Fevre, Ralph, Duncan Lewis, Amanda Robinson, and Trevor Jones. "Violence and Injury at Work." *Trouble at Work*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 80–102. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781849664677.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 15:09 UTC.

Copyright © Ralph Fevre, Duncan Lewis, Amanda Robinson & Trevor Jones 2012. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Violence and Injury at Work

In Chapter 3 we referred to the popular perception of a decline in civility and respect and the idea that, perhaps because it was a haven for rational behaviour, the workplace provided some protection against the worst effects of this decline. Despite the fact that, after peaking in the mid-1990s, violent crime in the United Kingdom has fallen back to the levels it was 30 years ago, incivility is often linked in people's minds with threatening behaviour which may spill over into casual and random violence of the type that is sometimes seen in city centres on Saturday nights. It is commonly understood that those working in the blue light services charged with keeping order in the streets, or dealing with the consequences of disorder, and others such as bus and taxi drivers, run the risk of becoming targets of this violence. There is, however, little concern about the extent of violence in other occupations. As before, expectations of rational behaviour in the workplace are assumed to provide some protection against a wider social problem.

The incidence of violence and injury in the workplace recorded in our survey certainly shows that violence was much less common than the other kinds of ill-treatment discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. We found that about 5 per cent of British employees experienced physical violence at work during the previous two years. Figure 2 on p. 33 shows the relative incidence of the three types of ill-treatment, and violence is represented as a much smaller circle in the Venn diagram than the circles for unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect. Nevertheless, our survey found that the overall level is considerably higher (about five times the rate) than that found in crime victimisation surveys such as the BCS.¹ The figure of 5 per cent is very similar to other large-scale studies of employees which produce estimates of 4–7 per cent.² Nevertheless, whilst these other studies of workplace behaviour, such as the FTWS, support the estimates of our study, it is the BCS that has been the main source of information utilised by official bodies such as the HSE when formulating policy responses to workplace violence. It is an important finding that the overall incidence of workplace violence is not as low as these policy responses assume, and significantly greater numbers of workers are affected by violence at work than has been previously recognised by the official agencies concerned with the issue.

We have discussed elsewhere the reasons why we believe that major differences have emerged between estimates of violence by studies of broader

workplace behaviours and those of crime victimisation surveys (Jones *et al.* 2011). We argued that respondents to the workplace surveys may feel less tied to formal legal categories when discussing violent behaviours. Consider, for example, the descriptions given by three of the 194 respondents to the survey who told us they had experienced violence in the workplace:

- I've had fingernails dug into my skin by patients who are probably infected. You do get grabbed and punched ... you get sworn at ... I've been bitten (a white female, aged over 50, working in health/social work).
- It was a teenager looking for trouble. She abused me verbally and physically ... I was unable to fight back as she was a woman. She caused damage to the fire alarm. It took four policemen to get her arrested (white female, aged 53, working in Other Community and Personal Services).
- Disagreement about a meeting and she hit me with a file (white female, aged 35–44, working in Education).

In only one of these cases is it clear that the respondent regarded the violence as a crime. As we discuss later in the chapter, it is quite possible that those who experience relatively serious physical assaults at work, for example, from patients or distressed relatives in social care settings, may be reluctant to label these as criminal (see Estrada *et al.* 2010). This is not to say, however, that the higher levels of violence reported in employee surveys are simply inflated by the inclusion of 'minor' types of violence, such as pushing and shoving. In fact, the rates of reported *injury* in our study – presumably reflecting something more serious than pushing and shoving – were higher than those reported in crime victimisation studies.

We found that 59 per cent of those reporting violence stated that they received 'injury in some way as a result of violence or aggression at work' (compared to 42 per cent in the most recent BCS). We did not specify, as we did for the experience of violence, that the violence concerned was 'physical violence'.³ What respondents considered an injury might range from minor to severe physical injuries, or they may have considered psychological harm or trauma as an injury and stated it as such. Thus 26 per cent of the respondents who reported sustaining injuries did *not* mention experiencing physical violence. In other words, some respondents took a broad interpretation of injury and felt they had been injured from some encounters which were aggressive but not necessarily violent. This group was largely accounted for by people who had experienced the more serious forms of incivility and disrespect, such as being shouted at, intimidating behaviour and feeling threatened.

Our data also suggests that the frequency with which physical violence is experienced at work is much higher than that suggested by crime victimisation

Figure 11 Violence at work is rarely a ‘one-off’

studies (see Figure 11). Just 27 per cent of those reporting violence stated that this was a ‘one-off’ (compared to 58 per cent in the most recent BCS). A substantial proportion of respondents (41 per cent) stated that it happened ‘now and then’, 13 per cent that it occurred monthly, and 7 per cent that it happened weekly. Perhaps most startling was the finding that 13 per cent of respondents reported that they experienced physical violence on a *daily* basis.

In the survey, the small group of respondents who reported ‘daily’ experience of workplace violence was a surprising finding, and so we considered a number of possible explanations for it. For example, we explored the possibility that some respondents – including these 25 (out of the total of 194 who confirmed that they had experienced some type of physical violence at work) – might have felt so disenchanted about their work that they responded ‘daily’ for all the negative acts presented to them without considering them individually. Further examination revealed that these respondents had not simply answered ‘daily’ to every question about ill-treatment, and as a group, they shared similar characteristics overall to the others who experienced violence. It is also worth noting that out of the 25 respondents reporting daily experience of physical violence, all but one reported that they had suffered injuries as a result, and 17 of the 25 said they were injured on a daily basis.

As indicated earlier, our survey did not capture the nature of the injury (psychological or physical, for example), nor its severity. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how people confronted with violence and aggression on a daily basis would not also be injured fairly regularly as well. The qualitative accounts from particular types of workers lend further credence to this finding. For example, we have already referred to the white woman (aged over 50) who experienced violence while working in health/social work. She was injured on a daily basis, resulting from ‘clients in a nursing home and hitting and punching us’.

Her work situation seemed particularly bad, given that she stated she also experienced being shouted at, being treated in a disrespectful or rude way, feeling threatened, and having insulting or offensive remarks made about her (all of these were also experienced on a daily basis!). However, she reported 'never' experiencing many of the other types of ill-treatment asked about on the survey, such as being continually checked upon or given an unmanageable workload. This lends credence to her answers and sheds some light on how particular workplaces can be especially toxic and problematic in certain ways.

At the outset of our research, we expected that many people would regard actual physical violence as the most serious end of the spectrum of harmful workplace behaviour. Yet we know from previous chapters that violence was not included in the top three types of ill-treatment in terms of producing the most negative impact on the victim, which were being given unmanageable deadlines, having opinions ignored and being shouted at. Only just over 1 per cent of our respondents reported experiencing actual physical violence at work as having the most impact (compared to the other forms of ill-treatment included in the survey). It is therefore obvious that the majority of those who experienced violence did not think it was the type of ill-treatment that had the greatest impact on them.

We noted in earlier chapters that respondents may have interpreted our very general question about impact in terms of the consequences of ill-treatment for people's feelings about their relationship with their employer and co-workers, and their feelings of self-respect. Ill-treatment which had less impact in this sense might have substantial effects of other kinds, but this does not seem to be the case in respect of workplace violence. In the FTWS, relatively low proportions of respondents reporting actual physical violence at work said that the impact was 'serious' across all of these dimensions. For example, only 11 and 15 per cent, respectively, reported 'serious' physical and psychological impact, and well over half those experiencing violence reported no physical or psychological impact at all. Perhaps surprisingly, other forms of ill-treatment were rated as having greater specific impacts on those who experienced them. For example, whilst the differences were not huge, higher proportions of those who had been humiliated or ridiculed in connection with their work reported that this caused 'serious' physical and psychological impact for them (14 and 19 per cent, respectively).

This highlights the importance of social context and the 'lived reality' of harmful behaviours in the workplace. As Waddington *et al.*'s (2005) study of workplace violence in a number of professions found, in some contexts verbal threats or harassment were regarded as far more upsetting and harmful than incidents of actual physical mistreatment. We also found some evidence for this in both our survey and in our case studies. For example, a white female (aged 25–34) who worked in education chose to recall 'being called a fat cow by a child' when we asked her to tell us about the most upsetting of her

experiences, even though she reported experiencing violence and injuries on a daily basis at work. In similar fashion, a Westshire employee said,

At least with physical you get a slap and it's gone. This needling, pick, pick, pick, pick, picking goes on and on and on. And if they're allowed to get away with it, like a child stealing sweets, they continue and then they steal a few more sweets. And then they steal a few more until they're stealing a box full of sweets, you know?

Of course, violence may have consequences for the organisations involved as well as the individuals. Whilst our case studies provided a small number of examples of workplace violence, those that did arise suggested that the organisational consequences could be serious although, just as with the impact on individuals, these consequences were probably no greater than the impact of the wider range of ill-treatments on the organisation concerned.

It was certainly the case that workers in 'flashpoint' areas in Westshire, and their managers, demonstrated that workplace violence had financial and managerial consequences in terms of days lost through sickness/injury (at the time of the research, two of the small security team were currently off sick with injuries received during the course of their duties). This clearly had immediate resource implications for the organisation, even before we consider the wider impact on attitudes to work and general well-being of the staff. However, as Chapter 7 (on Westshire) shows, it seems reasonable to argue that, worrying though reports of violence are, the most serious organisational consequences arise from the numerically greater incidences of non-physical bad behaviour in the workplace. The same argument could apply to Britscope, the other of our organisational case studies that gave rise to reports of physical violence. With regard to the other two organisations, Strand and Banco, reports of actual physical violence and injury were so rare that negative organisational consequences relating to bad behaviour at work were almost entirely to do with unreasonable treatment and denigration or disrespect (as discussed in previous chapters). It is worth bearing in mind, then, that most of the ill-treatment was perpetrated by managers, and comparatively little of it originated with clients or customers. It was therefore managers who were largely responsible for the organisational consequences of ill-treatment in the workplace.

The Venn diagram in Figure 2 on p. 33 depicting the interrelationship between the three types of ill-treatment shows the circle for violence firmly embedded in the other two circles, indicating that it is a significant, if less widespread, part of the more general story of ill-treatment. Our survey showed that it is rare indeed that violence happens in the absence of any other type of workplace problems (otherwise, in the Venn diagram, the violence circle would be orbiting the other two circles rather than firmly ensconced within them). In fact, we found that violence increased the likelihood of other ill-treatment items occurring to a statistically significant extent. Those reporting violence

Figure 12 Violence at work is usually perpetrated by non-employees

also reported rates of the other types of ill-treatment that were at least two, and often three or four, times as high (compared to those who had no experience of violence). The most striking differences were for these types of incivility and disrespect: ‘being insulted or having offensive remarks made about you’, ‘intimidating behaviour from people at work’ and ‘feeling threatened in any way while at work’.

Racial attacks and domestic violence often appear to be part of a broader pattern of harmful interactions that can include anything from relatively minor incivilities to harassment and threatening behaviour. Harm often stems from experiencing physical abuse alongside other types of encounters that are inherently emotionally damaging (Hanmer and Itzin 2000; Robinson 2010; Walby 2005). Similarly, research on racist victimisation has shown that it is better understood as a process rather than a series of discrete events, ‘with both “minor” abuse and incidents of physical violence interwoven in a pattern of harassment and intimidation’ (Bowling 1999; Phillips and Bowling 2007: 425). Thus, although physical ‘violence’ often seems the most significant of all encounters, we must not discount the pernicious effects of the combination of violence and other forms of abuse and ill-treatment.

Violence occurs along with unreasonable treatment as well as incivility and disrespect. This much is clear from Figure 2 but it also emerged in the bivariate comparison of violence with other types of ill-treatment. It was not

just in relation to incivility and disrespect that violence increased the likelihood of other forms of ill-treatment. Significant differences were observed for *every one* of the 20 comparisons, including all types of unreasonable treatment. Whatever continuities we can find between incivility and disrespect and violence and injury, continuities with unreasonable treatment suggest common *organisational* causes of both violence and ill-treatment (as suggested by Bowie; discussed in Chapter 1).

The overlap between employees' experience of violence and other types of ill-treatment had an unintended methodological benefit for our study. Because respondents who reported violence and/or injury at work *always* reported further ill-treatment, they *all* fell into the group we have been referring to as the troubled minority. Some of them reported injury through violence at work but every single one of those who reported violence or injury also reported one or more additional items from the list of ill-treatment. So, although they are fewer in number, we have more comprehensive information about the experiences of everyone who reported workplace violence or injury, and this includes information about the perpetrators of incidences of violence in the workplace.

Whereas, in Chapter 3, we were surprised that customers (or clients) were not a more important source of incivility and disrespect, our expectations were less wide of the mark in respect of violence. The perpetrators of violence were rarely fellow *employees* but instead *non-employees* such as clients, customers or members of the general public.⁴ More than three-quarters (79 per cent) of the violent incidents were perpetrated by these non-employees, with far fewer victims identifying employers⁵ (10 per cent), co-workers (8 per cent) or subordinates (3 per cent) (see Figure 12). This is in stark contrast to unreasonable treatment, and even incivility and disrespect, where the troublemakers were other *employees* of the same organisation, be they managers, co-workers or subordinates. This raises important questions about causal factors as well as about possible policy responses to such problems.

For example, it indicates the importance of understanding the nature of the job and the workplace when attempting to explain workplace violence. It is also methodologically significant as the survey data largely represent non-employee workplace violence, but when people chose to speak to us about their negative experiences at work in the qualitative interviews, violence was rarely recounted. When it was, people tended to tell us stories of recurring problems with certain individuals at work (often including features of unreasonable treatment or incivility and disrespect) which eventually escalated into a violent encounter. Thus, we must remember that the types of data we have on violence may reflect different sorts of experiences. Given the data at our disposal, most of this chapter deals with non-employee workplace violence.

Again, because they were all part of the troubled minority, those who reported violence at work were also asked about the gender and ethnicity

of those who perpetrated the violence. Of those reporting violence at work, 48 per cent reported that the perpetrator(s) was/were male, 23 per cent that the perpetrator(s) was/were female, and 25 per cent that they had been victimised by both male and female perpetrators. Furthermore, our analysis showed that violence was mostly male-on-male or female-on-female. Likewise, workplace violence was usually between people of similar ethnicity. The majority of perpetrators were white (76 per cent), with 6 per cent black, 3 per cent Asian, 2 per cent mixed origin, and this is similar to the profile of respondents in the troubled minority. In other words, white respondents were most often victimised by white perpetrators, and BME respondents were usually victimised by people from BME communities. In this regard, violence was similar to other types of ill-treatment at work in that perpetrators tend to match victims in terms of ethnicity and gender. It is also consistent with much criminological research indicating that victims and offenders are socio-demographically similar more often than they are not.

Recognising the importance of considering the type of perpetrator for understanding workplace violence, we wondered whether the significant associations between violence and the other 20 types of ill-treatment (discussed on p. 84) might, in part, be attributable to an especially extreme pattern of abuse and violence amongst those sharing the same workplace. Given what we know about domestic and racist violence, it might be expected that the links between violence and other forms of abusive behaviour might be particularly marked when people were having some form of relationship by virtue of their repeated exposure to each other within a shared work setting. This might include repeated exposure to and/or a close relationship with particular clients/customers.

In fact, our data show that people who experienced violence from other employees had much higher rates of other types of ill-treatment compared to people who had experienced violence from non-employees. Specifically, 12 of the 20 comparisons were statistically significant (e.g. pressure not to claim, having one's views and opinions ignored, constant criticism, being treated unfairly, being excluded from a group, humiliated, gossip and rumours spread about one, hints to quit, teasing, intimidation). Although the number of people reporting violence from other employees was small (only 42), it is clear that these people reported more ill-treatment (including the kind associated with incivility and disrespect) compared to those that had experienced violence from non-employees.

If the closest workplace links between violence and incivility and disrespect are to be found in the relations between fellow employees, this certainly qualifies our conclusion that violence is an aspect of antisocial behaviour that intrudes into the workplace from outside. Moreover, we shall see later in this chapter that this pattern of abusive and violent relationships between employees was more common in the private sector than the public sector.

Employees do indeed suffer violence from the general public, but this is less likely to be combined with other forms of ill-treatment. The links found in our survey between violence and disrespect were not, in the main, the result of alcohol-fuelled excesses on the streets spilling over into police stations, ambulances and accident and emergency departments. There were other reasons for this combination of types of ill-treatment, and we should therefore be very cautious about accepting any argument which suggests that the workplace represents a last bastion of rational behaviour in a 'broken society'.

As mentioned earlier, the qualitative case studies provided few examples of violent behaviour in the workplace, but some of these did illustrate further the contrast between inter-employee violence compared to violence perpetrated by clients, patients or the general public. Violence between employees – as in the survey – was a much rarer event in our case study interviews, but where violent acts were described they appeared to be part of a wider pattern of escalating ill-treatment. It was also sometimes difficult to distinguish the 'tipping point' where verbally aggressive or intimidating behaviour escalated into physically abusive behaviour. One such example came from Westshire (see Chapter 7), where Sarah, a white female consultant in her early forties, described how a deteriorating relationship with another senior colleague finally spilled over into physically intimidating behaviour:

So he caught me in the office one day, and he said, 'Sarah, I am absolutely f***ing fed up with you, you're a manipulative, snidey cow and I wish I'd bloody well never appointed you.' And he was shouting, and I was just ... I thought consultants shouldn't raise fists, get you against a wall ... He backed me into a corner, you know, literally, physically, and I felt ... I wasn't actually scared that he was going to hit me, but ... he did swear and used lots of nasty words about me. And he stormed out of the room. And I said, 'Derek!' And he said, 'F**k off!' And he stormed out down the corridor!

Another member of staff was repeatedly poked in the chest in an extremely aggressive stand-off with a senior clinician in a dispute over the management of surgical waiting lists. A security officer in the same organisation described how another senior member of staff became so violent and abusive in a dispute over car parking spaces that he assaulted a security guard and had to be physically restrained by other staff.

In the Britscope case study, there were a number of incidents reported to us that could be described as violent. For example, two black female workers told us about incidents in which co-workers had subjected them to aggressive shoving and pushing (another employee was injured quite seriously as a result of a workplace prank). One of the former cases illustrated how, in the context of a mutually hostile workplace relationship, it can be difficult to distinguish between aggressor and victim. One woman in her forties recounted a dispute with a colleague triggered by workplace gossip about an alleged sexual affair. Both parties appeared to see the other as the aggressor,

and the incident resulted in a formal investigation. She reported that her co-worker had accused her of sleeping with their manager, who happened to be the boyfriend of the co-worker. This led to a confrontation in front of other staff, in which her co-worker made accusations and approached her aggressively. She described the physical encounter that followed: 'I didn't say a word, all I did was, she was in my face with her hand in my face, so I push her back, I say listen, just get away from me and I didn't say a thing.' This exchange resulted in her being accused of slapping her co-worker in the face, an accusation which was not supported by the formal investigation.

A local line manager in Britscope explained that in his experience physical violence rarely took place between workers in the workplace itself, perhaps unsurprisingly given the potential consequences for those involved in terms of disciplinary procedures and possible dismissal. However, he was aware of cases in which ongoing disputes between workers had resulted in fights 'off site', one of which had been so serious that the police were called, and which had become the focus of an internal Britscope investigation. Britscope also provided further examples of physically abusive behaviour that was part of a broader pattern of serious sexual harassment. Significantly, these examples of inter-employee violent and abusive behaviour all had a 'history'. They occurred in the context of ongoing and deteriorating work relationships, and were preceded and/or accompanied by a range of other ill-treatments such as rudeness, incivility and verbal aggression.

The reported impacts on the interviewees of these damaged working relationships, in almost every case, were severe. A number of these respondents reported psychological problems such as depression. Several had taken substantial periods of sick leave, and a number had moved jobs or even considered quitting the organisation. It is difficult to disentangle the effects of different aspects of the pattern of ill-treatment experienced by these individuals from the violence. We must also bear in mind the results from the FTWS, which suggested that the effects of violence were less pronounced than we might have expected. All the same, it seems clear that, similar to domestic or racist violence, inter-employee violence can have substantial impacts for individuals beyond the immediate physical effects of conflict.

Our survey suggested the links between violence and other forms of ill-treatment were not as pronounced where the perpetrators were not fellow employees. All the examples we had of this kind of violence in the case studies came from Westshire NHS. One interviewee, a security officer (a white male in his early thirties), recounted how his colleague had been spat at by a client while another had been injured trying to physically restrain another member of the public. Saturday nights were particularly difficult, requiring them to deal with between 10 and 12 violent or potentially violent incidents on average. As he said, 'One of my colleagues got punched in the stomach last Saturday by an elderly woman; when another officer tried to help, she got

punched too.’ Another incident involved a confused patient who struck a member of staff who tried to direct her back to her ward, and the piece of medical equipment strapped to the patient’s arm cut the head of the staff member.

Somewhat surprisingly to us, our respondents dealt with these incidents in a relatively matter-of-fact manner. One might argue that security staff, and staff working in high-stress areas such as accident and emergency units, would perhaps expect to experience occasional physical conflict with members of the public or patients. For some staff, it was certainly the case that they saw aggressive and violent encounters as coming ‘with the territory’ (as one mental health nurse told us). Staff working in front-line roles dealing with the public faced violence, or the potential for it, as part of their everyday working lives. It would be a mistake, however, to think that it was just the members of the blue light services dealing with the extreme end of antisocial behaviour who were in this position.

Whether the violence manifested itself on a daily basis, or was expressed at a relatively minor level, there was the potential for violence in many, if not most, of their interactions with clients/public. For example, confrontation can be a regular feature of working life for those working in health care settings, particularly those dealing with mental health. A further example of this comes from the security officers working in Westshire:

Well at first it is a bit shocking to see the abuse people have got to take at work. It’s not really acceptable, but you do become accustomed to it, and you have a light-hearted approach. It’s like I was saying yesterday when we were restraining that male. He took a dislike to my colleague, so I was quite happy he was abusing him, I was okay. I was being let off, but we joke it off between us, so not ‘have a laugh’, but we do sort of ... the boys especially, they do sort of take the light-hearted approach towards it, and they sort of laugh things off.

There is a long tradition of research into how the risk of violence factors into occupational subcultures of certain professions such as the police, often resulting in attributes such as cynicism, burnout, ‘us versus them’ mentality and so on. But even in less overtly adversarial, but still public-facing, jobs there is an adaptation that has to happen on the part of workers who must come to terms with their (sometimes daily) potential to experience violence. For example, Sheard (2011: 625) found a similar sentiment expressed by female bartenders in her study of violence in the night-time economy:

Indeed, some of the bar tenders described violence which had been perpetrated against them at work in a matter-of-fact manner as its occurrence (or the threat of it) was or had been frequent enough for them not to be shocked.

On p. 81 we noted that respondents to workplace surveys may feel less tied to formal legal categories when discussing violent behaviours, and this might be one reason why the rates of violence they record exceed those in

the annual BCSs. Evidently people are very reluctant to think of violent incidents at work – even those that happen regularly and/or cause injury – as ‘crime’. Why might this be the case?

People tend to think of ‘crime’ as something that happens on the streets, usually between strangers; when bad things happen at work people tend not to think of them as criminal but rather as some negative aspect of the job. Similar to the often-demonstrated and long-standing reluctance of people to acknowledge violence in the domestic sphere as ‘crime’, our respondents seemed to consider violent incidents within their workday as something other than criminal, particularly when the culprits were known to them. The Westshire security officer provided some clear examples of how quite serious assaults, or attempted assaults, were not criminalised because of the context. Disputes over car parking, both with other staff members and the general public, were a daily problem negotiated by security officers. There was a recent incident when a fellow staff member, with whom there had been ongoing disagreements about car parking, had driven his van deliberately at the parking officer who leapt out of the way to avoid serious injury. This, in theory, was a clear example of attempted criminal assault. However, it was not reported to the police but dealt with internally by the organisation:

To be honest with you, it’s still going on internally. I could have gone via the police because it’s something like causing injury by using a vehicle as a weapon, but I didn’t pursue that. I should have really, but at the time I didn’t feel it necessary, but I wish I had now. It’s just being dealt with internally.

Further examples suggested that non-criminalisation was not necessarily a function of lack of severity of the assault, but rather the nature of the assailant and the context of the violence:

It [the violence] is really bad. It’s like this lady that obviously attacked our officer. She was an elderly lady, what do you do? And in the same light we had a 15-year-old girl, no parents there, she was causing absolute mayhem in A and E, but what do you do? She’s classed as a minor although she was speaking like she was a bit older, but it’s such a sticky situation to be involved in.

Our interviews also found examples of ambiguity about the jurisdiction of workplace procedures to deal with violent incidents between co-workers that happened away from the workplace. In this case, violence ceased to be considered *workplace* violence at the point it became a crime. Thus, the previously mentioned line manager at Britscope reported that a very serious fight between two workers was referred by one of them to the organisational complaints procedures. However, the organisation initially decided that, despite the seriousness of the violence, the fact that it had taken place away from the workplace (and that the police had decided not to take action) meant that it was deemed unsuitable for consideration by the formal Britscope complaints procedures. The victim of the violence had continued to claim that

the incident was related to work, however, and pursued it at a higher level in the organisation. At the time of our research, the matter had still to be resolved (although the two men had been put in separate working areas):

He battered him. It's a bit of iffy one actually, but the bloke who was beat up tried to claim it related from work ... it all stemmed from work with comments made like he was this or that ... But ... there were no hard facts there. The police didn't prosecute so then that made ... actually where do we come in? We're not above the police, we're not above the law. We have our own standards and we can deal with that, and we deemed it that there was no case to answer from his initial complaint because we couldn't see how it stemmed from work. But then he wrote to our chairman ... Then that then comes back down through the porters, personnel and all the rest of it, and it came back that further investigations were done. I don't know what the end result of this one is, but I think it's going to be the same. The police haven't prosecuted so why should we dismiss?

Respondents' answers to questions about perceived 'causes' of violence at work also supported the notion that characteristics of individual victims or perpetrators were less important than understanding the context where the violence occurred. For certain groups of workers, at least, violence emerged from the structures of their working environment. Few respondents reported individuated explanations of violent incidents motivated by particular forms of prejudice, and relatively few respondents identified the cause or motivation for violent incidents as something about themselves (e.g. their ethnic background, sexuality or social class). Substantially larger proportions of the sample identified the causes or motivation for workplace violence to more general features of their working environments. In particular, 'It's just the way things are where you work' was the most commonly chosen factor, selected by 64 per cent of respondents who had experienced violence. Only 14 per cent said it was their position in the organisation, although this was the third most frequently given reason. The second most common reason was the attitude/personality of the other person (48 per cent). In sum, most victims of workplace violence were more likely to relate these incidents to the wider conditions of their work, or to the general personality dispositions or attitudes of the perpetrator(s), than to any of their own specific demographic characteristics.

Thus far, we have been summarising our interpretations of qualitative data and the bivariate analyses of our survey results. As in Chapters 2 and 3, we now move on to multivariate analysis in order to learn more about the causes of workplace violence. In one important respect, however, we shall be departing from the methods of analysis used at the corresponding point in Chapters 2 and 3. We have only violence and injury to model, rather than the several items of unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect. Moreover, we know that there are some causal links between violence and injury. It therefore makes little sense to treat them as a single dependent variable. Instead, we shall refer to the multivariate analysis presented in Jones *et al.* (2011), which not only

modelled violence and injury separately but also included some independent variables – for example, occupational variables – which were excluded in the versions of the multivariate models used in Chapters 2 and 3 because they had no role in explaining unreasonable treatment or incivility and disrespect.

What kind of employees experienced workplace violence and injury?

Although experience of violence at work varied between different demographic groups, we did not find much evidence that particular individuals were more prone to violence (independently of where they worked or what jobs they did). We considered gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, religion, education, disability and income, but only one of these was statistically related to workplace violence in our multivariate models, and none were related to injury.

Employees with psychological or emotional conditions, or learning disabilities, were seven times more likely to experience workplace violence. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that this result for a category of disability is, for once, unambiguously pointing towards the health effects of ill-treatment. It is, after all, a common assumption made by clinicians and therapists that someone who has been assaulted at work may subsequently experience some level of psychological trauma. We have also referred to some evidence for health effects in the FTWS (p. 62) and our own case studies (p. 69). There is, however, reason to doubt that all of the association observed here is due to health problems. In the first place, some proportion of the correlation is (probably) with learning disabilities rather than psychological conditions. In the second, we would expect the health effects of violence to be as, if not more, obvious in the case of injury at work. This is not the case, however. Although other health conditions were close to significance for injury, categories of psychological or emotional conditions and learning disabilities were not. Indeed Fevre *et al.* (forthcoming) confirmed that other physical disabilities and other health conditions were significant at the 10 per cent significance level for injury even though psychological or learning disability was not.

Which jobs were more prone to violence and injury?

With the possible exception of health effects, our analyses point us towards more structural explanations of violence and reinforce the importance of context. The data indicated that, on the whole, it was certain types of places

rather than certain types of people per se that were especially prone to violence. This underlines, once more, the overwhelming importance of the troubled workplace in predicting all kinds of ill-treatment at work. Once employees find themselves working in one, demographic characteristics make little difference to their chances of experiencing violence.

Multivariate analysis showed that employees were more likely to experience workplace violence if they had managerial or supervisory duties, worked full-time and were trade union members (who were also more at risk of injury as well as violence). It was clearly not the marginalised and peripheral workers who were most at risk of workplace violence but permanent staff in managerial or supervisory positions. Indeed multivariate analyses confirmed that managers/supervisors also were more likely to report witnessing violence, holding everything else constant. Given the predominance of client/public perpetrators, it is reasonable to speculate that such a pattern may arise in part from more junior staff calling in front-line managers to deal with situations of conflict, although it is not possible to explore this further in our survey data.

The other job variable that proved to be significant in multivariable analysis did, however, suggest that some of the most poorly paid workers were also more likely to experience violence in the workplace. Multivariate analysis showed that violence was more likely in personal service occupations. This category includes cooks, waiters, care assistants, child carers, assistant auxiliary nurses, domestic staff and undertakers. As with trade union members, personal service occupations were also significant for injury as well as violence. The fact that personal service occupations were significant suggests something about the kind of workplaces – care homes, private households – where violence took place, and it is to these characteristics that we now turn.

What kinds of workplaces and organisations were more prone to workplace violence?

The multivariate analysis reported in Jones *et al.* (2011) showed that violence was more likely with super-intense work, in the public *and* the third sectors, in health and social work (which also predicted injury as well as violence), and in smaller workplaces. In Chapter 3, we found that the public sector was more likely to produce workplaces troubled by incivility and disrespect, and now we find that the public sector was also more likely to produce workplaces troubled by violence. This clearly lends some credence to the view that incivility often occurred alongside, or led to, violent behaviour and to the notion that it was workers in public services who bore the brunt of this. However, we must be very wary of jumping to the conclusion that these were all blue light employees. Indeed, we know from the fact that personal service occupations were more

likely to experience violence that they were not all police officers, firefighters or paramedics. Moreover, public administration (where police officers and others are counted) predicted injury but not violence in the workplace. Another clue is provided by the fact that third sector workplaces were also more likely to exhibit violence. That the third sector featured alongside the public sector probably indicates the degree to which comparable services – for example, care for people with mental illnesses – are provided in both sectors. This may also be why health and social work remained significant even when we controlled for sector: there were sufficient private sector workplaces in this industry to allow us to see its independent effect. We should also note that multivariate analysis showed that violence was less likely in the largest workplaces (with more than 250 employees). This would exclude many hospital facilities but few, if any, care homes.

Other studies have found that intense and heavy workloads, in combination with a lack of opportunities to exercise control over their work, increase employees' risk of violence at work because the stress and pressure under which people are working leads to conflict (Estrada *et al.* 2010). We found a relationship in our multivariate analysis between violence (but not injury) and super-intense work. Super-intense work is therefore associated with all three types of ill-treatment at work in our multivariate analyses. We did not find a relationship with an increased pace of work or less control, however. In fact, less control predicted less injury. Change in the nature of work was associated with injury, but we suspect that this may, at least in part, have been because the nature of work was modified following the injury.

We know from Figure 7 on p. 53 that both public administration and defence, and health and social work, produced some of the least flattering answers to the FARE questions and to the employers. It is no surprise, therefore, that bivariate analysis showed that these questions were significantly related to the likelihood of experiencing workplace violence. For example, fewer respondents who responded 'where I work, people are treated as individuals' reported workplace assault (4 per cent compared to 7 per cent). Nevertheless, the FARE questions did not predict workplace violence, or injury, in our multivariate analysis with one exception. Injury was less likely where people were treated as individuals. In sum, for violence and injury, conflict over workplace norms is less important than being in a job that entails dealing with the public.

The troubled minority

All those who experienced violence were in the troubled minority, but in the models reported in Jones *et al.* (2011) we compared them with the sample as a whole. This was why we could see the factors such as sector that

characterised (violent) troubled workplaces. Once we have conducted our analyses wholly inside the troubled minority, we should not necessarily expect the same patterns to emerge.⁶ In effect, we are comparing those troubled minority members who experienced violence or injury with those who did not. Moreover, since we are only dealing with the troubled minority, we can now bring variables which distinguish the different types of perpetrators into the analysis. In fact, controlling for client or customer perpetrators meant that third sector was no longer significant while public sector remained so, but there were other surprises.

That disability ceased to be significant (at the 5 per cent level, though it remained so at the 10 per cent level) was probably a consequence of not distinguishing those with psychological or emotional problems or learning disabilities from the rest. Controlling for client versus other types of perpetrators did, however, allow a new characteristic of individuals to emerge as significant for violence. Gay or bisexual respondents were five times more likely to report violence at work compared to heterosexual respondents in the multivariate model. (Even simple bivariate analysis showed that 16 per cent of LGB employees reported violence as opposed to 5 per cent of others.) This finding, of course, comes on top of the finding in Chapter 3 that gay and lesbian respondents were significantly more likely to experience feeling threatened and very close to significantly more likely to experience humiliation, hints they should quit, and shouting. Employees who said they were bisexual were significantly more likely to experience hints they should quit, and intimidation, and in both cases the effects were massive. (In multivariate analysis of the FTWS, LGB respondents were substantially more likely to report humiliation.) Finally, Chapter 3 showed that, within the troubled minority, LGB employees were 12 times more likely to receive hints to quit and four times more likely to be threatened. A clear pattern is therefore emerging of serious, and perhaps escalating, ill-treatment of LGB employees.

Given the extent of criminological research which uniformly paints violence as a gendered phenomenon, we expected that gender would play a significant role in our analyses of the troubled minority. Yet, while bivariate analysis showed that women (6 per cent) were significantly more likely to experience violence at work when compared with men (4 per cent), this relationship did not hold up when we controlled for other factors. As we noted above, sector continued to be significant for violence in the analysis of the troubled minority. Public sector workers were more than three times as likely to report violence as those working in other sectors. Public sector therefore predicted troubled workplaces (both violent ones and those featuring incivility and disrespect), but it also helped to predict a violent workplace amongst the wider group of troubled workplaces. Larger workplaces were also more likely to be untroubled, less affected by violence, and with fewer injuries. The same also held true for

the FARE question about treating people as individuals but only in respect of injury, not violence. Employees were much less likely to be in a troubled workplace of any kind if they thought people were treated as individuals, but now we find that this variable also separated the violent from the non-violent troubled workplaces.

Finally, employees in workplaces which were more ethnically mixed were more than twice as likely to report violence. This should not, however, be interpreted as an indication of high levels of ethnic conflict at work. Findings on workplace composition probably reflected the ethnic composition of particular kinds of workplaces, rather than higher rates of tension and inter-employee violence in these workplaces. Public sector workplaces had higher rates of 'some BME' compared to 'no BME' employees (and public and third sector workplaces had higher rates of 'some women' compared to 'no women' employees). Overall, then, these findings probably reflect the characteristics of workplaces in particular sectors where the incidence and frequency of physical violence is relatively high, such as health and social work settings which employ relatively high proportions of ethnic minorities. This is supported by the survey findings indicating that more BME-dominated workplaces had higher levels of violence from clients/customers than from fellow employees or managers.

Conclusions

Our statistical models showed that particular occupations and industry sectors were associated with a higher rate of workplace violence. These were sectors and occupations with a high proportion of client-facing jobs, particularly in the public sector, such as policing, nursing and social care. Our work thus suggests that explanations for workplace violence are most likely to be found in the nature of workplaces, rather than in the individual characteristics of victims or perpetrators. Although primed towards individualised explanations by the survey method, respondents rarely identified causal factors relating to their own particular characteristics such as their ethnicity, age or gender. Rather, they were most likely to explain incidents with reference to the general nature of their work.

Although Chapter 3 showed that women in the troubled minority were more likely to report being insulted, the absence of significant results for gender has been a feature of most of our multivariate models of ill-treatment. In other words, holding constant other relevant socio-demographic and workplace variables, men and women were equally likely to experience trouble at work. This indicates, once more, the importance of looking beyond the individual level for explanations of violence. In this respect, it is worth noting that, although women did not necessarily report more

ill-treatment at work, they tended to work in places associated with the most extreme types of problems, such as violence and injury. Gender is also interesting when considering witnessing and perpetrating violence. In bivariate analysis, it was men who were significantly more likely than women to report witnessing violence and violence-related injury in the workplace. Perhaps this is because men were more likely to hold positions as managers/supervisors than women, so such incidents were more regularly brought to their attention.

Similar analyses were carried out for workers reporting that they had perpetrated violence or caused injury to other workers during the two years prior to the survey. Perhaps unsurprisingly, reporting rates for these kinds of serious behaviours were very low, and few findings were statistically significant. Men were, however, significantly more likely than women to admit to perpetrating violence at work and to causing injury to others through workplace violence. Interestingly, these findings held at the multivariate level, as men were far more likely to report perpetrating violence and injuries at work compared to women. If nothing else, these findings seem to support the conclusions of some sociological studies of the nature of masculinity and its resistance to change.

With the exception of our findings about LGB employees and those with psychological or emotional problems or a learning disability, exposure to the risk of workplace violence does *not* appear to be experienced disproportionately by certain *workers*, but is rather unevenly spread across certain *workplaces*. This may seem counterintuitive in that it is people, rather than places, that commit acts of violence. We recognise this but what the data have led us to propose is that it is certain workplace contexts which facilitate or even encourage the use of violence. This is not to condone the use of violence in such settings, only to acknowledge that people within these settings might lose self-control sometimes. Indeed, our finding that most of the violence was committed by *non-employees* supports this argument. It is the service users, the clients, customers and other members of the public who tend to 'lose it' rather than employees. The overall effect of the results reported in this chapter is to reinforce what we have said in Chapters 2 and 3 about the importance of sociological studies of workplaces as the key to building useful theories of all types of trouble at work.

As in the previous chapters, we conclude with extensive bivariate analysis of the kind that is most useful to policy-makers and practitioners who need to know where they should concentrate their efforts to make the most effective intervention in this important aspect of ill-treatment in the workplace. In the process, we shall illustrate why, despite what we have just said about the public sector, we think policy-makers would be wrong to think of violence in the workplace as largely the consequence of asking blue light workers to deal with antisocial behaviour.

Our bivariate analyses showed that workplace violence was unevenly distributed across different sectors of the economy. Those working in the public or third sector were significantly more likely to report workplace violence (9 per cent each compared to 3 per cent in the private sector). Rates of workplace violence also varied significantly between different industries. Specifically, we found relatively high levels of violence reported by those working in health and social work (15 per cent or three times the sample average). Workplace violence also had a statistical association with ethnic composition. In workplaces where there were more BME workers, there were higher rates of violence (e.g. when three-quarters were BME, 12 per cent of respondents reported experiencing physical violence at work, compared to only 4 per cent when none were BME).

Another industry sector with apparently elevated risk was public administration and defence (which includes police officers and some other emergency workers), at 10 per cent or twice the sample average. Education was the third riskiest industry, with 6 per cent of those respondents reporting violence. Substantiating these results were the industry classifications of those 25 respondents who reported experiencing violence on a daily basis: five were in public administration, six in education, and 12 in health and social work. Indeed, looking at the industry and occupational classifications (discussed earlier) together shows that most of the violence perpetrated in the three riskiest industries (health/social work, public administration/defence or education) was against those in the associate/professional/technical or personal/service occupations (90 or 70 per cent of 129 respondents).

Another way to illustrate the importance of workplace setting is with Figure 13. Each pie chart represents a different measure of workplace violence – experiencing, witnessing or perpetrating. It is easy to see how the three industries just mentioned – namely, health and social work, public administration/defence, and education – accounted for a substantial majority of each pie. Clearly, these three industries can be considered hotspots for violence at work. This probably comes as no surprise after reading the previous chapters on unreasonable treatment and incivility and disrespect, which also described elevated rates in these industries.

Our survey provided strong evidence of particular places being ‘hotspots’ of workplace violence. Let us not forget, however, that although most workplace violence is committed by non-employees, a different picture emerges when we distinguish between employee and non-employee perpetrators (see Figures 14 and 15). Work environments in the public sector are troubled and therefore lead clients/customers to be violent. The private sector is where most inter-employee workplace violence takes place.

Figure 16 shows that particular industries were hotspots for *non-employee* workplace violence, but these were *not* the same hotspots where *inter-employee* violence occurred. Specifically, education, health and social work

Experiencing violence (*n* = 156), by industry

Witnessing violence (*n* = 183), by industry

Perpetrating violence (*n* = 15), by industry

Figure 13 Industry matters for understanding where workplace violence is experienced, witnessed and perpetrated

Figure 14 Inter-employee violence tends to happen in the private sector

Figure 15 Non-employee violence tends to happen in the public sector

and public administration/defence were hotspots for non-employee violence, whereas more private sector jobs like manufacturing, construction, transport and wholesale/retail trade were the hotspots for inter-employee workplace violence. It is important to note that the numbers were very small, so these differences should be viewed with caution. Specifically, those industries noted with an asterisk (*) had fewer than five respondents each. However, both sector and industry data seem to suggest qualitative differences between violence from clients and customers and violence from anyone else.

With regard to analysis of the workplace characteristics of those who reported witnessing workplace violence, again the picture was similar to those experiencing such violence. Particular troubled workplaces, such as those in the

Figure 16 Different industries are hotspots for employee vs non-employee workplace violence

public sector, were associated with a greater likelihood of witnessing violence, and the type of industries associated with higher risk of *experiencing* violence was unsurprisingly also associated with greater likelihood of *witnessing* violence. With regard to perpetrators of workplace violence, those working in the health and social welfare sector were most likely to admit to perpetrating violence themselves in the workplace. Thus, public administration/defence and health/social work can be considered true hotspots as they have high rates of unreasonable treatment, incivility and disrespect *and* violence. Workers in these industries were more likely to report witnessing and perpetrating the full range of ill-treatment in the workplace.