

U.S. HOSTILE WORKPLACE SURVEY 2000
THE WORKPLACE BULLYING & TRAUMA INSTITUTE

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SEPTEMBER, 2000

QUICK VIEW FACT SHEET

The best estimate of prevalence in the American workplace is 1 in 6 (16.8%) of workers and is based on a survey of Michigan residents completed in the year 2000 by L. Keashly at Wayne State University.

The findings reported here are from the year 2000 research project of the Institute (then-named the Campaign Against Workplace Bullying). The 1,335 respondents were website visitors who voluntarily elected to complete the anonymous survey from March to May.

Women comprise 50% of the bullies.

Women bullies target women an overwhelming 84% of the time; men bullies target women in 69% of the cases; women are the majority (77%) of targets.

Nearly all bullies are bosses (81%); they have the power to terminate their targets at will.

Bullying is more prevalent than illegal discrimination; in 77% of situations neither the bully nor target was a member of a protected status group.

Bullying is a health hazard to the person targeted:

- 41% were diagnosed with depression
- over 80% reported effects that prevented them from being productive at work (severe anxiety, lost concentration, sleeplessness, etc.)
- PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms afflict 31% of the women, 21% of the men

Support for Targets came from spouses, partners and outside friends. Co-workers, the bullies' bosses and human resources failed to support the targeted person despite requests for help. In fact, in only 7% of cases was the bully punished, transferred or terminated.

Bullying costs Targets their jobs and livelihood:

- Of the survey respondents for whom the bullying has stopped, 82% lost their jobs (44% involuntarily; 38% voluntarily)
- In the aftermath, 51% lost all or part of their income as a result; 33% had no change

Thoughts linger: 79% of Targets frequently or constantly think about the past bullying.

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About the Survey

The findings reported here are from the year 2000 research project of the Institute (then-named the Campaign Against Workplace Bullying). Respondents were website visitors who voluntarily elected to complete the anonymous survey from March to May.

Respondents were primarily a group of individuals who were directly experiencing one-on-one harassment at their workplaces. The sample is non-random and self-selected, meaning that one should only extrapolate the findings to the national population of bullied individuals sufficiently frustrated to seek solutions to their dilemma. From that information-seeking group, a smaller group then completed the survey.

In all, there were 1335 respondents -- all targets of workplace bullying. This is the largest research sample of its kind in the world.

Bullying is defined by the Institute as *repeated illegitimate mistreatment of a targeted employee by one or more persons characterized by acts of commission and omission which impair the target's psychological and physical health, and economic security*. It is illegitimate because the bully's conduct undermines the employer's legitimate business interests. It prevents work from getting done.

The U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey 2000 was an exploratory study of adult bullying's impact on the health and careers of targeted individuals. The study also compared its frequency with the more recognized and illegal forms of discriminatory interpersonal misconduct.

RESULTS

1. Bullies -- The Perpetrators

Women and men are equally likely to be bullies -- exactly 50% each

Bully's rank relative to their Target:

- 81 % ranked higher, 1 or more levels
- 14 % same rank, a peer or co-worker
- 5 % lower rank, bullies higher ups

Average age is 44 years old (ages ranged from 19-82).

Bullying tactics were briefly described in the survey as one of the four categories used to illustrate the full range of cruel behaviors employed by bullies by the survey authors in their book (*The Bully At Work*, 2000). Respondents were asked to choose the dominant style used by the bully, acknowledging that most bullies adopt one or more strategies simultaneously. The types of bullies described in the survey (with percentages reported):

- Screaming/Yelling, public attempts to humiliate, seeking to do battle when and where she/he chooses, needs to compete and "win" to feel good (Screaming Mimi, 14%)
- Controls all resources (time, budget, support, training) so as to prevent you from being successful at your job, undermining, setting you up to fail (Gatekeeper, 20%)
- Constant, personal verbal assaults on your character, name calling, belittling, zealous attention to unimportant details, committed to systematic destruction of your confidence in your competence (Constant Critic, 30%)
- Manipulates the impression others have of you, splits the work group into taking sides, defames you with higher ups and at next job, killing your reputation (Two-Headed Snake, 36% overall, 39% for women Targets)

Bullies preferred public sites in front of witnesses for humiliating their Targets (46%). In 34% of cases the hostility was completely private (and more easily denied) and 20% of the time bullying was behind closed doors, but meant to be overheard.

It's No Secret

The fact that 96% of co-workers were aware of the Target's plight bolsters our claim that bullying is not a workplace secret, despite our reluctance to publicly discuss "the silent epidemic." Even if co-workers did not witness the bully's aggression, 87% of Targets said they directly told co-workers what happened to them.

Bullying, by definition, is a repeated act. In only 1% of cases was the hostility a single episode. The psychological violence perpetrated by bullies lasted an average of 16.5 months with the most frequent exposure period being 18 months (for 42% of Targets).

The bully also targeted others in the workplace for hostile mistreatment. Non-government Targets reported 77%, while 88% of government Targets said that others were similarly mistreated.

2. Targets – Individuals Who Suffer From a Hostile Workplace

Women were predominantly Targets (77%). Their average age was 41. Women Targets were at greatest risk for hostility from women perpetrators (84% vs. 69% from men).

Bullying Happens Everywhere & To All Kinds of People

The online sample for the US Hostile Workplace Survey 2000 was completed by individuals from a variety of employers:

- 35% corporate employers
- 33% government (a disproportionate sample gov't workers are 12% of the national workforce)
- 13% small or family-run businesses
- 19% non-profit organizations

The data about education refute a popular notion held by critics that Targets are somehow uneducated or unskilled, so that status somehow “justifies” mistreatment. Actually, 63% of Targets had a college degree or some college, 17% had graduate degrees and 4% were PhDs, MDs or lawyers. Couple these demographic data with the second most frequent reason given for being targeted for bullying – the bully envied the technical competence of the Target – and the myth of the low caliber Target is shattered.

The significant positive correlation between education level and traumatization (described below in Health Impairment) may at first seem counterintuitive ($r = .149, p = .007$). But in cases where education leads to greater skill or greater ethicality or greater passion and commitment to work, it can actually make the person more vulnerable to abuse.

For only 1% of Targets, the bully committed a single act of misconduct. It is not a single event.

Average exposure to bullying for everyone was 16.5 months. Men report a significantly longer average exposure (18.38 months) than women (15.74 months) ($t = 2.26, p = .02$). This could be explained because women could be more willing to take action and to seek help sooner. It could be that men are more tolerant of the accompanying shame and more frozen into inaction by it or generally less willing to seek help for the embarrassing dilemma.

The majority of Targets reported no history of being bullied before at work (67%). Neither had they been previously traumatized (62% had not), either at work or in another way. However, they were not the only ones targeted at work for harassment by the same bully. 77% of the bullies harassed others at work. This rate rises to 88% for Targets who work in government.

Why People Are Targeted

The bully's motivation was explored in a simple question -- "what caused the bullying?" Respondents were free to check as many reasons as desired. The top five reasons (with accompanying percentages reported on the checklist provided in the survey) were:

1. Target refused to be subservient, resisted control (58%)
2. Bully envied Target's competence in the work to be done (56%)
3. Bully envied Target's social skills, being liked, positive attitude (49%)
4. Ethical Target behavior, whistleblower was retaliated against (46%)
5. The cruel personality of the bully (42%)

Remaining substantial reasons were as follows: it was Target's turn in rotation (39%); no known reason, attacks were unprovoked (36%); failure of Target to confront (33%); a hostile workplace culture where bullying leads to promotion (30%); bully has a personal problem, an addiction (25%).

Because bullies rationale could be based on more than one reason, the total of percentages is not 100.

The important difference between victims of schoolyard bullying and adult workplace Targets is that the adults are targeted for their strengths. Unlike the isolated, friendless and different kid, adult Targets have the characteristics of an ideal employee espoused by employers: independent and self-starting, technically skilled, able to work in teams with optimism, and strictly honest and ethical. Unfortunately, this combination does not earn kudos. It attracts malicious attacks by bullies.

Bullying Compared to Illegal Discrimination

In the majority of cases (62%), neither the bully nor Target enjoyed “protected class status.” Protected groups are based on gender, race, ethnic origin, religion, age, or disability. When a target is a member in one or more of those groups and their harasser is not, then the mistreatment could be categorized as discriminatory. Without discrimination, state and federal laws in America in 2000 do not afford targeted individuals protection against a hostile work environment.

According to our survey, the bully was a protected class member in 15% of situations. Only 8% of Targets had protected class status when the bully did not. An additional 15% of Targets share protected class status with their attacker. For them, there is no legal remedy based on race or gender.

This means that for 77% of cases neither party had legal status upon which to claim discrimination. Three out of four cases were simply bullying. Bullying is two to three times more prevalent than illegal harassment.

Our finding matches the frequency reported in the University of Illinois at Chicago study by Richman et al. (1999, *Amer. J. of Public Health*) that contrasted sexual harassment with “generalized workplace abuse,” or bullying. They, too, found that bullying was similarly more frequent.

Effects of Bullying on Targeted Individuals

Health Impairment

Survey respondents completed a 35-item health checklist. Percentages are reported for the most frequently checked categories, listed in rank order.

- Severe Anxiety (94%)
- Sleep disruption (84%)
- Loss of concentration (82%)
- Feeling edgy, easily startled (80%) [Hypervigilance/PTSD]
- Obsession over bully’s motives & tactics (76%)
- Stress headaches (64%)
- Avoidance of feelings, places (49%) [Avoidance/PTSD]
- Shame or embarrassment that changed lifestyle/routines (49%)
- Racing heart rate (48%)
- Recurrent memories (46%) [Thought Intrusion/PTSD]
- Physical exhaustion, taking to bed, unable to function (45%)
- New body aches--muscles or joints (43%)
- Diagnosed depression (41%)
- Significant weight change (either up or down) (40%)
- Increased use of substances to cope: tobacco, alcohol, drugs, food (35%)
- Panic attacks (33%)
- TMJ (jaw tightening/teeth grinding) (32%)
- Chronic fatigue syndrome (31%)
- Irritable bowel syndrome (colitis) (25%)
- Migraines (23%)
- Chest pains (21%)

Work Trauma

Work Trauma is a relatively new phrase in the occupational health lexicon. In the psychiatric literature, the phenomenon of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) describes the experience of many Targets. PTSD triggered by people (intentional human design) has the same psychological effect as PTSD caused by natural disasters or accidents. Sufferers lose control over their world, feel intensely threatened, and no longer feel safe and secure. PTSD manifests itself when a person adopts one or more of the following symptoms:

- hypervigilance (easily startled, on guard, feeling edgy, paranoia)
- thought intrusions (nightmares, flashbacks, recurrent memories)
- avoidance-dissociation (numbing of thoughts, feelings, need to avoid traumatizing locations)

All of the symptom categories were included in the checklist. For each individual, a Trauma Cluster score was computed with a score range of 0 to 3. The proportion of those exhibiting all three trauma symptoms: women -- 31% , men 21%. The bully's gender was not related to the generation of Work Trauma. The maximum trauma cluster score of 3 could be equally attributed to women bullies (51%) and men bullies (49%).

Average trauma scores for women were significantly higher than for men (1.80 vs.1.51, respectively) ($t = 3.02, p = .003$)

Naturally, previously traumatized Targets experienced more Work Trauma than those with no prior experience (2.07 vs. 1.63, $t = 3.75, p = .0002$). This finding supports the argument made in the book *The Bully At Work* that a small proportion of people becomes Targets because of prior experiences that rendered them vulnerable.

Another common sense theory related to Work Trauma is that support would minimize the negative impact. There was a small inverse correlation between Trauma scores and extent of positive support given by friends outside of work ($r = -.087, p < .035$). But there was no such relationship between trauma and support from spouses or partners.

Women Targets with partners had a slightly higher average trauma score (1.81) than women without partners (1.77); whereas men Targets with partners had a much lower average trauma score (1.46) than men without partners (1.76). This means that partners can mitigate the Work Trauma experience. However, it is primarily the men's partners who provide the helpful support and not the women's partners.

There was a significant positive correlation between education and traumatization. That is, as education level rose, the number of trauma symptoms rose. This can be explained by assuming that education leads to greater skill or greater commitment to work. In turn, that skill threatens the bully and increases the intensity of the abuse. Also, the people most vulnerable to abuse could be the most competent if they also believe that the workplace will treat them fairly and reward their skill. In a sense, the bright target is apolitical. He or she underestimates the importance of political manipulation to others.

Bullying & Traditional Workplace Violence

One hypothesized connection between bullying and homicidal workplace violence is that the psychologically abused person's frustration builds to a point of explosion. The Target would then be the perpetrator. In certain instances of highly publicized violence, this may have been true given who the victims of the violence were – supervisors, HR people, EEO officers.

However, from our extensive coaching experience, Targets are non-confrontive, introverted and non-violent. A much different hypothesis about their violence potential emerges when one considers the downward emotional spiral that most experience from anxiety, through depression to prolonged PTSD. If violence is likely, it is most likely in a form turned inward – suicide.

Thinking about violence toward others and suicide was nearly equally likely (21% and 22%, respectively), dispelling the myth that Targets are the ones likely to commit homicide at work.

Economic Impact of Bullying

Respondents were asked to provide their income before and after the bullying. We computed a difference score for those individuals who answered those questions.

- 51% lost income as a result of the bullying with many losing everything
- 33% experienced no change (this can happen with continued employment and be used to counter plaintiff's arguments in a legal action or formal complaint that "adverse action" happened)
- 16% actually realized a gain in income as the result of termination and replacement with a better-paying job elsewhere. This statistic should be interpreted as a sign of hope to Targets who often fail to see alternatives to their grim situations. There is always an alternative to the destructive effects of working daily with a hostile tyrant.

3. Support for Bullied Targets

Targets were asked if they reported their mistreatment others and what actions those persons took. The possible actions were:

- Positive actions (maintaining the Target's perspective, testifying, keeping the relationship)
- Doing nothing, even though by virtue of telling the person, a request for help was made
- Negative actions (abandonment of Target, turning into an enemy, siding with the bully)

Potential supporters were: Co-Workers, Bully's Boss, Human Resources, Spouse/Partner and Outside (of work) Friends. The results below summarize who knew about the bullying and what they did in terms of helping or hurting. The numbers are expressed as percentages of respondents.

	Co-Workers	Bully's Boss	Human Res.	Spouse/Part.	Outside Friends
Were told:	87	73	63	92	91
Positive actions:	15	18	17	85	79
Did nothing:	28	40	51	9	15
Negative actions:	57	42	32	6	6

Targets were least likely to tell HR, but that is because of HR's reputation of backing management (the bully's boss in this survey), which is reflected in the statistically significant correlation between HR and the bullies' bosses' support levels ($r = .496, p < .0001$).

It is clear that workplace “insiders” – co-workers, the bully’s boss and HR – were destructive, not supportive. Positive support came only from spouses and friends outside of work.

Hostility With Impunity

The aggression by bullies rarely leads to negative career consequences. The perpetrators' immediate bosses directly helped the bully or punished the complaining Target in 42% of cases. Tacit support also came from 40% of the bullies' managers who did nothing to intervene.

Human resources also supported the bully by reacting negatively to the Target (32%) or by doing nothing (51%) despite requests for help. The correlation between actions taken by the bullies' bosses and HR was the largest of all support indices measured and was statistically significant ($r = .496, p < .0001$). This finding supports the perception of collusion Target’s report anecdotally.

Work Trauma experienced by Targets (described in detail in the Health section) is worsened because of the preponderance of negative actions taken by bullies' bosses and HR ($r = -.179, p < .0001$ and $r = -.185, p < .0001$, respectively).

Of the Target's co-workers, 11% actually sided with the bully.

Negative sanctions against the bully -- censure, transfer or termination -- occurred in only 7% of the cases and that was only for those situations where the bullying had stopped for the Targets. The majority of survey respondents (62%) reported that the hostility was ongoing at the time of completing the online questionnaire.

Seeking Help and Healing

Despite the emotional devastation experienced by many Targets, few (37%) visited a private mental health professional.

Another myth is that employees are “sue crazy” or “frivolously” litigious. However, only 37% of Targets ever consulted an attorney. Fewer still (19%) actually filed a legal complaint. There seems to be little truth to the critic’s complaint that harassed employees are “tortifying the workplace.”

Targets were asked what factors helped the healing process, to enable them to continue their lives as they had enjoyed prior to the bully’s unwanted assault of their worklife. The top six factors (with percentages) were as follows:

1. Self-determination, personal resolve, emotional strength (63%)
2. Love from family (60%)
3. Personal faith (50%)
4. Friends away from work (49%)
5. Deciding to fight back (47%)
6. Separation from the perpetrator (46%)

Additional healing factors: mental health support (26%); physician (25%); time (34%).

In the aftermath of bullying, experienced by 38% of the Target respondents, 21% reported a worklife completely free of bullying, while 18% were less troubled by the now infrequent experience of bullying. The 61% who said they were still plagued by bullying in answer to the question about freedom from bullying corresponds to the 62% who said that their bullying was still ongoing in the question that asked what made it stop.

4. What Made the Bullying Stop

For the majority of respondents (62%), bullying was concurrent with completing the survey.

Targets, for whom the bullying had stopped, explained what made it stop:

- 11% of targets transferred but kept their jobs with the same employer
- 38% of targets left their jobs voluntarily
- 44% of targets were expelled in a way controlled by the employer

Negative sanctions against the bully -- censure, transfer or termination -- occurred in only 7% of the cases.

That means 82% actually lost their jobs simply because a bully came uninvited into their lives.

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