Pathological blame
7. Impaired neurology
8. Elevated frustration
9. Interest in weapons
10. Personality disorder.

This information was updated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 2006. There were a few additions made to the lists, behaviors that could be viewed as extensions from the original lists since 1990. The seriousness and public health threat of VITW is reflected in the involvement of the CDC.

The Federal Bureau of Investigations came up with the following list of things you do not do, "What does not work to prevent Violence in the Workplace?" (FBI 2006; NVAA, 1999):

1. One -size-fits- all approach
2. Rigidity, inflexibility
3. Denial of problems
4. Lack of communications
5. Lack of collaboration

6. Ignoring respect
7. Lack of clear written policy
8. Lack of careful evaluations of job applicants
9. Passing around “bad apples”
10. Lack of organization-wide commitment to safety.

Since Violence in the Workplace includes death or deaths, mass murder is considered a factor of Violence in the Workplace. Mass Murder is defined by the U.S. Bureau of Justice as “the murder of four or more victims usually by one person and most of the time at the same location” (Mass Murder, 2006).

Mass murderers also have different typologies (Fox & Levin, 1985):

1. Disciples – followers of such men as Charles Manson, David Koresh, or Jim Jones.
2. Annihilators – exhibit the most mental issues and usually have bursts of anger.
3. Disgruntle employee – are either former employees or about to be fired. They usually killed randomly.
4. Pseudo commando – these are people who talk about guns, gun collections and a large amount of artillery. Unlike the disgruntle employee, pseudo- commando’s carefully plan every move and are very mobile.
5. Set and Run- (its very definition seems to contradict their typology). These killers are not suicidal; they just want to kill as many people as possible in one space. To execute the crime, the killer will usually strap on explosives to themselves, yet they die because their objective is to kill as many people as he can?

Gathering primary data by interviewing managers of three businesses in three different industries (Government, Restaurant, and Big Box [Circuit City, Retail]) was one way to understand employers and employees views on violence in their workplace. Using three different views in three different industries seemed like a way to start the process of research on VITW. It could also show how decisions are made by the leaders of these companies, and an insight of how they view safety issues regarding their customers and their employees in the field. Also, part of the methodology includes a review of literature on the subject and presentation of secondary data.

Only two questions were asked during the interviews: Do you have a program for Violence in the Workplace? If the answer was “yes”, the second question was asked: How do you provide this information to your employees?

The first interview was with a manager at BAE Systems that works in a confidential department. The questions I asked were not ruled as classified information. Since government agencies were involved with setting programs and handbooks regarding VITW, spending millions of dollars in research and implementation of these programs what better place to start than with a contractor for the government. BAE Systems is a government contractor company. Employees are required by the company leaders to attend classes on VITW, prevention, and intervention. This would include everyone from janitors to the CEO to take the class. The government agencies require that employees of any companies they contract with (such as BAE Systems) must take classes on avoiding Violence in the Workplace (VITW). The reason the government is so strict is because some areas of these contractors deal with highly sensitive information. Also, he explained that the VITW classes are not part of the hiring process, but everyone eventually makes it to the class (S. Forte and V. Forte, 2006).

The second business interview was with the Longhorn Steakhouse restaurant. Longhorn is one of many affiliates of RARE Hospitality from Atlanta, GA. The employees of this company have many

contacts with their customers. The phone interview was conducted with L. Martin, the company's co-owner of one location in Nashua, NH. Yet, they conform to the core company's policy on VITW and procedures. Mr. Martin explained that the company he works for has a zero tolerance for Violence in the Workplace, but they do not provide any VITW classes to employees. However, the VITW subject is covered as part of their hiring process, and covered in detail in the company handbook (sections on policies and procedures) that is distributed during orientation. Longhorn will not accept threats or physical violence by employees on company property. Mr. Martin and his staff have never had a threat or confrontation with a customer in his 20-year service (S. Forte and L. Martin, 2006).

The third company interviewed was Circuit City, a Big Box Retail Company, located in Nashua, NH. Asking to speak to the manager in-charge, Chrissy (last name unknown) approached the service desk. The first question was: Did she have a few minutes to answer two questions? I explained the research goals and why it was important to speak to company leaders on the subject of Violence in the Workplace, Circuit City, and their policy and procedures on the subject. Chrissy's response was: "She has never heard of any type of classes, pamphlets, or orientation reviewing steps they can take in a violent situation with staff or customers." She apologized for her inability to respond to the questions, but gave the corporate phone number. Having tried to reach anyone who might have information on their VITW policies, there was only a brick wall. As of Saturday, September 9, 2006, there were no responses from any department of the Circuit City's corporate office.

Addressing the same issues of workplace violence, I received three different responses from these interviews, which had a scientific uncertainty. This data does not reflect business policies of all restaurants, government contractors, and Big Box retail companies nationwide. However, the interviews unveiled different VITW training approaches. Only one interview data was concurred with the information cited in the research sources regarding government policies and classes on Violence in the Workplace.

3 The Blame Game

We have to start somewhere when it comes to the inevitable blame game. The Human Resource departments (HR) were typically blamed for the problem of VITW because they were responsible for hiring these employees (NVAA, 1999), (Elliott and Jarrett, 1994). However, the HR departments pass the buck to management, because it is their fault that they did not provide the necessary tools to screen for risk factors with job applicants. Managers, in return, blamed the government for not making them aware that VITW was an epidemic (Fletcher, 2004), (Henneman, 2006). The FBI said this was the responsibility of the U.S. Department of Labor, and the DOL said it was the responsibility of OSHA (U.S. DOL, 2006). We could explore every avenue of every government agency, academic researchers, and private companies, and still find variations of how to pinpoint the danger of an employee unless they have made threats already.

As we have already established earlier, the Federal Government employees are mandated to attend classes on VITW. Employees of companies that contract for government agencies must also go through a program.

Some managers and business leaders in the public and private sectors believe that this problem has been blown way out of proportion (Walton, 2004). Such an attitude puts a company at financial risk with cost rising to 36 billion dollars a year, which is average of \$3 million dollars a settlement (ASSURE, 2005).

Further, all business leaders have a moral obligation to create a safe environment for their employees. They also have a legal responsibility to keep their staff reasonably safe (DOL OSHA, 2006). Employers can be better prepared by educating themselves and their staff by recognizing behavioral signs and risk factors. They can hire assistants from an outside consulting agency (D. Grimme and S. Grimme, 2001).

Business leaders have to make the changes. It is their responsibility to educate all their employees no matter what the cost. During the interviewing process for this research paper, some leaders reported that they believed they were doing what they could to prevent VITW, but nothing pro-active or a contingency plan is in order. Awareness, prevention and intervention have saved lives (NVAA, 1999).

Millions of dollars have been invested in research on VITW prevention and intervention programs for government and public and private businesses since 1993 to the present. Everyone involved in putting education programs into effect had very similar ideas of what to teach, who should be responsible, and what attributes to look for. Handbooks on VITW for government employees are available through OSHA upon requests. OSHA offers free pamphlets and training tapes to assist companies with VITW education, and they follow-up at companies that do not have OSHA posters hanging or a log-book keeping track of any incidents. OSHA inspectors also requests business' plan books for prevention and intervention of emergency situations (NIOSH, 2004). This publication, *Profiling the Lethal Employee: Case Studies of Violence in the Workplace*, was written to show that prevention and intervention through education has been helpful, and awareness to the issue is now just a normal thought process (Kelleher, 1997). However, it is business leaders that are essentially responsible. Ignoring the issues does not make them go away (Henneman, 2006).

There is a quote that begins each chapter of the book, *Profiling the Lethal Employee: Case Studies of Violence in the Workplace* (Kelleher, 1997, p. 127), particularly this one, which is worth mentioning, because it applies in so many ways we approach problems:

“Every time history repeats itself the price goes up,” — anonymous.

If this quote ever applied to the activities of our time this would be it. The book concludes that we are no closer to a definitive answer in 2006 than when the first recorded mass murder took place by a lone gunman back in the 1980s (Kelleher, 1997).

Tooling up Human Resources is a positive way to start addressing the problem of VITW, including better employee screening tools. Managers should update safety and security by adding better lighting for staff that arrive or leave work after dark. Managers should have zero tolerance for any type of verbal or physical threats or abuse. Installing better monitoring systems, employees will start to pay attention to the atmosphere around them and report any observed strange behavior from employees, their managers, or customers that might compromise their safety (Castillo and Jenkins, 1994).

Violence in the Workplace has remained unchanged for six straight years. No one really understands why this stagnation is taking place, but the numbers are still too high to be complacent. Research on VITW by government agencies and the public sector has also leveled off. The FBI's new priorities reflect this trend. The CIA, DOJ, and high-level government officials have altered their attention, too.

4 Restrictions

Academic research for Violence in the Workplace has had some restrictions when fully examining this subject. Time was one of the most restrictive to this research. Little time does not allow for primary research results. Secondary resources were used instead. Statistical information was used from other legitimate resources. Answers to questions could not be broken down from studies and results of other researches. Some organizations, such as OSHA, can account and publish statistics for government agencies because they have access to the information. All government and government subsidy employees are required to take classes on Awareness, Prevention and Intervention for Violence in the Workplace. However, OSHA can only recommend company CEO's or managers to educate their staff. There is no way at this time to break down the violence or death that occurs in the workplace due to unaccounted private or public company policies.

5 Recommendation

There are recommendations to further study the factors of why violence and death in the workplace is still about 600 a year. In the future research, a research team of psychologists and criminologists should be involved to create a way of doing a Primary Research Thesis that is fair, impartial, thorough, and equal to the U.S. population of businesses in public and private sectors. The breakdown of the private companies and their policies on Violence in the Workplace will need innovation and creative means to be as accurate as possible.

The outcome of further research could accomplish improvements at the workplace itself. New in-depth research into a safe and better workplace may be worth the time and effort it will take. It would be beneficial to the workplace if we instituted new ideas for decreasing workplace violence.

6 Conclusion

Almost every researcher or government agency that has been named in this paper has come to a resolution on how we begin the process of reducing and rid our workplaces from violence and death. Education on three major factors (Awareness, Prevention, and Intervention) has saved lives, and it could be better if everyone (especially in the service industry) were informed and have a plan in place at work. Since research cannot conclude anyone as the one to carryout such massacres in the workplace or when, then we have to rely on preparation.

Based on the minimal yearly statistics of 600 deaths a year at the workplace over the past 14 years, (1993- 2005), we could conclude that 8,400 deaths have occurred by individual mass murderers in the workplace. One may concede that the individual killer and their victims is still a high priority that needs to add more changes to workplace safety plans.

It is understandable why the government is focused on new threats that could kill thousands at their workplace in a matter of hours; as we observed on September 11, 2001 terrorists attack. There were total approximately 3,168 deaths in the workplace during the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, where 168 civilians were killed at work, and the 9/11 attacks. The terrorists, Timothy McVeigh in Oklahoma Bombing and Osama Bin Laden in the 9/11/2001 attack, can not be considered on the same level of mass murder as individual murderers at the workplace. Terrorist attacks were designed to attack the United States as one entity. There is not one victim of these horrific acts that is irrelevant no matter who was working and where they were working when evil struck.

It appears that the government and academic programs put into place had a positive response to Awareness, Prevention and Intervention education; however, more attention is needed on this issue.

Victims of death in the workplace are a subject brought to light, but only to those who are looking at this issue. Employee vulnerability will always be a threat to companies, unless they enter work each morning and see actual procedures in place to help make them feel safe.

Innovation and inspiration is needed before another mass murder occurs. Since Violence in the Workplace is a U.S. epidemic, why do we have to wait for a sick-minded individual to create havoc in the business environment? There are ways to prevent VITW, e.g., to spend the money and purchase the equipment that would keep weapons from coming in. Also, there are other ways of prevention and intervention for the short term. Though the numbers of deaths in the workplace has been reduced, it is evident that more focus, more money, more awareness of the dangers in the workplace, and new technical and educational programs need to be implemented.

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* **SUZANNE FORTE** is a recent graduate of Rivier's new Accelerated Executive MBA Program in Organizational Leadership in October 2006. Sue was born in Connecticut. She earned her undergraduate degree in Political Science at the University of Colorado in 1994, while managing a Comedy Club in Denver, CO. Sue returned to New England from San Diego in 2003. Here she chooses to return to college and broad her opportunities in other industries with a higher degree. Relocating to Florida, where her family resided, she began her career as a manager of a Ten-Plex movie theatre by accident. Sue was promoted within a year to general manager of Vero Beach 12 Plex. During her career as a General Manager she relocated to eleven different cities to troubleshoot weak theatres and then to oversee the openings of new 18-22 Mega-Plex Cinemas. The education in business from her position with the theatre companies was priceless. Her last relocation was back to New Hampshire, where her family relocated once again. Sue joined her son and daughter in entering college together. Her son graduated from the University of New Hampshire, Manchester, in journalism. Her daughter graduated from the University of New Hampshire, Manchester, in special education. Sue and her family are currently making career choices where they can best serve our communities and enjoy beginning a new.