

# WORKPLACE **BULLYING** INSTITUTE™

## 2014 WBI U.S. WORKPLACE BULLYING SURVEY

### **Employers' & Coworkers' Reactions to Bullying**

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FUNDING FROM



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## EMPLOYERS' REACTIONS TO BULLYING

**72% of American employer reactions either condone or explicitly sustain bullying;  
less than 20% take actions to stop it**

In 2014 at the time of the Survey, there was no state or federal law yet enacted to compel American employers to address abusive conduct that occurred outside the limited definitions of illegal discriminatory actions. The absence of a law means that employers may tolerate misconduct without legal risk. Of course, repeated abusive conduct, as defined in the prevalence question, does prove costly for employers who choose to ignore it. Tangible costs include unwanted turnover of key skilled personnel, absenteeism, higher insurance costs (health and employment practices liability), and litigation expenses. Intangible costs include: damage to institutional reputation and an impaired ability to recruit and retain the best talent.

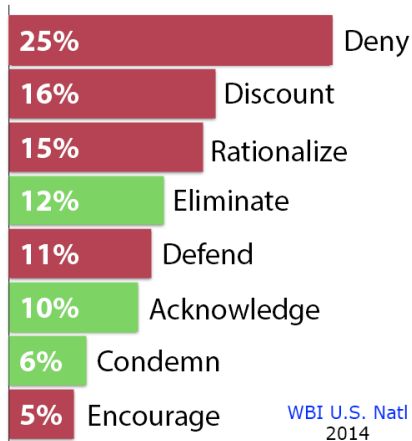
A rational employer would seek to minimize preventable costs and strive to eliminate demonstrable abusive conduct. A 2013 WBI poll conducted by Zogby of Business Leaders, CXO-level corporate leaders, showed that 68% of executives considered “workplace bullying a serious problem.” And according to this current 2014 Survey, 48% of Americans are affected by bullying. Given the confluence of this awareness, we asked the public how employers were voluntarily dealing with bullying without needing to comply with laws.

*Question:* What do you know to be the most common American employer reaction to complaints of abusive conduct (when it is not illegal discrimination)?

Table 10

Employer Reactions	Proportion	Percentage
<b>Encourage it; Necessary for a competitive organization</b>	.0483	5%
<b>Defend it; When offenders are executives and managers</b>	.1115	11%
<b>Rationalize it; It's an innocent, routine way of doing business</b>	.1543	15%
<b>Deny it; It doesn't happen here, fail to investigate complaints</b>	.2491	25%
<b>Discount it; Describe impact as not serious</b>	.1599	16%
<i>Negative Reactions</i>	<i>.7230</i>	<i>72%</i>
<b>Acknowledge it; Show concern for affected workers</b>	.0985	10%
<b>Eliminate it; Create and enforce policies and procedures</b>	.1208	12%
<b>Condemn it; Exercise zero-tolerance</b>	.0576	6%
<i>Positive Reactions</i>	<i>.2770</i>	<i>28%</i>

Figure 12



Respondents were clear that employers fail to appropriately react to abusive conduct much more frequently than they take positive steps ameliorate bullying. Denial and discounting were the most common reactions by employers.

The 6% condemnation rate in this Survey matches the rate in a separate WBI study (WBI 2012 IP-B) given by targets to describe how many good employers had created effective anti-bullying policies and who had faithfully enforced them (5.5%).

## COWORKERS' REACTIONS TO BULLYING

Results from several WBI online surveys of bullied targets reliably show that coworkers rarely help their bullied colleagues. Several social psychological processes operate in the group setting to explain the failure to act prosocially.

The perspective of the general public captured in this national Survey describes circumstances somewhat more positively than surveys of bullied targets. We believe the reference to “most of the witnesses” led to these inexplicable results. The flaw is in the design of the question.

Doing nothing was the most cited tactic. Of course, doing nothing to help colleagues when they are distressed is not a neutral act. It is negative. However, it is not the same as betraying the target by siding with the perpetrator(s). Negative actions were taken in 49% of cases.

Respondents from the national sample believe that approximately one-quarter of coworkers (29%) take public positive steps to help their bullied friends. This is more benevolent than targets credit coworkers to be. And the public estimate that only 7% of coworkers ostracize (socially exclude, “ice out,” and isolate) their peers seems unrealistically low.

*Question:* How did most of the witnesses react to the ongoing mistreatment of the targeted person?

Table 11

Responses	Proportion	Percentage
<b>Did nothing</b>	.3835	38%
<b>Privately aided the target/victim</b>	.2229	22%
<b>Publicly helped the target/victim: corroboration, reported incidents</b>	.1305	13%
<b>Attempted to intervene or resolve: talked to perpetrator and/or management</b>	.1566	16%
<b>Isolated/ostracized the target/victim from the group</b>	.0703	7%
<b>Sided with the perpetrator: ended relationships with the target/victim</b>	.0361	4%

We examined the differences in the perceptions of bullied targets and witnesses with respect to the rates of three negative coworker behaviors: doing nothing, ostracism, and siding with the bully. Though targets believed 41% of coworkers did nothing to help, witnesses confessed to a relatively high rate of doing nothing themselves in 30% of cases.

Both ostracism and betrayal seemed to be taboo according to both targets and witnesses. The rates varied between 3% and 9%. The low rates probably reflect a social desirability bias.

## ZOGBY ANALYTICS SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The Workplace Bullying Institute commissioned Zogby Analytics to conduct an online survey of 1,000 adults in the US. All interviews were completed January 27 and 28, 2014. Using trusted interactive partner resources, thousands of adults were invited to participate in this interactive survey. Each invitation is password coded and secure so that one respondent can only access the survey one time.

Using information based on census data, voter registration figures, CIA fact books and exit polls, Zogby uses complex weighting techniques to best represent the demographics of the population being surveyed. Weighted variables may include age, race, gender, region, party, education, and religion.

Based on a confidence interval of 95%, the margin of error for 1,000 is +/- 3.2 percentage points. This means that all other things being equal, the identical survey repeated will have results within the margin of error 95 times out of 100. Subsets of the data have a larger margin of error than the whole data set. Additional factors can create error, such as question wording and question order.

One of the conventions used in Zogby surveys is to allow respondents a response option of “Not Sure.” WBI chose to eliminate the “Not Sure” responses from the sample in all questions. Below are the sample characteristics.

Table 18

Sample Characteristics	Frequency	Valid Percent*
<b>Sample size</b>	1,000	100
<i>Region</i>		
<b>East</b>	220	22
<b>South</b>	260	26
<b>Central/Great Lakes</b>	300	30
<b>West</b>	220	22
<i>Age</i>		
<b>18-29</b>	220	22
<b>30-49</b>	360	36
<b>50-64</b>	250	25
<b>65+</b>	170	17
<i>Race</i>		
<b>White</b>	680	68
<b>Hispanic</b>	130	13
<b>African American</b>	120	12
<b>Asian/Pacific</b>	41	4.1
<b>Other/mixed</b>	29	2.9
<i>Religion</i>		
<b>Catholic</b>	260	26
<b>Protestant</b>	530	53
<b>Jewish</b>	30	3
<b>Other/None (religion)</b>	180	18
<i>Respondent Gender</i>		
<b>Male</b>	485	48.5
<b>Female</b>	515	51.5
<i>Employment Status</i>		
<b>Working</b>	532	53.6
<b>Unemployed – Looking for work</b>	63	6.3