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Social Workers at Risk

The Prevention and Management of Violence

**Robert Brown
Stanley Bute
Peter Ford**

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ROBERT BROWN
STANLEY BUTE
PETER FORD

List of Abbreviations

ACOP	Association of Chief Officers of Probation
ATC	Adult Training Centre
BASW	British Association of Social Workers
CCETSW	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work
CHE	Community Home with Education
CICB	Criminal Injuries Compensation Board
COHSE	Confederation of Health Service Employees
CQSW	Certificate of Qualification in Social Work
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
MH Act	Mental Health Act
NALGO	National and Local Government Officers Association
NAPO	National Association of Probation Officers
NATMH	National Association of Teachers of the Mentally Handicapped
NISW	National Institute for Social Work
SCA	Social Care Association
SEN	State Enrolled Nurse
SSD	Social Services Department

Introduction

This book is about violence towards social work staff. It is concerned with the risks faced by workers in residential, day care and fieldwork settings, in probation, social services and the voluntary sector. It is not about 'working with aggression' as a social work method. Nor is it about violence within families, violence towards people other than social work staff, or violence *by* social work staff towards those in their care, although the second chapter may be relevant to an understanding of violence in general.

The purpose of the book is simply stated: to encourage staff to respond to threatened violence in ways that will minimise risk. It is perhaps a slightly unusual book, in that it contains both research findings and discussion of relevant literature, and yet is not a conventional academic treatise. It is a practical book, stressing good practice and set in a theoretical framework. Because of its subject, it is in places prescriptive to an extent that is uncommon in social work literature, reflecting the authors' consensus about what one should and should not do when faced by someone who is aroused and potentially dangerous. We have tried to make it as clear as possible; before we began, a potential reader told us that 'it would be helpful if it could be put in down-to-earth terms at a level that can be easily assimilated without the need for unnecessary jargon, sometimes misunderstood to be a necessary part of professionalism.' We have striven to observe this dictum.

In July 1978 a Hampshire social worker, Mr Peter Gray, died while visiting a deaf and dumb client, who was subsequently made the subject of a hospital order after he had been

diagnosed as suffering from paranoid psychosis. This tragedy led one of the authors, Stanley Bute, of Hampshire Social Services Department, to undertake a study of violence towards social work staff, under Bristol University's Personal Fellowship scheme. He went on to produce a booklet of guidelines for staff on the management of violence. The heavy demand for this booklet encouraged the three of us to produce a training package on the subject, comprising a short video film and accompanying booklet. This also sold well, convincing us of the demand for such training materials, and led in turn to the suggestion of this book.

Our discussions with numerous social services and probation staff in different work settings indicated that many of them had faced violence, threatened or actual, during their careers, as we ourselves had done. It seemed to us that it would be worth trying to produce a book that would help staff to bridge the gap between the classic psychological studies of aggression and the daily realities of social work. Our collective experience includes practice in probation, social services, mental health and community work, and further experience in social work management and training.

The book is offered to a wide range of staff, including field social workers, probation officers, line managers, receptionists, telephonists, staff in day centres, homes, hostels and institutions, lecturers, trainers and students. Some chapters, such as the final one which is concerned with training, have particular relevance for part of this audience, but others, such as the second one, 'Understanding Violence', are intended for everyone. The theme of the book is the prevention of violence by the adoption of good practice. Linked to this is the notion that social work staff seem to handle the majority of threatening incidents with confidence and ability; however, the practical skills used in handling aggression are very rarely discussed and shared with others.

The first chapter is addressed to a widespread ignorance of the extent of violence towards staff in social work agencies, including fieldwork, residential and day care settings. It is based on some hitherto unpublished data from a survey carried out in 1979, and although the sample of 338 replies contains some degree of bias, we give it prominence because it provides

detailed indications of the hidden problems of violence in social work agencies in one area of the United Kingdom. The second chapter introduces a range of psychoanalytic and behavioural theories relevant to an understanding of aggressive behaviour. It is followed by a set of four chapters which deal with recognising potential violence, preventing it from happening, responding appropriately if violence nevertheless occurs, and obtaining help and support after an incident. Each of these chapters concludes with a summary of 'Points for practice'. Chapter 7 explores issues for social work managers in a range of different settings, and includes a 'Checklist for Managers'. The book ends with some practical suggestions for training.

Our examination of the violence experienced by social work staff raises some interesting questions. In a recent unpublished lecture, Professor Percy Cohen of London University discussed the sociological aspects of social control. He argued that centralised states often have marginal groups at their frontiers, and that the imposition of state control generates violence both to and from the agents of the state. It seems to us that this point applies not only to terrorists in the Basque region or Northern Ireland, but also to social workers who have the duty of implementing laws concerned with the welfare of children, the old and the mentally ill. The removal of people from their homes to institutions is associated with particular risks to staff, as we shall see later in this book.

Violence is exciting, sensational and frightening; it would have been relatively easy to illustrate this book with pictures that excite and frighten, but we have tried not to be sensational. Illustrations from experience have been included because they serve to highlight the details of good practice. Perhaps the most important of all the comments made to us as we prepared the book came from a group of young people resident in a local probation hostel, some with convictions for violence. Whatever you do, they told us, do not upset our relationships with the staff; the last thing they wanted was to be categorised as violent, and for staff to retreat behind a barrier of suspicion and fear. They gave us an unexpected and salutary reminder of the continuing importance of traditional social work relationships, and nothing we say in the following chapters should detract from their point.