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A Publication of the Workers Health & Safety Centre

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Timely news bulletins
for all concerned with
safer, healthier work

Workplace bullying survey finds high level of non-compliance



A recent survey of almost 1,900 Canadians revealed many employers are ignoring reported incidents of workplace bullying.

A [random phone survey](#), conducted in October, 2018 by polling firm Forum Research, found more than half of Canadians say they, a co-worker, or both have been bullied at work. For one in four of these bullied workers, they **faced it on a daily basis**. Another one in

four reported facing bullying behaviour once a week.

Only half of those bullied reported the incident to their employer. In these instances, it was reported **just one in three employers took action** to address the bullying. Equally troubling, three-quarters of those surveyed stated the person bullying them did not face any consequences after it was reported.

Those who identified as disabled or from the LGBT+ community reported even higher levels of bullying. Older workers experienced bullying more often than their younger counterparts.

On a positive note, in instances where the employer took action to end the bullying, two-thirds reported the actions were effective.

Worker health implications

Affected workers are suffering. Those bullied can experience feelings of helplessness, panic and anxiety. They can suffer with sleeplessness and loss of appetite. Over time, the stress associated with bullying can lead to more significant health impacts including **lowered self-esteem, depression** and cardiovascular illnesses.

Where bullying is ongoing, many go so far as to **quit their job** as they see no alternative.

Business and legal implications

Though hard to quantify, workplace bullying can also lead to toxic work environments **costing Canadian businesses billions of dollars** annually in

terms of turnover, absenteeism and reduced productivity.

Failure to respond to complaints of bullying or failing to take proactive preventive measures are placing employers in many Canadian jurisdictions in legal jeopardy. Here in Ontario, for instance, **employers must address the issue of bullying** or harassment.

Workplace harassment is clearly defined in Ontario's *Occupational Health & Safety Act (OHSA)* as "engaging in a course of vexatious comment or conduct against a worker in a workplace that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome." This might include insulting or intimidating conduct or comments, hostile actions, **bullying or cyber-bullying** and the posting of offensive pictures. It often involves **repeated incidents or patterns of behaviour** intended to humiliate, degrade, threaten, intimidate and/or offend the victim(s).

Specific forms of bullying at work might involve teasing, spreading rumours, exclusion from meetings or social events and threats of violence. Other forms of bullying common to work might include micro-management, assignment of too little or too much work or otherwise undermining a person's work.

OHSA places **significant duties on employers**. Chief among these obligations is the requirement to [develop a workplace harassment policy \(in addition to a workplace violence policy\)](#). Employers must also [develop a harassment program](#), which includes measures and procedures for workers to report incidents and how they will be investigated and addressed. Unfortunately, unlike the violence program requirements, *OSHA* has no specific requirement for the prevention of harassment — an omission many health and safety activists say must be amended. Regardless, employers must also **provide all workers with information and instruction** on the content of the workplace harassment (and violence) policy and program.

Despite this legal requirement though, one-third of Ontarians surveyed believed their employer has no policies relating to bullying in the workplace. For those workplaces with policies, 26 per cent felt they were either not very, or not all effective. An additional 10 per cent were unsure about the effectiveness of bullying policies.

On the basis of these survey findings [and others](#), some are also suggesting it is time to develop a standard for workplace violence, harassment and bullying training, much in the way a standard was developed to combat worker injury and death from working at heights. In such a way, a minimum level of quality is ensured.

WHSC can help!

For our part, the Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) offers a range of [resources](#) and a three-hour [Workplace Violence and Harassment Prevention Training program](#) designed to help workplace parties better understand workplace violence, harassment and bullying and to fully comply with legal obligations. We also offer training programs to help employers meet the training and competency requirements for [supervisors](#), [joint committee members](#) and [worker health and safety representatives](#), who all play essential roles in the pursuit of healthier and safer workplaces.

For additional information about workplace harassment, bullying and violence training or related legal obligations, contact the WHSC and ask to speak with a training services representative.

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