



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CRIME PATTERNS AND TRENDS , MURDER AND MAYHEM

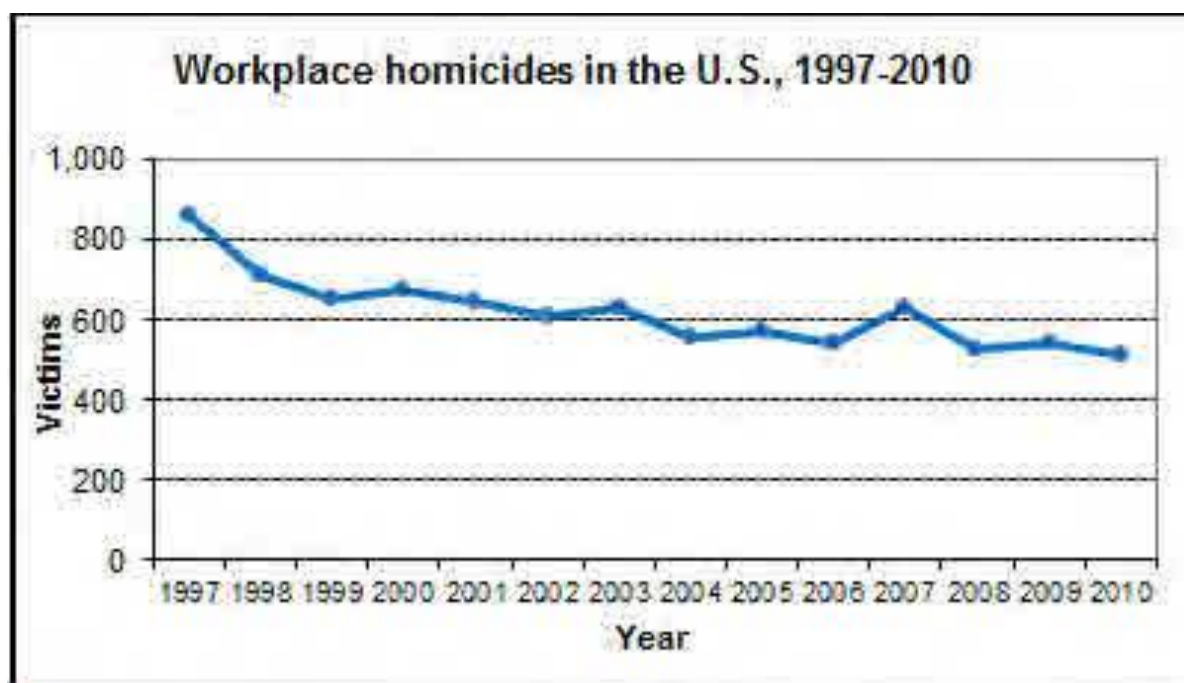
When disgruntled customers kill

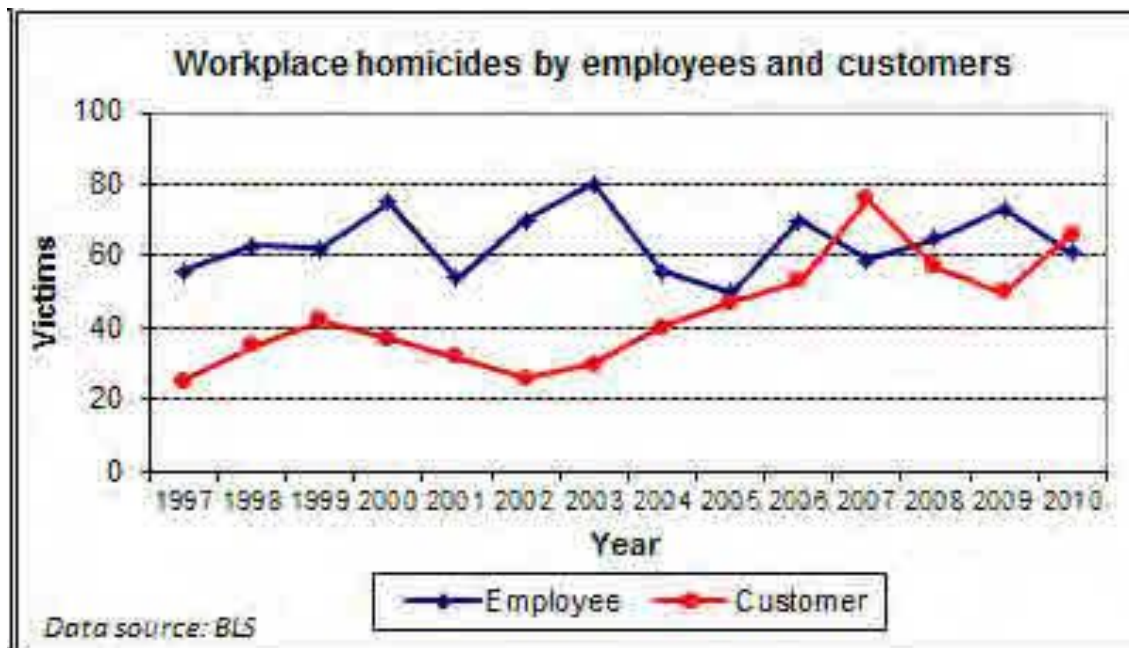
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The latest [report](#) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics appears to have good news with regard to the safety and well-being of American workers. According to preliminary tabulations of occupational fatalities for 2010 (see below), homicides in the workplace declined almost 7% over 2009, continuing a long-term downward trend that began nearly two decades ago. In fact, the 506 workplace homicides for 2010 is the lowest count since these statistics have been collected.

Workplace homicides typically involve robbery -- predominately robberies of convenience stores and taxi drivers for quick cash and quick getaway. These types of episodes have indeed declined substantially in recent years, paralleling the general decline in the overall U.S. homicide rate.

The aggregate figures, although encouraging, obscure a troubling fact: Certain forms of workplace homicide -- fatal assaults by co-workers and especially by customers -- continue to buck the overall downward trend (see below).





While they represent a small share of the total, cases that fit the stereotypical co-worker from hell who decides to take matters -- and guns -- into his own hands have remained relatively stable in recent years. With an increasing number of workers facing termination, just holding the line can be considered a positive sign that companies are becoming better prepared to deal with internal employment issues.

Not so encouraging, however, is that workers in diverse occupational settings are increasingly being assaulted and killed by customers. Disgruntled consumers, clients, and patients sometimes attempt to avenge, through sabotage or violent means, perceived mistreatment by banks, loan offices, manufacturers, restaurants, law firms, hospitals, and government agencies. Although hardly an epidemic statistically, these reflect a small and extreme tip of a much larger iceberg of consumer responses to frustration.

Decades ago it was virtually unheard of for a dissatisfied customer to seek murderous revenge against a firm or company. However, fighting city hall has taken on a new and ominous meaning. Resentment can be felt not only by vengeful employees but also by disgruntled clients and customers who seek to win one for the little guy. In a complex, bureaucratic society, more and more citizens are feeling powerless against the red tape and unresponsiveness of big business and government. Most, of course, will do little more than complain loudly about injustice. But increasing numbers refuse to sit back and take it.

Part of the problem lies in the impersonal or ineffective response of customer relations in a service economy that is not particularly service oriented. More and more, consumers are frustrated by automated phone systems with confusing button-pushes and lengthy holding queues, notwithstanding the claim by a recorded receptionist that the call is important. □

And when a live human being picks up the phone, it is often some overburdened, uninspired, and poorly trained customer relations representative. All too frequently, the customer relations associate attempts to justify incompetence by claiming that the computers are down or that a computer error is to blame for his or her inability to resolve your predicament.

Unfortunately, customer service has too often become customer disservice. And now, with virtually every company having an Internet site, getting help and satisfaction is almost impossible. The corporate Web pages (absent addresses and phone numbers) instead offer a section on FAQs (frequently asked

questions), but they never are the questions that you seem to have. For that, you go to www.customerservice.com/dont-hold-your-breath.

Unlike recommended strategies for reducing employee violence, a company can rarely screen its clientele or refer angry customers to an employee assistance program. Yet a solution to the problem of the vengeful customer is straight-forward. In the face of growing alienation and cynicism, large companies and agencies must upgrade and humanize their customer relations efforts. They must make easily accessible an adequate number of competent and concerned human beings rather than impersonal machines.

And, above all, companies and agencies of all types must remember the adage: The customer is always right, especially when he is holding an AK-47.