

# Violence at work tends to increase after staff reductions

November 23 2020

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When employers cut down on staff, more incidents of violence are reported to the Swedish Work Environment Authority, according to research. Violence often occurs at workplaces where clients are in need

of help and support.

"Actually, this is a work environment issue," says Sofia Wikman, criminologist at University of Gävle.

Research shows that reductions in the number of staff are connected to an increase in the number of employees who report to Statistics Sweden that they have been exposed to [violence](#). For this reason, violence is a symptom of a malfunctioning organization. Examples are clients who have to wait for a long time for a decision, queues that are too long, general unclarities or if, for example, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency changes its policy.

"The Swedish Social Insurance Agency reported a great number of suicidal threats for a certain period of time. They had changed their decision-making without engaging in a risk assessment. This concerns the preconditions for how staff could approach their clients, as threats and violence often involve the ones who are the most vulnerable in our society," says Sofia Wikman.

"We are very good at being stable in Sweden," Sofia Wikman continues, "and our occupational health and safety legislation is good and stable. But we aren't particularly flexible, not very good at lowering thresholds for those who need that or at listening to staff."

"We have created a society which celebrates officials who stand for rationality and thinking. But our ability, as humans, to be intuitive, to feel, has been downgraded. We forget this gift, to feel with our stomachs."

Sofia Wikman usually quotes Albert Einstein to her students: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the

gift."

To illustrate the problem, Sofia Wikman usually refers to the two characters Pippi Longstocking and Prussiluskan in Swedish author Astrid Lindgren's children's books on Pippi Longstocking. The challenge is to make people like Pippi Longstocking and people like Prussiluskan agree on the rules in a workplace. This is true because we need legal certainty and democracy, but we also need to know when we can "lower thresholds."

"I usually say that we need different types of people at a workplace. We need Prussiluskan's thoughtfulness, wisdom and planning, but also Pippi's spontaneity, instincts and feelings. Such oppositions influence and transform one another," Sofia Wikman says.

## **Checklists are not the answer**

Sofia Wikman points to the fact that today we have many courses on threats and violence in working life, courses which are made legitimate by stating that threats and violence increase. But these courses focus not on how to use your intuition but on how to think rationally about these issues.

"This is not always what we need, because sometimes the person holding the gun is a little guy with Down's syndrome, and sometimes it is a criminal like Jackie Arklöw, and the outcome may be devastating if you can't keep these balls in the air at the same time. We can't use checklists to make all issues concerning safety disappear. In that way, we become robots; we need to remain human."

## **Violence has never been allowed**

Sofia argues that there is an ongoing process of juridification in society; we use police and the judicial system to outlaw things, aiming for zero tolerance.

"But violence has never been allowed. Are you going to start telling people with dementia or people with psychotic disorders or people who just woken up from anesthetic that what you do is against the law? That's meaningless. What is important, however, are organizational preconditions for staff when they meet people, not only training in how to meet people, because if there isn't enough time, such training doesn't matter."

People often imagine that they can learn about threats and violence, but according to Sofia Wikman, that's hard. However, if you work for a long time in a workplace, and if you learn from colleagues, you can find workplace-specific strategies on how to work safely.

Threats and violence are symptoms relating to the organization, and this insight can be used in prevention. It is not a question of individuals who are exposed. Instead it concerns the whole organization; how should we improve?

These issues need to be brought up in work teams, without guilt and shame. If the [work environment](#) is good, we learn from one another and this type of mindset can be continuously developed together.

"It's clear that if you are doing a [good job](#), the risks for threats and violence diminish. If you focus on core activities, have enough time to deliver bad news and treat people kindly, then the risk is reduced," says Sofia Wikman, senior lecturer in criminology at University of Gävle.

Provided by University of Gävle

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