



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MURDER AND MAYHEM

Workplace homicide: What is the risk?

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment August 5, 2010 06:30 PM

Note: This is the first in a series of postings about workplace violence.

A cloud of sadness hangs over the Manchester, Connecticut area in the aftermath of last Tuesday's tragic shooting at a beer distribution plant that claimed the lives of nine employees, including the gunman. As with most horrific episodes like this, fear and anxiety ripple across workplaces everywhere from Boston to Bakersfield. If terror could strike in the suburban community of Manchester, it could strike anywhere, and at any time.

The fear arising out of the Manchester massacre has been heightened by disturbing news reports -- in both print and electronic media -- about some alarming statistics on workplace violence. As fast as the Internet could carry them, figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics were downloaded, e-mailed, faxed, twittered, and broadcast, suggesting that almost 1,000 American workers -- nearly three a day -- are murdered each year on

the job, usually by gunfire. In addition workplace violence is now the third leading cause of employment-related fatalities.

Actually, the number of workplace homicides has continued to drop steadily for well over a decade, mimicking the decline in homicide generally. Regardless, with reference to multiple killings daily, the message is painfully clear: You had better watch out, because the next disgruntled and murderous employee may be working nearby at your office or warehouse.

A better understanding of these workplace murder figures is sorely needed. The vast majority of the incidents involve robberies -- taxicab holdups, convenience store stickups and assaults upon police and security officers. Many others stem from domestic disputes that spill over into the office suite. The least common form of workplace homicide, claiming fewer than 100 victims per year, are the murderous acts of disgruntled employees and ex-employees seeking revenge over work-related issues. The term "epidemic," which has been used to describe the problem of workplace violence and murder, is more hyperbole than reality.



By no means do we wish to trivialize or deny the pain and suffering of the Manchester nine or their friends and families. The devastation is unfathomable. Yet we also need to keep in perspective the level of risk.

The few dozen people slain each year at the hands of embittered employees are a tiny fraction of the millions of Americans who apparently put their lives on the line every day on the job. Actually, the likelihood of becoming a victim is literally less than one in a million. In fact, American workers are far more likely to be killed while commuting to the job in a highway pileup than to be gunned down by the seemingly quiet guy at the next desk.

In the midst of the ongoing economic downturn, concerns about corporate downsizing, company layoffs, bankruptcies and factory closings increase the level of stress and

despair in the American workplace. How then can we protect ourselves against the possibility that more beleaguered workers will turn their worksites into battle zones?

Whatever steps we take to combat workplace violence should not be driven by hysteria, especially in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy. We must come to terms with the small risk of workplace murder in the same way we tolerate the occasional deaths from plane crashes or tornadoes. As with other catastrophes, we should react in a sound and rational way to the Manchester tragedy.

One lesson is that we all need to make greater efforts to reach out to co-workers and neighbors in order to combat the true epidemic of loneliness, isolation and resentment. At the same time, companies should do all they can to humanize the workplace, rather than trying to single out the potentially violent employee who might have murder on his mind.

Of course, we could conceivably reduce the risk of workplace homicide virtually to zero through some draconian measures: by transforming office buildings into tightly secured fortresses, with metal detectors and surveillance cameras at all entrances; by requiring intensive psychological screening of all job recruits including polygraph tests; by scanning the computer files of all employees in search of violent Internet downloads; by locking up all workers who look or act unusual or who lack social skills as well as close friends; and, finally, by strictly prohibiting private ownership of all guns. We're not about to do any of these things because we value our personal freedoms. They need to be protected as much as life itself.