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# Dealing With Workplace Violence in Georgia's Cities and Counties

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## Abstract

*Using the fears of workplace violence expressed by public employees as a reference point, this analysis examines the responses of city and county governments in the State of Georgia to the threat of external and internal violence. As a preliminary assessment of the responsiveness of city and county governments to the problem of workplace violence, officials in Georgia local governments with populations of 50,000 or higher were asked about both their perceptions of the threat and the specific actions taken by their governments to address it. While personal concerns and preparations were described, few officials indicated that their governments have formulated policies and implemented programs to address the problem. High percentages of officials, however, indicated that they expect more violence on a scale similar to the Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City and that public employees are at greater risk than private sector employees.*

## Introduction

Workplace violence is a growing hazard in public and private organizations in the U.S. or, at least, that is the perception of public employers and their employees. While the general perception is that the risk is increasing, the extent of the problem is difficult to gauge (*Nigro and Waugh, 1996*). Notwithstanding the lack of accurate measures of the overall problem, the anecdotal evidence and the statistical evidence pertaining to some forms of violence indicate that the problem is widespread and, while perhaps not growing, having an effect on the sense of security and the productivity of public employees (*see, e.g., Taylor, 1995*).

Public employees and employers are certainly feeling at risk. For example, when it became apparent that a new federal office complex in downtown Atlanta would be funded and the process began to identify which agencies would be relocated from offices scattered around the city, a few affected employees publicly expressed opposition to the moves. Many more

voiced their concerns privately. The complaints by employees of USFS, whose offices were located in the upscale Midtown section of Atlanta, reflected the widespread concern among federal employees. Aside from more mundane issues (albeit serious on a personal level), such as anticipated problems parking in the downtown business district, specific concerns were raised about the threat of street crime and a concentration of federal offices that might attract political terrorists. Atlanta's reputation for violent crime, whether deserved or not, was a factor mentioned by many opposed to the moves. The bombing of the Murrah Federal Office Building in Oklahoma City was also a fresh memory and concerns were raised about the concentration of workers in a single building might be an inviting target for bombers.

Although the number of incidences of terrorism has been declining in the U.S. over the last several years (*U.S. Department of Energy, 1997, p. 2*), the Oklahoma City bombing and other rumored and real threats to government personnel and facilities have clearly affected the planned moves in Atlanta. Recent bombings in the city also have had their impact. As a result, federal authorities have chosen to keep some agencies out of the complex because they might attract anti-government terrorists and/or jeopardize the capacities of law enforcement and emergency management agencies to respond to such events. Evacuation plans were also implemented and tested soon after the building was occupied, although that would be a normal exercise for new building security.

Federal employees in Atlanta clearly are not alone in their fear of criminal and political violence. Government buildings are frequently used to anchor economic development projects in deteriorating downtown business districts, exposing public employees to higher levels of street crime. The new Federal Center in Atlanta was built on the site of one of the city's oldest department stores and in an area, although adjacent to Underground Atlanta, which has suffered economic and physical decay. Although a revitalization is underway, with nearby buildings being filled with state offices, including Georgia State University (GSU), the recovery has been slow. GSU faculty and staff affected by the expansion into buildings relatively far from the center of campus are increasingly expressing concern about safety in and around the buildings and between the buildings and available parking areas. The university administration has moved its police headquarters closer to the new facilities and downplays security concerns in its planning documents and communications with

faculty, staff, and students, while discussing the feasibility of key systems to secure more campus buildings.

Heightened building security is becoming a familiar process in many urban and suburban public buildings as school officials use metal detectors to prevent students from bringing weapons onto campuses, surveillance cameras to monitor hallways and school yards, surprise locker checks to find weapons and drugs, and conflict management training to reduce tension and aggressive behavior among students. The reports of assaults, murders, and other violence and the implementation of security programs in high schools, government offices, university campuses and other public workplaces would seem to indicate increased risk of workplace violence. But, hard data has been lacking.

Whether public employees, their clients, and their families are at more risk now than in the past is uncertain. Certainly, they feel more at risk and that sense of insecurity may well have an impact on the mental health of the workers, their productivity, and their relationships with coworkers, superiors, clients, families, and the general public (*Nigro and Waugh, 1996*). That is the context within which this study was conducted. Using data from a survey of Georgia city and county officials in jurisdictions of 50,000 or greater population, this analysis focuses on the responses of local governments to the threat of workplace violence, in terms of policies and programs to reduce the risk or to address the effects of violence, and the perceptions of local officials of the threat in general and the risk to themselves in particular.

### **The Threat of Workplace Violence**

The seriousness of the threat of workplace violence is difficult to judge under the best of circumstances. While there is a growing awareness of the hazard and its many forms, empirical evidence to document the risk is fragmented, incomplete, and often misleading. Data from death certificates, the FBI's Uniform Crime Data, the Bureau of Crime Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey, worker's compensation claims, and victim compensation claims do not necessarily identify causes or location of death and generally provide poor measures of injuries sustained because of workplace violence and poor coverage of violence short of murder. Reports of political terrorism against government personnel and facilities, too, are largely anecdotal. The evidence of planned, or more correctly "allegedly planned," attacks indicates that bombings are the preferred modus operandi

of anti-government groups and that such groups do have the capacities to carry out nuclear, biological, and chemical attacks on large numbers of people, consequently it is reasonable to assume that large scale attacks are both feasible and perhaps likely (*see, e.g., U.S. Department of Energy, 1997*).

While the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has identified the occupation groups with the greatest risk of violent death on the job and identified risk factors (*see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993, pp. 2-4*), that information describes the general hazard of workplace violence rather than the specific hazards faced by public employees in urban areas and other locations. Data from NIOSH's National Traumatic Occupational Fatality surveillance system indicated that homicide was the leading cause of death for women in the workplace between 1980 and 1985, with over 50 percent of the casualties being women in the South and black women being twice as likely to be killed than white women (*Bell, 1991*). The statistics generally indicate that workplace violence is a significant problem for public and private organizations and certainly for women in those workplaces.

NIOSH has issued general guidelines for reducing the risk of workplace violence and guidelines have been developed by a variety of other agencies, including the State of New Jersey's Department of Personnel (*1996*) and the Federal Protective Service (*1996*). NIOSH prescribes a comprehensive, formal program to assess risk, identify potentially violent employees and situations, assess vulnerability, monitor and investigate complaints, provide training to reduce the risk and address its effects, and provide clear management and organizational support for the program.

While data on local government workplace violence programs has not been available, a 1996 study of state government policies indicates that only a few states have comprehensive policies and programs, as recommended by NIOSH, to address the problem. California, for example, has a clear policy statement, a delineation of prohibited activities, complaint procedures, and education and training programs, but lacks a schedule of penalties for workplace violence. No other state met even one of the NIOSH standards for comprehensive policies (*Bowman and Zigmond, 1996*).

Similarly, there has been little hard data on workplace violence in America's cities and counties and relatively little information on how the

problem is being addressed, if at all. How local officials perceive the threat and how their governments are addressing it is the focus of this study.

### **Methodology**

During February and March of 1997, questionnaires were mailed to the chief executive officers (or equivalent) in the thirty-eight city, county, and combined city-county governments in the state of Georgia with populations of 50,000 or higher. The questionnaires addressed human resource issues to determine whether the nature of the civil service system or recent changes in the status or job security of employees had changed, whether the government has a workplace violence policy and (if so) what is its nature, and whether the officials perceived workplace violence as a serious problem in their governments. Twenty-three or 60.5 percent of the questionnaires were returned.

An analysis of the nonresponses does not indicate biases in terms of regions of the state, city or county size, or demographic factors. Small counties and cities, with populations under 50,000, were not included in the study because there was little expectation that they would either have significant workplace violence problems or policies to address such problems.

The respondents included officials in four Georgia cities or city/county combined governments and nineteen counties. The number of full-time employees ranged from approximately 200 to 5800 with the median being approximately 600. Most of the county officials who responded were from suburban areas, but the selection of jurisdictions with 50,000 or more inhabitants largely dictated that they would contain or be close to a sizable urban area. Most of the city officials who responded were also from suburban locations, rather than central cities, and the implications of that bias will be examined in the concluding analysis. It was also apparent that some of the CEOs passed along the questionnaires to their personnel directors, particularly in the larger jurisdictions, and the implications of that change in respondents will be addressed in the conclusion, as well.

### **Analysis**

There were a number of expectations concerning the threat of violence that guided the design of the survey instrument. There was no presumption that the risk of workplace violence is greater for public employees located in urban areas than for those located in more rural areas. Indeed, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the risk to forest rangers, law enforcement personnel, and other public employees working in more isolated locales is increasing and the reporting of incidents is not systematic enough to afford a reasonable estimate of the overall level of violence. Declining crime rates in urban areas also suggest that the levels of workplace violence may actually be decreasing for the public employees located in inner cities, although hard data on incidences of workplace violence in these areas are elusive, as well.

In general terms, the expectations were that the perceptions of risk from workplace violence would be greater for public officials (1) in larger cities and counties; (2) when crime rates are perceived to be higher; (3) when the levels of professionalization and customer orientation in the government are lower; (4) when the workforce is more diverse; (5) when there have been recent reductions in force, pay or benefit freezes, and/or privatization of government services; (6) when there are problems with facility security; and (7) when the government has not adequately addressed the problems of drug and alcohol abuse and workers' family and personal difficulties. The adoption of workplace violence programs was expected to be related to triggering events (such as high profile homicides or assaults), political support for one or more of the forms of workplace violence (such as family violence), or the leadership of one or several concerned officials in putting the issue on the public agenda.

The data did not support most of those expectations. There was no apparent connection between the perception of crime rates in the community and assessment of the seriousness of the threat of workplace violence. Only two officials characterized their communities as having high crime rates and in both cases their governments have not adopted policies to address the issue of workplace violence. The jurisdictions with workplace violence policies, however, did tend to be located within the largest urban area, the Atlanta metropolitan region. Given when the policies were adopted, it is uncertain what encouraged the governments to consider workplace violence to be a significant problem. None of the respondents indicated that their governments had one or more cases of workplace homicide during the past five years. None had experienced a high profile

case, a triggering event, that might raise concerns about the lack of a policy or the potential for legal liability for failure to prepare for possible violence.

Only four officials indicated that their governments have written policies on workplace violence, one adopted in 1982, one in 1987, one in 1992, and one not specified. Judging from the responses, there is considerable variance in the implementation of programs under the workplace violence policies. Two indicated that their governments had implemented such programs, one said his or her government had not implemented programs but described training programs to address the issue, and one indicated that his or her government had a policy but no implementing programs. To the extent that other respondents indicated that their governments have policies to deal with violence-related problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse (see Table 1), the problem is being addressed in local governments even if there is no clearly identified "workplace violence policy."

The explanation for the small number of jurisdictions with specific workplace violence policies and programs can be found in Table 2. As the data indicate, the major reasons for not having a workplace violence policy are that there has never been such a problem (73.7 percent) and that other personnel policies adequately cover situations that might give rise to violence (47.4 percent). One respondent indicated that his or her government had no policy because no money had been allocated to support such a policy, but did not suggest that workplace violence programs may be too costly.

As Table 3 indicates, in five jurisdictions the person taking the lead in advocating a workplace violence policy was the director of human resources, rather than an elected official. In one jurisdiction, an employee group or association also took the lead in advocating such a policy. There were more responses concerning the lead advocate than there were jurisdictions with workplace violence policies, so, evidently, some of the advocates have not been successful in encouraging the adoption of a policy.

Table 4 offers a list of the forms of workplace violence and indicates that the three jurisdictions with programs to implement their workplace violence policies tend to focus on violence by clients, employees, and their families or intimates. The raw frequencies do indicate that terrorism, street crime or intruder violence, and inmate violence are not typically included in such programs. Table 5 indicates the responsible office or official with the



department of human resources being the lead in all three cases, with the emergency management office offering support in one jurisdiction. The supporting role of the emergency management office was noted on that questionnaire. In other words, the pattern appears consistent in terms of the human resource director or office most frequently being the lead advocate for workplace violence programs and the responsible administrative agency.

Table 6 includes the components of a comprehensive workplace violence program as recommended by NIOSH and other agencies. Few of the governments have such programs in place and none has adopted the kind of comprehensive program that the U.S. Postal Service (*see, e.g., Johnson, 1995*) and other agencies have implemented in recent years. All three of the jurisdictions with workplace violence programs seem to emphasize conflict management training and a "zero tolerance" for violent behavior. The other cited components include the more traditional employee assistance programs, worker safety, facility security, psychological counseling for victims, risk analysis, complaint handling, and information gathering. One jurisdiction, too, indicated that the personnel department has coordinated its efforts with the local emergency management office.

As Table 7 indicates, most of the officials in jurisdictions with workplace violence programs do feel that their programs have been effective in reducing employee concern and anxiety about the risk of workplace violence and in reducing the exposure to known risks. Just how effective they have been in reducing the actual levels of violence is uncertain. Logically, officials would feel that their programs are somewhat effective, but the small number of jurisdictions with programs makes it difficult to draw any conclusions from this set of responses.

The responses to the questions regarding personal perceptions of the threat of workplace violence were the most telling. Officials were asked to rate the problem on a 10-point scale, from "no problem" (1) to "somewhat of a problem" (5) and "a very serious problem" (10). Only eight respondents registered their assessments of the threat in their own jurisdictions. The responses ranged from 2 to 5 with only two indicating that workplace violence was "somewhat of a problem" or 5 on the scale. In terms of whether the problem has grown over the past ten years, only 9.5 percent indicated that it is more of a problem now and 71.4 percent indicated that it is not more of a problem now (with 19.0 percent being uncertain).

When asked to rate the dangers posed by different people and groups, officials judged all the dangers relatively low. In fact, the data in Table 8 follows much the same pattern as that in Table 4. Officials judge that the greatest dangers are posed by customers and employees. Only one official gave a "high" danger rating to an group, inmates or patients.

Table 9 indicates that only 8.7 percent of the officials have felt in personal danger of assault in the workplace, but almost one-third have actually been threatened. Understandably, there is a high correlation between being assaulted and/or threatened and having a personal plan to deal with workplace violence. Three-fifths of the officials have personal plans, including six of seven of those who have been threatened and both of those who have felt in danger, and over half have informally discussed how to handle workplace violence with their coworkers.

The responses regarding the Oklahoma City bombing, future attacks on public employees and facilities, and the risk to public employees compared to private sector employees are even more disturbing. Over three-quarters of the officials feel that they have increased concern about workplace violence because of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building, over four-fifths expect that there will be similar attacks in the future, and almost two-thirds feel that public employees are in more danger than private sector employees today. Few of the officials indicated that their governments had received assistance in dealing with the problem from the federal government or the Georgia state government, however.

The officials were also asked what more their governments might do to reduce employee concern, lower risk, and reduce actual levels of violence? The recommendations ranged from increasing building or facility security to increasing training of employees on how to recognize and handle dangerous situations. One official indicated that his or her jurisdiction had purchased an expensive security system, but had not allocated money to operate the equipment. Another mentioned needing more leeway to terminate employees who use or threaten violence.

## **Conclusions**

On the whole, few city and county officials in Georgia feel that workplace violence is a serious problem and few governments have adopted policies and implemented programs to address the issue. For the most part, workplace violence is viewed as a human resource issue to be dealt with by

personnel departments. The decided focus is on violence by employees and customers, with some attention to threats from family members and other known individuals. Threats from criminal intruders, terrorists, and other outsiders, other than family members, are generally discounted. No jurisdiction has adopted NIOSH's recommended comprehensive program and very few have adopted any of its elements.

The principal impetus for workplace violence policies and programs appears to be concern about the issue among human resource or personnel directors. The most compelling evidence of the impact of workplace violence on public employees can be found in the last table. Personal experience with workplace violence or its threat is clearly having an impact on local government officials. Those who have been threatened or felt in danger develop personal plans to escape or reduce the risk and tend to discuss plans to handle violent incidents with others in their workplaces. In short, the fear of violence is encouraging action to reduce the threat, but, thus far, that action has largely been on an individual level. Of the four officials indicating that their jurisdictions have workplace violence policies or programs, only one has felt in personal danger and has actually been threatened. Personal experience with workplace violence has evidently not yet been translated into formal policies and programs.

Most disturbing is the expectation that public employees and employers will face more deadly attacks in the next five years. The fact that local officials in Georgia also feel that public employees are more threatened than private sector employees suggests some internalization of the Murrah bombing experience and may also reflect concern about verbal attacks on the public service over the past several decades. There appears to be a significant sense of exposure.

Can one generalize from the Georgia data to all American cities and counties? The short answer is "no" in terms of the adoption of formal policies. Despite the evidence that there are few well-developed policies at the state level (*e.g.*, *Bowman and Zigmond, 1996*) and few at the local level in Georgia, there are indications that much larger percentages of local governments in some states, such as Florida, have adopted workplace violence policies and implemented programs. However, it is likely that one can generalize about the state of mind of local officials in other parts of the U.S. regarding workplace violence. The expectation of more large-scale violence is commonly held. To the extent that many of the questionnaires sent to local government CEOs in Georgia were passed on to personnel

directors, this analysis may be tapping a group of officials already somewhat sensitive to the issue, but not necessarily in positions to propose special workplace violence programs. Clearly, the respondents are concerned enough about the issue themselves to develop personal plans to reduce the level of risk and expect that even more large-scale violence will occur in the near future. Whether formal policies will result from that concern, and before there are more Oklahoma City-type disasters, is uncertain. It is likely nonetheless that the incidence of workplace violence will continue to increase and, as more officials feel threatened, policies will be adopted. High profile events and personal crises may speed that process in some jurisdictions.

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**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Government Administration**  
**(in percentages)**

Characteristic	%
Strong merit system	80.9
Diverse workforce	90.9
Reduction(s) in force over the last 5 years	43.5
Reduction(s) in employee pay and/or benefits during the past five years	4.3
Freeze(s) of employee pay and/or benefits during the past five years	34.8
Good security for its facilities	59.1
Effective policies and procedures dealing with drug and alcohol abuse by employees	100
Many facilities and buildings located in high crime areas	13.0
Increasing use of private contractors to deliver public services	21.7

**Table 2**  
**Reasons for No Workplace Violence Policy**  
**(in percentages)**

Reasons	% Yes
Workplace violence really has never been a problem	73.7
Exposure of employees to workplace violence is really too low to worry about	15.8

Costs of implementing such a policy are seen to be too high in light of projected benefits	0.0
Organized labor has opposed such a policy	0.0
Workplace violence is generally seen as a law enforcement problem, not a management problem	5.3
Nobody has ever suggested that a workplace violence policy is needed	21.0
Existing personnel rules and regulations are considered adequate to handle workplace violence	47.4

Table 3

**Lead Official or Office in Promoting the  
Adoption of Workplace Violence Policy**

**(multiple responses were permitted)**

Official or Group	Lead
Chief Executive Officer	0
Legal Counsel	0
Director of Human Resources/Personnel	5
Other elected Official(s)	0
Employee Group(s) and/or Association(s)	1
Employee Labor Union(s)	0
Community Group(s)	0

**Table 4**  
**Types of Violence Covered by**  
**Workplace Violence Program**  
**(n=3)**

Threat	N
Violence by Terrorists	0
Violence by Clients	2
Violence by Employee	2
Violence by Intruders	0
Violence by Family Members and/or Intimates of Employees	2
Violence Against Women	1
Violence Related to Drugs and/or Alcohol Abuse	2
Violence by Prisoners or Other Institutionalized Persons	0
Violence Related to Family and/or Personal Problems	1
Violence Related to Disciplinary Actions and/or Processes	2
Other	0



**Table 5**  
**Government Office with Lead Responsibility**  
**for Workplace Violence Program**  
**(in percentages, n=3)**

Office	Yes
Office of the CEO	0
Department of Human Resources or Personnel	100
A Joint Management-Labor Committee	0
Emergency Management Office	*
Other city or county unit	0

\* Denotes secondary mention of the emergency management office.

**Table 6**  
**Major Components of**  
**Workplace Violence Program (N=3)**

Components	N
Worksite Security Analysis to find existing or potential violence hazards	1
Analysis of Personnel Records to identify workplace violence trends	0
Establishment of a Threat Assessment Team, task force, or coordinator to assess vulnerability and to determine appropriate preventive actions	0
An established procedure for workplace violence-related complaints by employees	2
A clearly specified procedure for investigating reports of workplace violence	1

Conflict management and resolution training for supervisors	3
Mandatory employee training in emergency procedures and response	0
An information system for accurately documenting episodes of workplace violence	1
Medical and psychological counseling and debriefing for employees experiencing or witnessing assaults and other violent incidents	2
An explicit statement of high level management concern about workplace violence and commitment to protect the safety and health of workers and customers	0
Clear assignment of responsibilities for various aspects of the workplace violence program and its administration	0
Worker safety and/or health teams	1
"Target-hardening," such as security guards, locks and protective enclosures, and surveillance equipment	1
Post-incident response plans	0
An Employee Assistance Office or Program (EAP) to address problems that might lead to violence	2
Liaison with agencies of other governments (local, state, or federal) to deal with workplace violence concerns	0
A "zero tolerance" of workplace violence policy	3
Provision for regular program evaluation by top management	0
Broad dissemination of information on workplace violence and the city's or county's prevention and response policies and programs	0

Coordination with emergency management/disaster response offices and personnel	1
Merger of the workplace violence program with the city or county emergency management and disaster response program	1

**Table 7**  
**Perceived Effectiveness of**  
**Workplace Violence Program**

(in percentages, n=4)

	Highly Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Don't Know
Alleviating employee concern and anxiety about being targets of violence	25	25	0	50
Reducing exposure to known risk factors	0	50	0	50
Reducing actual levels of workplace violence in the city or county government	0	25	0	75

**Table 8**  
**Sources of Danger to Employees**  
**(in percentages, n=22)**

Violence By	Level of Risk:		
	High	Medium	Low
Coworkers	0	18.1	81.8
Clients and/or customers	0	27.3	72.7
Strangers	0	22.7	77.3
Former employees	0	31.8	68.2
Inmates or patients	4.8	23.8	71.4
Domestic terrorists	0	9.0	90.9
International terrorists	0	4.5	95.4
Intimates or relatives	0	22.7	77.3

**Table 9**  
**Personal Concerns about Workplace Violence**  
**(in percentages, n=23)**

Questions	% Yes	Indicating
Have you personally felt in immediate danger of attack or assault?	8.7	
Have you personally been threatened?	30.4	
Have you personally been assaulted?	0.0	
Have you personally been injured as a result of workplace violence?	0.0	
Do you have a personal plan for dealing with threatened or actual violence in your workplace?	60.9	
Have you informally discussed with others in your workplace how to handle violent clients, coworkers, or outsiders?	56.5	
Has the Oklahoma City federal building bombing increased your interest in and personal concern about workplace violence in your city or county?	76.2	
Do you think that similar attacks on public facilities may occur in the next five years?	81.0	
Do you think that public employees in the United States are in more danger from workplace violence than private sector employees today?	65.2	
Has your jurisdiction received adequate assistance to deal with workplace violence from:		
The Federal government?	4.5	
The State government?	9.1	