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## Workplace Bullying: Persistent Patterns of Workplace Aggression

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*Workplace Aggression:*

*Efforts by individuals to harm others at work (or the entire organization) in ways the intended targets are motivated to avoid.*



*Workplace Bullying:*


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*Situations in which individuals, or groups of individuals, subject one or more others to negative behaviors at work over an extended period of time.*

Definition consistent with:

Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., Zapf, D., & Cooper, C. L. (Eds.). (2003). Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace: International perspectives in research and practice. London: Taylor & Francis.

Leymann, H. (1996). The content and development of mobbing at work. European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 5, 165-184.




*Bullying differs from aggression in that it:*

- requires opportunities for repeated contact;
- is likely to be more overt in operation than single or isolated acts of aggression;
- violates the "effect-danger ratio;"
- involves power differences (real or imagined) between actor(s) & target(s); and,
- exists with the active support, tacit approval, or simple indifference of others in the workplace.

Bullying differs from aggression more generally in that it:


- A. requires opportunities for repeated contact between the actor(s) and target(s). For this reason, situational factors play an important role. For example:
  - a. In the case of one-on-one bullying, the actor and target must have an ongoing relationship. This would be typical of a supervisor bullying a subordinate.
  - b. Other workplace examples involve the opportunity for repeated contact between organizational insiders and outsiders, best captured in healthcare settings in which nurses and other healthcare staff are the targets of repeated acts of aggression by patients or social workers in domestic violence situations.
- B. Persistent patterns of aggression (i.e., bullying) is more obvious to targets than single or isolated instances of aggression
- C. The more overt nature of bullying leaves actors open to retaliation and this is a violation of the effect-danger ratio, in which individuals seek to maximize the harm inflicted on others while shielding themselves from retaliation. Refer to:
  - a. Bjorkqvist, K., Osterman, K., & Lagerspetz, K. M. J. (1994). Sex differences in covert aggression among adults. *Aggressive Behavior*, *20*, 27-33.
- D. Bullying targets are unable or unwilling to remove themselves from the situation. Bullying must be allowed or encouraged to exist or may simply flourish in an atmosphere of indifference



*Bullying: Two Defining Features*

- Persistency of Behavior
  - Frequency: more than one occurrence
  - Duration: the period of time over which the behavior(s) occur(s)
- Power and Powerlessness
  - Power imbalance between actor(s) and target(s)
  - Powerlessness (real or imagined) within situations

Note: Perceived powerlessness might be behind failure to report bullying



## International studies of workplace bullying

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Selected sample of studies  
demonstrating the percentage of  
respondents identified as "bullied"

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Author	Yr	Nr.	Sample	PCT
Leymann et al.	93	171	Steel workers	4
Kivimäki et al.	00	5,655	Hospital staff	5
Zur Muhlen	01	552	Communal administrators	10
TUC	98	1,000	NOP Telephone survey	11
IPD	96	1,000	Telephone survey	13
UNISON	97	736	Public-sector union	14
Leymann et al.	93	37	Nursery school staff	16
Bjorkqvist	94	338	University employees	17
Lewis	99	415	Union members	18
Vartia & Hyyti	02	896	Prison officers	20
Keashly & Jagatic	00	1148	Stratified statewide survey	27 42
Quine	99	1,100	Employees NHS Trust	38
Rayner	97	1,137	Part-time students	53

6 months | 12 months | Last 5 years | During working life

Leymann & Tallgren (1993): Sweden

Kivimäki, M., Elovainio, M., & Vahtera, J. (2000): Finland

Zur Muhlen (2001): Germany

TUC (Trades Union Congress; 1998): London

IPD (Institute of Personnel Development; 1996): London

UNISON (European Trade Union; 1997): London

Leymann et al.(1993): Sweden

Bjorkqvist (1994): Finland


Lewis (1999): Wales

Vartia & Hyyti (2002): Finland

Keashly & Jagatic (2000): Michigan, U.S.A. NOTE: In this study, respondents indicated bullying over 12 month period (27%) and bullying over course of career (42%)

Quine (1999): UK

Rayner(1997): UK



## International studies of workplace bullying

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Selected sample of studies showing  
the percentage of respondents  
identifying "supervisors" or  
"coworkers" as the source of bullying



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Origin (# of studies)	Supervisor		Coworker	
	Range %	Mean %	Range %	Mean %
Austria (2)	73-75	74	45-55	50
Finland (3)	43-55	52	32-70	52
Germany (7)	41-91	69	37-80	66
Ireland (2)	70-93	81	7-32	20 (min)
Italy (1)	87	87 (max)	40	40
Norway (1)	54	54	54	54
Portugal (1)	45	45	71	71 (max)
Sweden (1)	47	47	54	54
Switzerland (1)	85	85	59	59
UK (5)	54-84	71	12-34	23
US (2)	37-43	40 (min)	41-42	42

Selected group of studies reporting source of aggression. As can be seen, in the UK, where most of the bullying research has been done, supervisors are most often cited as the source of aggression and this was least likely to be the case in the US. These differences may often be attributed to the way in which bullying is measured. In the UK, for example, respondents are often provided with a definition of bullying emphasizing power imbalances and this, of course, is more likely to bring supervisory bullying to mind. Elsewhere, especially in the US, respondents are presented with a list of behaviors and asked to indicate the extent to which they've experienced those behaviors—leaving them free to focus on the behaviors as opposed to the source. Regardless, it seems clear that the sources of bullying are most often to be found among supervisors and coworkers and less likely from subordinates and customers/clients.

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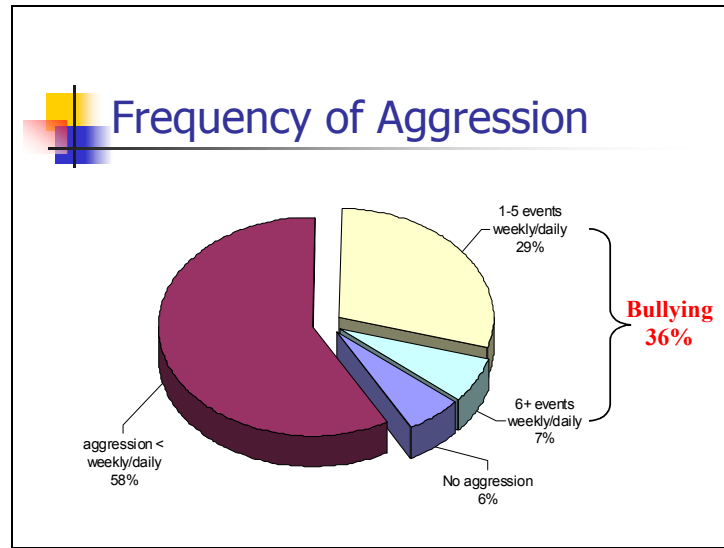
## Research Findings from the Workplace Stress and Aggression Project

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A Collaborative Action-Inquiry  
Research Project with the  
Department of Veterans Affairs

The slides that follow are based on data derived during the course of an ongoing project in the Department of Veterans Affairs. These data were collected between November 2000 and August 2001. The project is in its fourth year and we have just completed a second round of data collection (November 2002).

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Percentages of respondents reporting:

no aggression: 6%

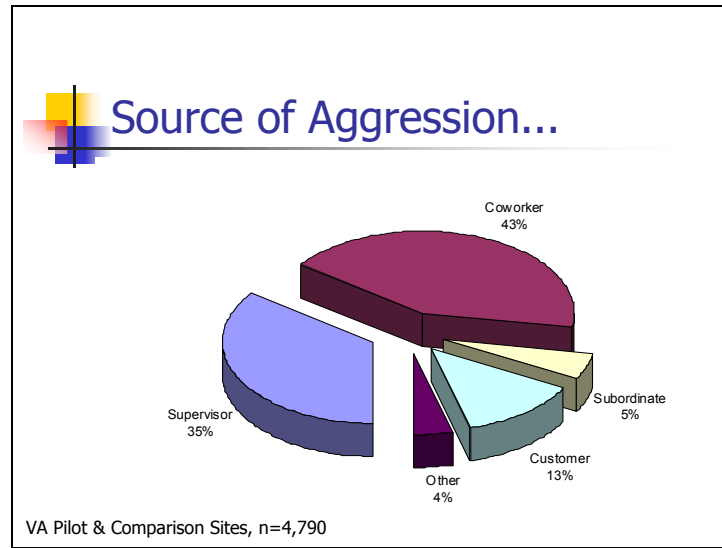
Aggression but less than weekly or daily: 58%

Between 1 and 5 aggressive events on a weekly or daily basis: 29%

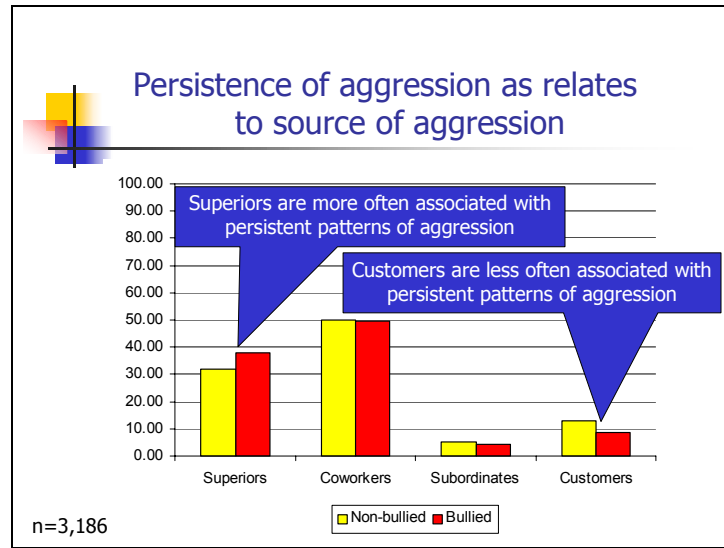
6 or more aggressive events on a weekly or daily basis: 7%

By combining 1-5 and 6+ categories, we classify 36% of our respondents as being bullied; or, more precisely, as those experiencing persistent acts of aggression over a 12 month period.


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Percentage of respondents reporting supervisors, coworkers, subordinates, customers, and “others” as source of aggression in general—not just persistent forms of aggression. These data were obtained from 11 pilot facilities (participating in a larger experimental project) and 15 comparison sites, n=4,790.



By dichotomizing aggression into “Bullied” (those experiencing 1 or more events on a weekly daily basis for 12 months) and “Non-Bullied” (those experiencing less frequent encounters with aggression), we see that supervisors are more likely to be associated with bullying than less persistent instances of aggression. Conversely, customers are less likely to be associated with persistent acts of aggression and more likely to be involved in single or isolated acts of aggression. There is no statistical difference for coworkers or subordinates.

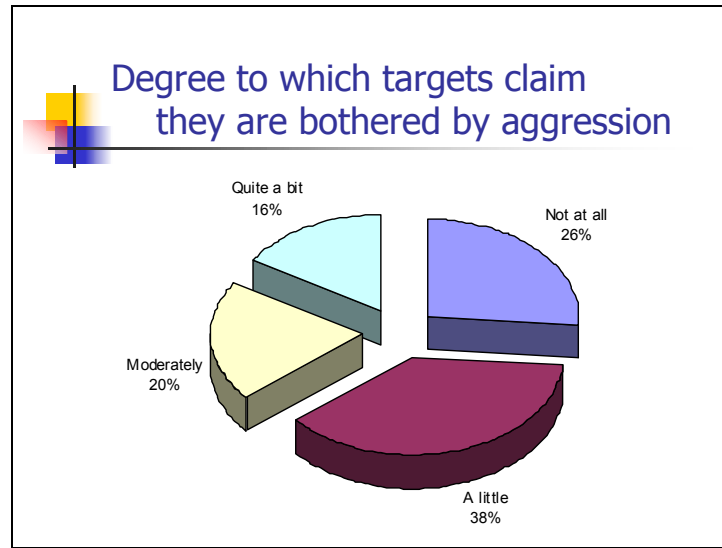


### Single vs. Multiple Actors

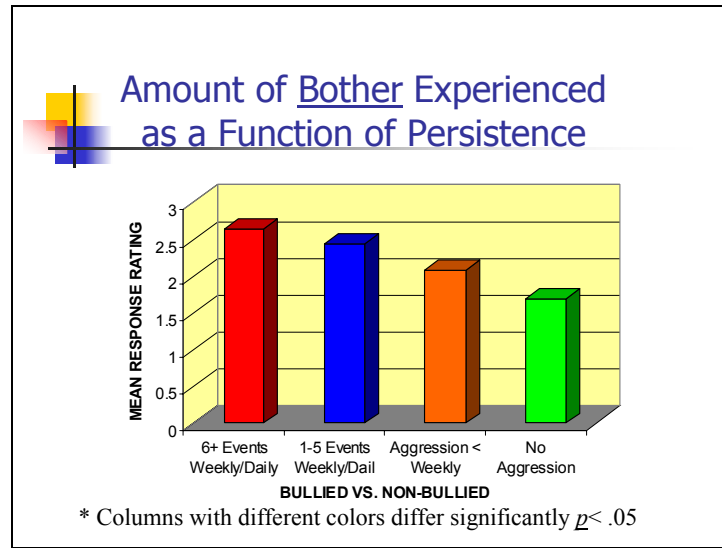
	<u>Non Bullied</u>	<u>Bullied</u>
■ <u>Supervisor</u> only.....	7.0%	4.1%
■ <u>Coworker</u> only.....	6.8%	2.6%
■ <u>Customer</u> only.....	2.3%	1.1%
■ <b>SUP + COW</b> .....	<b>27.9%</b>	<b>31.0%</b>
■ SUP + COW + CUST.....	8.1%	8.6%

A closer examination of the source of aggression reveals that respondents often report multiple actors across incidents. By far, most persons reporting aggression indicate that it comes from supervisors and coworkers and this holds true for both “bullied” and “non-bullied” targets. As can be seen above, 27.9% of non-bullied targets indicate both supervisor and coworkers were involved in aggression towards them and 31% of the bullied respondents indicated this, too.

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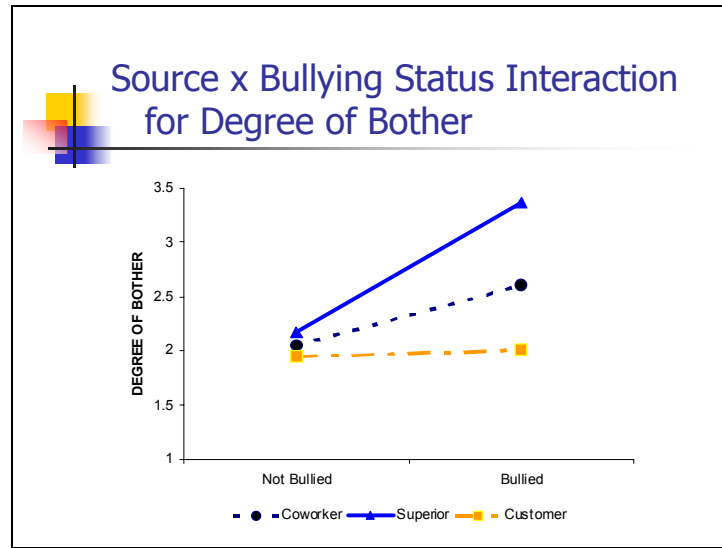
Not everyone is bothered by the acts of aggression they are reporting; rather, 74% report being bothered to some degree (38% a little, 20 Moderately, 16% quite a bit) and 26% report that they were not bothered at all by these behaviors.



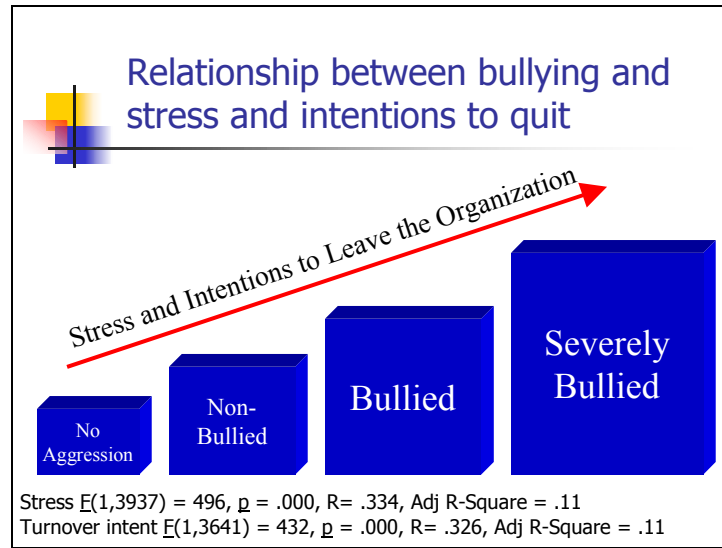
When you take a closer look at the degree to which people are bothered, there seems to be a linear relationship between the amount of aggression (frequency and duration) and the degree of bother experienced.

BOTHER	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
No aggression	1.69	.07
Less than weekly	2.08	.02
1-5 events weekly-daily	2.44	.03
>6 events weekly-daily	2.64	.06





The extent to which people report being “bothered” by aggression is not merely a function of persistence or the nature of the act (both are important) but also by the source of the aggression; i.e., the relationship of the actor to the target. As demonstrated above, when comparing groups of bullied and not-bullied individuals, there is a significant source X bully status interaction. The bullied group is least bothered by customer aggression and most bothered by aggression from supervisor, with Coworker in an intermediate position. There was no reliable effect of source for non-bullied group.



Using linear regression, we examined the relationship between self-reported measures of stress and intentions to leave the organization as a function of persistence of aggression (bullying). As can be seen above, self-reports of stress and intentions to quit are associated with increased self-reports of bullying.

Regressing duration of aggression (I.e. persistence of aggression) on self-reported measures of stress: Stress  $F(1,3937) = 496, p = .000, R = .334, \text{Adj R-Square} = .11$

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.675	0.033	50.741		0
STRESS	0.202	0.009	0.334	22.269	0

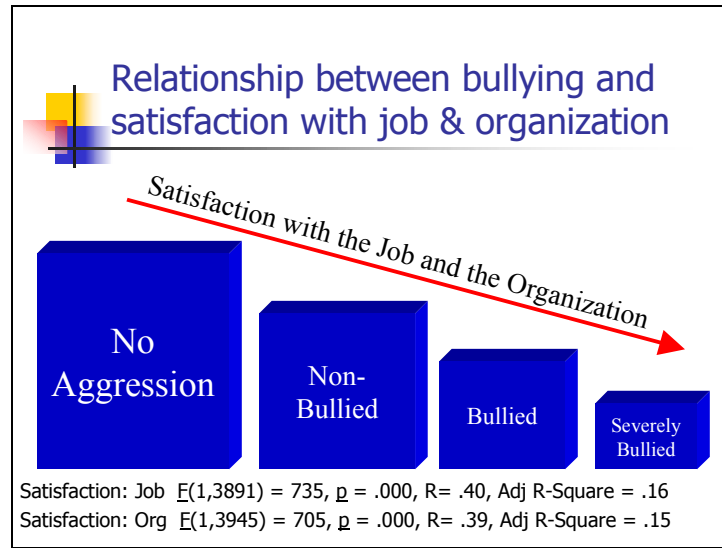
Dependent Variable: AGGEXP Duration of aggression

Regressing duration of aggression (I.e. persistence of aggression) on self-reported measures of intentions to leave the organization.

Turnover intent  $F(1,3641) = 432, p = .000, R = .326, \text{Adj R-Square} = .11$

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.882	.026	72.983		.000
Turnover intent	.179	.009	.326	20.787	.000

a Dependent Variable: AGGEXP Duration of aggression



Using linear regression, we examined the relationship between self-reported measures of satisfaction with one's job and the organization as a function of persistence of aggression (bullying). As can be seen above, both job satisfaction and satisfaction with the organization decreases with increased levels of bullying.

Regressing duration of aggression (i.e. persistence of aggression) on satisfaction with job.

$$F(1, 3891) = 735, p = .000$$

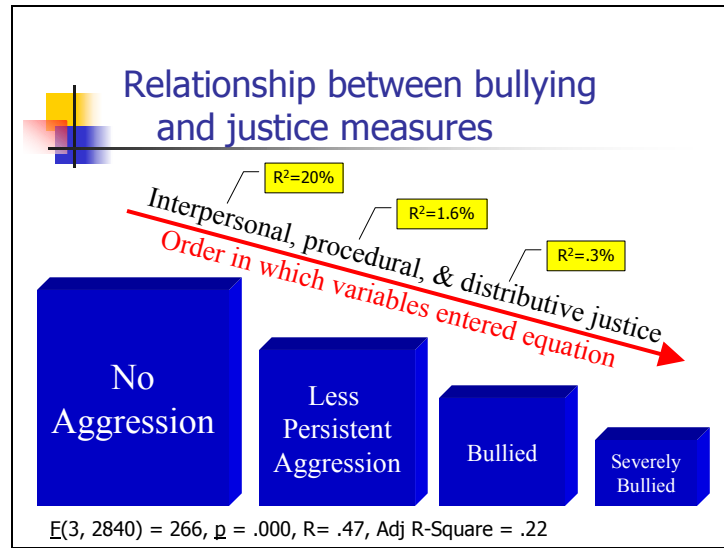
Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	3.249	.034	95.460		.000
Satisf with job	-.253	.009	-.399	-27.103	.000

a Dependent Variable: AGGEXP Duration of aggression

Regressing duration of aggression (i.e. persistence of aggression) on satisfaction with organization.

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	3.133	.030	103.311		.000
Satisf with org	-.240	.009	-.389	-26.559	.000

a Dependent Variable: AGGEXP Duration of aggression



Since bullying is, by definition, mistreatment at the hands of others, it should come as no surprise that perceptions of interpersonal injustice are strongly related to aggression in general and workplace bullying in particular. While controlling for interpersonal, procedural, & distributive forms of injustice, in a stepwise multiple regression procedure, interpersonal justice entered first (accounting for the most variance, 20%) followed by procedural (1.6%) & finally distributive (.3%).

Regressing duration of aggression on justice measures.

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Sqr	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	279.273	1	279.273	720.393	.000
	Residual	1101.751	2842	.388		
	Total	1381.024	2843			
2	Regression	298.583	2	149.291	391.834	.000
	Residual	1082.441	2841	.381		
	Total	1381.024	2843			
3	Regression	303.084	3	101.028	266.173	.000
	Residual	1077.940	2840	.380		
	Total	1381.024	2843			

a Predictors: (Constant), INTJUST Interpersonal Justice

b Predictors: (Constant), INTJUST Interpersonal Justice, PROCJUST Procedural Justice

c Predictors: (Constant), INTJUST Interpersonal Justice, PROCJUST Procedural Justice, DISTJUST Distributive Justice

d Dependent Variable: AGGEXP Duration of aggression

$F(3, 2840) = 266, p = .000, R = .47, \text{Adj R-Square} = .22$

Regressing duration of aggression (I.e. persistence of aggression) on satisfaction with organization.

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
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(Constant)	4.896	.160		30.558	.000
Inter justice	-.263	.030	-.270	-8.872	.000
Proc justice	-.167	.027	-.192	-6.162	.000
Distr justice	-.0376	.011	-.062	-3.443	.001

Dependent Variable: AGGEXP Duration of aggression

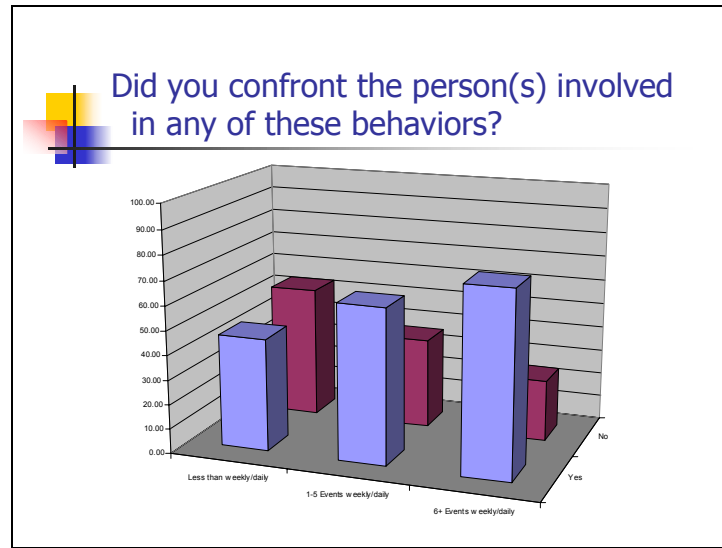
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As can be seen, individuals are more likely to report persistent occurrences of aggression than sporadic and/or isolated events. However, it is important to note that 51% of respondents reporting 1-5 events weekly/daily did not report these incidents to a supervisor or union official.

Did you report any of these experiences to a supervisor or union official?

Q158	Frequency		PCT	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Less than weekly/daily	661	1778	27.10	72.90
1-5 Events weekly/daily	611	647	48.57	51.43
6+ Events weekly/daily	199	82	70.82	29.18

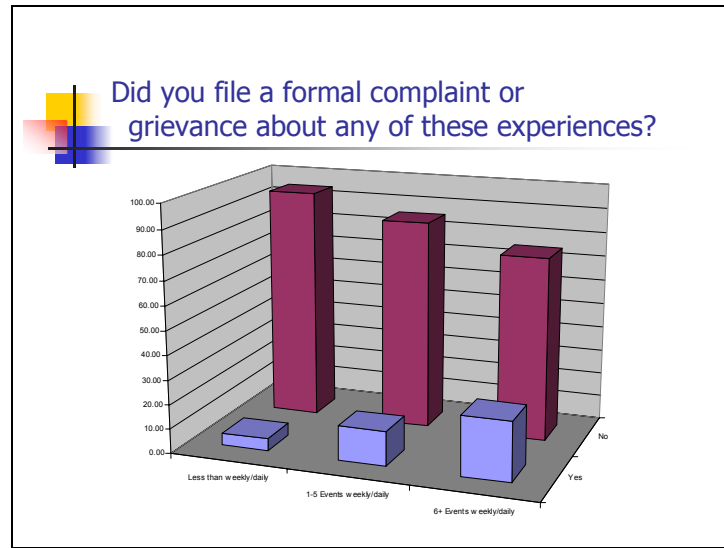


Our results with this VA sample are similar to those obtained in the international studies mentioned earlier, especially as relates to targets confronting their attackers. It is, of course, difficult to know if these individuals actually did confront the actor(s) or if this is merely bravado. Furthermore, we do not know what it means to confront someone; i.e., whether the “confrontation” involves a civil exchange, heated argument or, for that matter, physical retaliation. Furthermore, we do not know whether these confrontations were successful in extinguishing the bullying behaviors. Most of what we know from other studies suggest that severely bullied individuals do not confront the bullies.

Did you confront the person(s) involved in any of these behaviors?

Q159	FREQUENCY		PCT	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Less than weekly/daily	1125	1315	46.11	53.89
1-5 Events weekly/daily	796	463	63.22	36.78
6+ Events weekly/daily	211	70	75.09	24.91

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As academic researchers and practitioners concerned with the problem of bullying, this slide is very disturbing. As can be seen, the vast majority of episodes of aggression or bullying go unreported for several reasons:

- there may be no formal reporting process for these types of behaviors. For example, to whom (and how) do you complain about someone glaring at you, calling you names, spreading rumors, or giving you the “silent treatment?”
- People are concerned that they will be seen as childish for reporting such incidents.
- They don’t believe that a formal complaint will help; In fact, they are often concerned that it will make matters worse.
- People often view these behaviors as just being part of the job.

For whatever reason, there is a substantial amount of data that is presently not being captured.

Did you file a formal complaint or grievance about any of these experiences?

Q160	FREQUENCY		PCT	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Less than weekly/daily	127	2307	5.22	94.78
1-5 Events weekly/daily	177	1080	14.08	85.92
6+ Events weekly/daily	69	212	24.56	75.44





### Top 10 Bullying Behaviors by Source


<u>Supervisor</u>	<u>Coworker</u>	<u>Customer</u>
■ Little/no feedback	■ Glared at	■ Glared at
■ Not given praise	■ Silent treatment	■ Rude/Disrespect
■ Unfair workloads	■ Work interference	■ Sworn at
■ Glared at	■ Rude/Disrespect	■ Yelled or shouted at
■ Delayed action	■ Prevented from expressing self	■ Obscene gestures
■ Lied to	■ Flaunt Status	■ Work interference
■ Silent Treatment	■ Rumors/Gossip	■ Lied to
■ Rude/Disrespect	■ Delayed Action	■ Negative comments re IQ or competence
■ Contributions ignored	■ Refused requests	■ Name calling
■ Withheld Info	■ Withheld Info	■ Kicked/bitten/spat on

Of the 60 behaviors captured in the Workplace Aggression Research Question (WAR-Q), this slide shows the “top 10” reported behaviors in which supervisors, coworkers, or customers were the source. Those behaviors shown in RED are unique to that particular source and those behaviors shown in BLUE are common to all three actors. As can be seen, some behaviors are associated with particular actors who are in a position to employ those tactics. In the case of supervisors, they are best positioned to “give little or no feedback” to employees, withhold praise, assign “unfair” workloads, or “ignore the contributions” of their subordinates. With regard to customers (and in our sample they were veterans seeking health care and benefit services), they are in limited contact with organizational insiders and their aggression is more likely to involve verbal and physical forms of aggression; e.g., using obscene language or gestures, yelling and shouting, other derogatory remarks and pushing shoving, or (as shown above) kicking, biting, and spitting (note: the physical aggression was most often associated with the delivery of healthcare services). Finally, coworkers are in a position to employ a wide variety of aggressive behaviors for a prolonged period of time.



### In sum, as relates to persistent patterns of aggression...

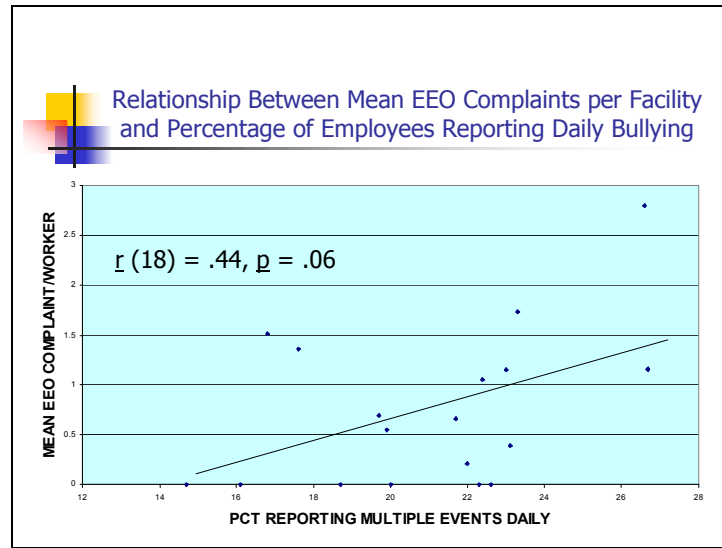
- Aggressive behavior from a supervisor has a greater adverse impact than aggression from any other source.
- The effects of aggression are cumulative, in that greatest amount of reported stress involves multiple actors



## Summary & Concluding Thoughts

- In this sample, 1 in 3 workers report being exposed to persistent aggression
- Persistent aggression seems experientially different from less frequent aggression
- The relationship between actors & targets is important to the experience of (and reaction to) bullying
- There is a need to explore patterning of, and interpersonal dynamics within, persistently aggressive work relationships.
- Is there a relationship between workplace bullying and hostile environments? Some preliminary evidence...

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This is just some preliminary data demonstrating a possible connection between bullying and the creation of a hostile work environment; or, to put it the other way, the likelihood of bullying within an existing hostile work environment. These data were produced using 18 of our 26 VA facilities, for which we had sufficient Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) discrimination data. EEO complaints were aggregated by facility and then the MEAN number of EEO reports per employee was calculated for each facility. Then, we calculated the percentage of employees within each facility reporting daily experiences with bullying. Clearly, this is a very small sample size and EEO complaints represent an extremely low base rate behavior. We just complete a second administration of our survey and we are in the process of testing this for both time periods. In the meantime, it seems suggestive of the fact that discrete acts of aggression, especially when they are frequent and persist over time, can related to EEO complaints that may have a substantial personal cost to affected individuals as well as a substantial financial cost to organizations, associated with the settlement of these claims.