



## Risk Indicators for Violence and Aggressive Dog Ownership

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### Abstract

Identifying risk factors of violence for individuals has improved considerably over the last 30 years. Current understanding, lists a range of risk factors that can be helpful when very little is known about the person of concern, versus when this person may be known well by the agency attending their home or business. Risk factors may include information about previous violent history, instability in relationships and employment, use of substances and symptoms of mental illness. Understanding aggressive dog ownership requires critical consideration of the violent risk factors for the individual. Those people who display aggressive behaviour to others may be more attracted to known aggressive breeds, may employ physical punishment to manage the dog, and may use the dog as an instrument of physical violence and/or intimidation of others. Ensuring appropriate risk assessment and management, adequate positive peer and management support may reduce the risk of stress conditions in staff exposed to persons of concern.

### Introduction

Understanding the risk for violence that individuals may pose to staff in the workplace is critical to ensuring a safe place of work, and thus the employer meeting its duty of care obligations for workplace health and safety. However the process of risk assessment and then risk management has posed a significant challenge for decades, with the very best state of the art forensic clinical techniques working moderately better than chance in predicting violence, and after an exhaustive individualized assessment of the individual covering many hours of interviewing, information from multiple sources, and multiple areas of the persons life and using multiple tools (i.e. tests, observation, provocation etc; Douglas and colleagues, 2006<sup>1</sup>).

Investigating a complaint comes with risks, some known to the staff member and the employee, and some unknown. In fact it is useful to consider the two broad situations that occur in the process of risk assessment; one where the customer is known to the organization(s), and one where nothing is known other than the basics of the complaint or query. Both these scenarios will be considered in the context of understanding individual risk factors for violence before consideration is given to understanding aggressive dog ownership.

### Definitions and Legal Obligations

Adam Graycar from the Australia Institute of Criminology (AIC, 2003) and the European Commission (Wynne and colleagues, 1997) defined workplace violence as:

'Incidents where persons are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well being or health'.

Three main types have been identified in the literature (Mayhew, 2000a) including:

1. Random public violence (e.g. Track Vitkovic killed 8 Australia Post employees in 1987 and terrorism);
2. Client initiated violence committed by individuals who have/had some form of relationship with the organisation and the incident may involve a 'one off' physical act of violence, which results in fatal/non fatal injury, and/or harassment over time. It is known nurses, police, and counter staff are most at risk for client initiated violence (Graycar, 2003);
3. Violence within organisations or violence by individuals who have/had employment relationship with the organisation and can also include 'one off' physical act of violence which results in fatal/non fatal injury, and/or harassment over time.

### Definitions of aggression

Various definitions of violence have been used over time when understanding risk assessment for violence, and very useful ones are those identified from research and work by Ogloff and Daffern (2004). These include:

1. Physical aggression against person – Person makes threatening gestures, swings at people, grabs at clothes, strikes, kicks, pushes, pulls hair or attacks others.
2. Verbal aggression against person – Person shouts angrily, insults, curses viciously, uses foul language in anger, or makes clear threats of violence to others.
3. Physical aggression against property/objects – Person slams doors, throws objects down, kick furniture, breaks objects, smashes windows, throws objects dangerously etc.

These types of aggression are considered hazards in the workplace under relevant workplace health and safety legislation, which carry particular risks for the individual and organisation.

### Risk in the Context of Workplace Health and Safety

Broadly speaking in science, policy, and law, risk is a hazard that is incompletely understood and therefore forecasted with uncertainty. Risk incorporates notions of nature, severity, frequency, imminence, and likelihood of harm. The risk is never known but estimated and is context specific.

<sup>1</sup> HCR-20 VIOLENCE RISK ASSESSMENT SCHEME: OVERVIEW AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY, KEVIN S. DOUGLAS, LL.B., PH.D. LAURA S. GUY, M.A. SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY JOHN WEIR, M.S. UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA (Visit <http://www.sfu.ca/psychology/groups/faculty/hart/violink.htm> for updates)

These concepts are seen in the legislative requirements in workplace health and safety which include: (a) the Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995 and the employer's obligation to ensure a safe workplace; (b) the Workplace Health and Safety Regulations 1997 which outlines the need to prevent/control certain hazards which cause injury, illness or death; and (c) the associated Codes of Practice (previously Advisory Standards). The Codes of Practice outline practical advice regarding management of exposure to risk noting the employer must adopt or provide same level of protection as a Code. There is also a need to identify an appropriate way to manage exposure to risk, take 'reasonable' precautions and exercise proper diligence against the risk.

Further relevant Queensland legislation defines hazards and risk as<sup>2</sup>: a 'Hazard' is defined as 'the utility to cause harm'; and 'Risk' is defined as the likelihood of harmful consequences given exposure to the hazard. Workplace health and safety standards universally require a 'Risk Management Process' to gauge the nature of the risk posed by the hazard, and then to outline the controls to address the risk. This is typically a 5 step process encompassing the following steps:

1. Identify hazards (using anecdotal experience and data);
2. Assess risks (determine the level of risk given consequences and likelihood of harm, and the greatest potential harm and occurrence);
3. Select control measures from hierarchy of controls (i.e. elimination, substitute, isolate, engineer, administration, personal protection equipment etc);
4. Implement controls; and *— eg barriers at customer service counter*
5. Monitor controls.

Various risk factors exist in respect to assessing and reviewing occupational violence and these encompass several domains including organisational, corporate, and individual.

**Organizational and Corporate Level Risk Factors**

Several organisational risk factors are known from the literature to be associated with occupational stress and risk for occupational violence<sup>3</sup> and these include:

1. Chronic labour-management disputes;
2. Significant changes in job responsibilities or Workload;
3. An authoritarian managerial style;
4. Atmosphere of intolerance and disrespect;
5. Arbitrary discipline;
6. An uncomfortable physical environment;
7. Delay

These organizational risks may be associated with indicators of dysfunction that can include:

1. Grievances;
2. Stress claims
3. Sick days/absenteeism
4. Equipment/product damage
5. Significant Employee Assistance Program utilization,
6. Staff turnover

Specific corporate risk indicators may also include: 1. the lack of a stated, top-level policy on workplace violence on verbal aggression, threats, harassment, bullying or physical workplace violence, 2. lack of employee education on workplace violence awareness and early warning signs, emergency procedures and prevention strategies. The presence of these risks at a corporate level significantly increases the risk of common law actions, allegations of workplace bullying and harassment, workers' compensation claims for psychological injuries, employee performance concerns, and excessive staff turnover<sup>4</sup>.

**Individual Level Clinical Risk Indicators**

Risk factors for occupational violence also exist on an individual level and an extensive clinical and legal literature exists concerning the assessment and management of this issue. Various assessment approaches exist and 'state of the art' approaches traditionally emphasize the assessment of static (temporally stable and unchangeable) risks, current dynamic (changeable through treatment and/or management), and future projected risks the individual may face. These are assessed by professionals with expertise in individual assessments and with expertise in the study of violence. Empirically or research supported risk factors for violence are noted in the table below and are derived from a structured clinical guideline assessing risk for violence called the Historical Clinical Risk 20 (HCR 20; Webster and colleagues, 1997)<sup>5</sup>. The presence of several of these risks in an individual whether they be a staff member, or member of the public increases the chronic long term predictive risk for them acting violently in certain circumstances.

Table One

The HCR-20 Scheme				
HISTORICAL VARIABLES	CLINICAL VARIABLES	RISK VARIABLES		
H1 Previous Violence	C1 Lack of Insight	R1 Plans Lack Feasibility		
H2 Young Age at First Violent Incident		C2 Negative Attitudes	R2 Exposure to Destabilizers	
H3 Relationship Instability			C3 Active Symptoms of Mental Illness	R3 Lack of Personal Support
H4 Employment Problems		C4 Impulsivity		R4 Noncompliance with Remediation Attempts
H5 Substance Use Problems				C5 Unresponsive to Treatment
H6 Major Mental Illness				
H7 Psychopathy				
H8 Early Maladjustment				
H9 Personality Disorder				
H10 Prior Supervision Failure				
<b>PAST STATIC</b>	<b>PRESENT DYNAMIC</b>	<b>FUTURE DYNAMIC</b>		

This checklist of risk factors for violence depicted by the HCR-20 includes historical risk factors or past static risk factors in that evidence of these in a person's history will add to their risk for violence over time. These historical risk factors are briefly outlined below:

1. Previous violence – evidence of any previous violence has been known to predict future violence;

<sup>4</sup> WorkSafe Victoria, 2009

<sup>5</sup> Similar tools exist for assessing risk for sexual and domestic violence

<sup>2</sup> Risk Management 2007 Section 27a

<sup>3</sup> WorkSafe Victoria, 2009

2. Young age at first violence – the younger a person is (i.e. <20 years old) at the time of the first recorded violent behaviour, the increased risk for future violent behaviour;
3. Relationship instability – a history of conflict in relationships including domestic violence increases risk for violent behaviour;
4. Employment problems – poor employment history and/or unemployment can increase risk for future violence;
5. Substance use problems – a history of substance problems has been linked to future violent behaviour;
6. Major mental illness – disturbances to thinking and affect/emotions have been associated with increased risk for violence;
7. Psychopathy – diagnosed psychopathic disorder (i.e. callous criminal who uses violence to solve problems) is a strong risk factor for future violence;
8. Early maladjustment – difficulties adjusting to school, home and community and the presence of a history of abuse can increase risk for future violence;
9. Personality disorder – personality traits like anger, impulsivity, hostility can form disorders which can increase the risk for future violent behaviour;
10. Prior supervision failure – failures with community or institutional placement like parole, probation mental health orders can increase the risk for future violent behaviour.

There also exists risk factors for imminent aggression for an individual to predict various types of aggression in the short term or from immediacy to over a two day period in certain settings (Ogloff and Daffern, 2004); particularly if the presence of several of these risk factors are noted:

1. Irritability - The person is easily annoyed or angered. They are unable to tolerate the presence of others;
2. Impulsivity - The person displays behavioural and emotional instability (i.e. dramatic fluctuations in mood or general demeanour, unable to remain composed and directed)
3. Unwillingness to follow directions - The person tends to be become angry or aggressive when they are asked to adhere to directions or to the investigation/compliance process
4. Sensitivity to perceived provocation - The person tends to see other people's actions as deliberate and harmful; they may misinterpret other people's behaviour or respond with anger in a disproportionate manner to the extent of the provocation
5. Easily angered when requests are denied - The person tends to be intolerant, or is easily angered when they make a request that is denied or they are asked to wait
6. Negative attitudes - The person displays attitudes that may relate to violence and aggression.

In understanding risk assessment for violence, it is critical to acknowledge violence as a choice, with the proximal cause of violence being a decision to act violently (Yang & Wong 2010). This decision may be influenced by a range of other factors including biological, psychological, social, physiological, neurological, illness, and exposure to violent role models and attitudes that condone or excuse violence.

Consideration of these static risk factors and more dynamic risk factors may assist in formulating the risk assessment for violence when investigating a complaint or query (Douglas & Skeem, 2005). More reliance on the research may be useful in those circumstances where minimal information is known about the customer. Consider the following scenarios using the Risk Assessment Table (over page):

1. Customer known to agency with long history of repeated threats of violence, several assaults, male aged 18 with pit bull, drinks and often intoxicated when complaints made, typically responds to requests with verbal aggression and lives in a suburb with known peers who support his threatening behaviour. The risk assessment follows:
  - a. Historical risk factors present include:
    - i History of violence physical and verbal;
    - ii Male;
    - iii History of substance use;
    - iv Peers support violence;
    - v Culture of violence in suburb
  - b. Therefore elevated baseline risk
  - c. Dynamic risks for imminent violence present include:
    - i Intoxicated
    - ii Responds to request angrily;
    - iii Sees investigation as an intrusion or sensitive to provocation;
    - iv Displays attitudes that condone violence;
    - v Irritable;
  - d. Risk assessment given above is high risk for future violence of assault and verbal threats if investigating complaint.
2. Customer complaint called in and only information is a male in late teens with a pit bull off lead.
  - a. Historical risk factors present include:
    - i Male;
    - ii Late teens
  - b. Therefore not elevated baseline risk at this stage
  - c. Dynamic risks for imminent violence present unknown until attend scene or collect information from complainant prior to attending scene and which elicits include:
    - i Not Intoxicated
    - ii Responds to requests from neighbor most of the time angrily;
    - iii May see investigation as an intrusion or sensitive to provocation;
    - iv Has not displayed attitudes that condone violence in past;
    - v Chilling on front patio at present – not irritable;
  - d. Risk assessment given above is low risk for future violence of assault and verbal threats if investigating complaint

There are also a range of other factors which may increase the risk for violence including access to weapons, peers who support violence (i.e. gangs), recent stressors (i.e. arguments, loss of job, separation, divorce, etc).

### Aggressive Dog Issues

Research currently provides three significant insights into aggressive dogs and their owners (Douglas, Guy & Hart, 2009, Guys et al, 2001, Hsu & Liching 2010, O'Sullivan et al, 2008). Firstly it seem that the use of punishment as a tool for controlling the dog's aggressive behavior leads to the dog becoming more aggressive and therefore is not an effective tool for punishment. Therefore people with more risk factors for violent behaviours may be more prone to use punishment as a method of disciplining their dog thus leading to an aggressive dog.

Secondly people maybe more prone to identifying with a breed publicly known or perceived as aggressive, as they have an image of themselves being violent. Owning a violent dog or aggressive breed of dog will then maintain the person's aggressive status within their community/peer circle (i.e. the idea people will respect them because of this symbol). Finally in the case where a person with a high level of psychopathic traits who owns an aggressive dog, may derive some satisfaction from owning an aggressive dog and be prepared to use their dog in an instrument to harm people or as a form of intimidation or as a weapon of aggression to scare others. Some people who use substances like amphetamines may believe owning an aggressive dog provides additional protection or warning to the property being entered. Similarly, people engaged in criminal activity may also want aggressive dogs as a deterrent to prevent or reduce risk of discovery of their behaviour. In rare cases people who have many risk factors for violence will engage in incidents of deriving pleasure from harming others with their dog – a form of violent sadism.

Lastly, pet ownership generally is a positive experience for most people and those who have risk factors for violence have the same needs in this respect (Kobelt, 2003, McPhedran, 2000). They also suffer the same difficulties being responsible pet owners due to competing demands, organizational difficulties, and periods of ill health. Some people with disorders may become preoccupied with pet ownership such as choosing to own many pets or be dysregulated about their pets and responsibility with breeding.

### Positive Support Strategies

Animal management in it nature has a number of risks which can lead to stress conditions within the employee. For example attending a violent home and being attacked is a stressful event that lacks supportive strategies (i.e. reasonable management action) post incident which can lead to psychological distress. Therefore while it is important for application of risk assessment pre and during an investigation it is equally important to ensure supportive workplace strategies occur within the organisation. In a workplace with the potential to have high risk violence against employees, support strategies can mitigate against this risk of an employee developing a stress condition. Strategies such as supportive leadership and positive peer support are known to help minimise the stress and anxiety within a team of people coping with high levels of exposure to violence and aggression.

Peer support could be classified as one of the first lines of

STRATEGY

defense against significant critical incident stress and moderate against the risk of an employee developing a stress condition (Shakespeare-Finch 2007). Peer support in animal management can be defined as support provided by a co-worker or group of co-workers. Research indicates there are two types of peer support: positive peer support and negative peer support (Bennetts and Hicks, 2007). Negative peer support is when the co-worker providing support hinders or limits a worker's recovery after an incident by using non supportive techniques and possibly led to an aggravation of a minor stress condition. For example a worker has returned from an incident in the field and coworkers console him by telling stories about where he also and been mistreated. Situations like in this example limits the recovery process after a workplace incident. Research has demonstrated that positive peer support can create an environment for recovery and post traumatic growth from incidences in the workplace (Scully, 2007). Workplace that have dedicated peer support program have significantly less workers compensation claims and increased general mood (Shakespeare-Finch & Scully, 2004). Commonly peer support programs will train selected workers in psychological first aid and techniques to console a co-worker. Programs that educate and embed positive peer support in workplace can moderate against the risk of an employee developing a stress condition (Shakespeare-Finch & Scully, 2004).

Furthermore support leadership also provides a significant avenue for support for workers and mitigates the risk of developing a stress condition from working in animal management (Offerman & Hellman, 1997). Positive supportive leadership styles include inspiring and motivating staff; honesty; integrity; providing a vision with forward planning; competence and credibility; fair mindedness and equality; appeals to employees hopes and dreams; and adds value to the employee (D'Aleo, 2007). Support leadership assists to provide an environment were the systems of risk management and peer support can be integrated with ease and without pressure. Positive management support, peer support and other reasonable management actions can help mitigate the risk of employees developing a stress condition that the impact attending high risk situations.

### Future Directions

While it is important to understand the general risk history of violent people, animal management agencies would benefit from workplace systems which help understand the characteristic of potential offending dog owners within their own township. In addition further research into workplace programs can help determine the key elements of successful support that can help mitigate against the risk of employees developing a stress condition, thus providing of suitable reasonable management actions for the animal management industry.

### Conclusion

When determining risk of violence prior to attending a situation utilising historical risk factors can be helpful when very little is known about the person of concern, versus when this person of concern may be known well by the agency.