

WORKPLACE VIOLENCE IN THE LIBRARY SECTOR

CUPE



To work in a library today, one has to be a social worker, a first responder, an advocate for the underserved, and a human with very thick skin.

- The Los Angeles Times, April 19, 2019.

Introduction

Many Canadians think of libraries as safe, public spaces. And that's true most of the time. But research conducted by CUPE and recent media reports show that health and safety hazards exist in libraries for workers and patrons alike.

A CUPE study of library workers in British Columbia found that workers have experienced and/or witnessed verbal and physical threats, unwanted physical contact, sexual assault, indecent exposure, explicit online materials, drug use, drug trafficking, and theft. CUPE library workers deal with situations involving intoxicated patrons and, at times, are required to ban people from the library. And occasionally, library workers must call first responders when things go terribly wrong; for example, when a patron overdoses on opioids.

Media reports indicate that extreme forms of violence are rare in libraries but sometimes occur. Two people have been charged with attempted murder in a shooting outside a branch of the

Toronto Public Library. The victim, a 26-year-old man with gunshot wounds, made his way into the library to get help after the shooting. In a separate incident, a man threw a bucket of liquefied fecal matter at several people at the York University and University of Toronto libraries. He has been charged with assault with a weapon and mischief. And a rash of violent incidents in Winnipeg has prompted the Millennium Library to subject all patrons to security checks.

But violence doesn't "just happen", contrary to what some people may believe. Rather, violence is a workplace hazard with specific causes. A situation made more challenging due to repeated government attacks on library funding.

The Fallout of Government Attacks on Library Funding

In recent decades, all levels of government across Canada have implemented austerity agendas that have resulted in reduced budgets and wage freezes in the public sector. Let's face it. Libraries are often not a priority to receive adequate levels of government funding. In fact, the opposite is often true as witnessed by recent attempts to defund libraries by governments in Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador. But libraries are a priority for communities across the country as shown by successful campaigns by organized labour and concerned citizens to stop cuts to library funding.

A damaged social safety net due to decades of underfunding means that more and more Canadians are unable to access the services they need. In fact, funding cuts to social services has resulted in increased numbers of Canadians turning to their local libraries for help in finding social supports. At the same time, the demand for information about immigration and job search assistance has also increased. Government funding cuts that lead to fewer staff can contribute to increased

workloads resulting in a heightened risk of workplace violence when patrons become frustrated or angry with a perceived lack of service.

Library workers report increased interactions with vulnerable, high needs, and marginalized populations such as the homeless, people struggling with mental health issues, and people struggling with addiction. Workers are sometimes required to perform duties more commonly associated with social work without necessarily having the training, resources, and time to do so. Sometimes situations escalate, and workers are subjected to physical or verbal violence and harassment. The Edmonton Public Library has hired staff to work with vulnerable populations and connect them with social services. In one year alone, staff had more than 6,000 interactions with at-risk individuals.

Risk Factors

Violence doesn't just happen; rather, violence is a workplace hazard with specific causes. There are several risk factors that can contribute to the occurrence of workplace violence:

- Working with the public.
- Working alone.

CUPE defines workplace violence as any incident(s) in which an employee is threatened, assaulted or abused during their employment that may cause physical or psychological harm. This includes threats, attempted or actual assault, application of force, verbal abuse or harassment, and domestic violence.

- Working with people who are frustrated or angry.
- Working with people who have a history of violence.
- People unable to control their behaviour due to mental health conditions or a brain injury.
- People who hold misogynist, racist, and homophobic views.
- People under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol.

Poorly designed workspaces that are cramped, crowded, and with poor visibility can also create hazards that lead to violence. Changes in the physical design of the workplace can reduce the occurrence and severity of workplace violence. Suggestions include changing counters or desks to provide adequate distance between workers and the public; designing offices and waiting areas to minimize crowding; and, arranging furniture so that workers can be seen by co-workers if assistance is needed.

Workplace Violence Prevention

Incidents of workplace violence result in serious physical and psychological consequences for library workers.

It also exacts a heavy, financial burden for employers in terms of:

- recruitment and retention challenges;
- increased training costs;
- increased use of sick leave;
- decreased morale, productivity and motivation;
- and expensive and lengthy investigations, arbitrations, court costs, and potential liabilities.

There are several steps local unions and employers can take to prevent workplace violence from happening in the first place. It is essential that employers and locals work together to develop and implement strategies to prevent workplace violence, including:

- develop procedures for interacting with patrons exhibiting challenging behaviours;
- improve awareness of working alone policies and procedures; and
- increase awareness of EAP resources.

Education is another crucial element. Employers must provide training on effective ways to work with patrons with mental health challenges, training to defuse potentially violent situations,

It is a requirement of employers to provide a healthy and safe workplace that is free from violence and harassment in all its forms, including domestic violence. CUPE believes that harassment is a form of violence.

and training in conflict de-escalation and resolution.

Steps that local unions can take to reduce and eliminate the occurrence of workplace violence include:

- bargain language that defines and prohibits all forms of discrimination, harassment, and violence;
- bargain language that provides supports for victims of domestic violence;
- bargain language that obligates the employer to provide training on workplace violence to all workers;
- bargain supports into benefit packages and employee assistance programs for workers exposed to post-traumatic stress injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders. Bargained supports could include special training, ongoing measures to protect workers' mental health, peer support programs, professional care and follow-up.

- bargain language to increase staffing;
- lobby funders for increased funding; and
- change the physical design of the workplace.

Local unions can also work to increase the awareness of the health and safety committee and educate and empower workers to refuse unsafe work. Consult CUPE's Workplace Violence and Harassment Prevention Kit and visit cupe.ca for more information.

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Research conducted by Statistics Canada shows that nearly 1 in 5 (19%) women and 13% of men experienced workplace harassment in the past year. The same research also reveals that women are more likely than men to experience workplace physical violence, sexual harassment, and unwanted sexual attention. Aboriginal women are generally more vulnerable to sexual violence. And lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to report being sexually harassed in the workplace compared to heterosexual women.