

# Violent Death in the Workplace

A Report from the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System

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## **Introduction**

Earlier reports from this project reveal that the majority of violent deaths occur in or around a private home; in a street, road, or sidewalk; or in a motor vehicle. A much smaller proportion, 2%, occurs in the workplace. Workplace lethality represents a unique type of injury event. Are at-work deaths related to workplace problems? If so, what are these problems? Who is at risk for such deaths? Are persons in particular occupations more frequently the victims than others? What clues do these deaths provide about workplace safety in Virginia?

## **Data Sources**

Data used in this report come from the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System (VVDRS) which is part of the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). The NVDRS documents violent deaths that originate within a state's borders. It compiles information from sources used in violent death investigation, and links decedents and circumstances to explain what precipitated the violent death. The VVDRS is the operation and reporting system of the NVDRS within Virginia, and uses the same methodology, definitions, and coding schema.<sup>1</sup> Information is utilized from several sources, primarily the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, law enforcement, the Virginia Division of Vital Records, and the Virginia Department of Forensic Science.

## **Methods and Overview**

Between 2003 and 2010, 227 deaths were identified where the fatal injury occurred at work. Most of these deaths were homicides (62%) or suicides (34%). Also included were deaths of an undetermined manner (3%), deaths due to unintentional firearm discharge (2%), and legal intervention deaths (<1%). This report will focus on workplace suicides and homicides.

Each at-work death was reviewed and additional pieces of information were noted, particularly if the death was "work-related." Overall, 56% of at-work deaths were confirmed as work-related, or directly linked to the decedent's occupation, workplace, or relationship with co-workers. Examples of work-related suicides include persons experiencing trouble with job performance, business owners with a failing business, and persons who are having interpersonal conflict with co-workers.

Examples of work-related homicides are decedents killed at work during a robbery, by a co-worker, or by a co-worker's intimate partner due to issues of jealousy. Work-related homicides also include decedents who were targeted due to their workplace such as a teacher killed during a school shooting.

Many at-work deaths (22%) were known to be *unrelated* to work. An example of an at-work homicide that is unrelated to work is where a decedent was killed at work by their intimate partner. In this case, the decedent was killed due to intimate partner conflict, and the workplace was the location where the offender chose to carry out the homicide or was able to locate the decedent. An example of an at-work suicide that is unrelated to work is a decedent whose spouse calls him at work to ask for a divorce, and this intimate partner conflict appears to be the motivating factor for the at-work suicide.

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<sup>1</sup> Complete descriptions of the NVDRS and the data elements collected by this system can be found in the NVDRS coding manual: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/pub-res/nvdrs-coding/VS2/default.htm>.

**Table 1. At-Work Suicides and Homicides by Work-Related Classification, Virginia: 2003-2010**

	Suicide		Homicide	
	#	%	#	%
<b>Work-Related</b>	13	17.1	108	77.1
<b>Not Work-Related</b>	35	46.1	15	10.7
<b>Unclear/Unknown</b>	28	36.8	17	12.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>100.0</b>

### **Suicide**

From 2003-2010 there were 76 suicides that were known to have occurred at work. These suicide decedents were disproportionately male (95%) and White (84%) with a median age of 47.

A relatively small proportion (17%) of these suicides appeared to be work-related. Most commonly (46% of cases) it seemed that work was incidental to the death, or possibly a place where the suicide could be carried out without interference. In these cases there was reasonable evidence to suggest the suicide was *not* related to work – events, a suicide note, or witness statements confirmed that the suicide was due to other problems. In 37% of at-work suicides, however, it was unknown or unclear if the suicide was linked to work.

In 17% of all at-work suicides the fatal method used came from the workplace. The two most common methods that came from the workplace were poisons (23%) and firearms (23%). Suicides where the fatal method came from work were not more or less often work-related.

Most at-work suicides (62%) took place somewhere inside the workplace building. Other common locations for the suicide included the parking lot of the workplace (8%) or inside of the decedent’s car parked at the workplace (4%).

The most common occupation for at-work suicide decedents was a construction or trade worker such as an electrician, carpenter, or welder (15%). Other common occupations included a cashier or clerk in a retail store (12%), active duty military (8%)<sup>2</sup>, and an auto mechanic (7%).

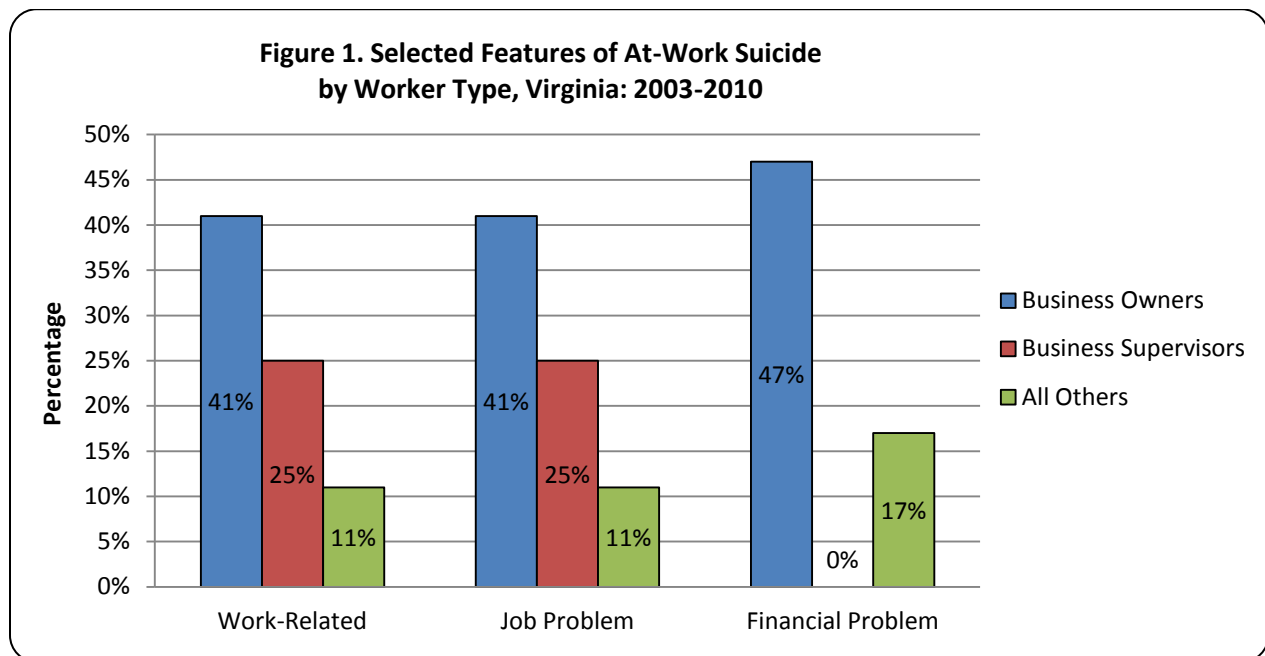
In almost one-quarter (24%) of at-work suicides the decedent was the owner of the business and in 5% the decedent was a supervisor. Among business owners with an at-work suicide, 41% were work-related; this proportion dropped to 25% for decedents who were supervisors. For those who were neither business owners nor supervisors, 11% of suicides were work-related.

Owners of businesses were dealing with job and financial problems. Among business owners with an at-work suicide, 41% were experiencing a job problem and 47% had a financial problem. In contrast, at-work suicide decedents who were not business owners less often had job problems (11%) or financial problems (17%).

For most other suicide circumstances, at-work and other suicides were quite similar. Some common circumstances for at-work suicides that were not related to work included a mental health problem

<sup>2</sup> For more information on military service member and veteran suicide, see the VVDRS report on military-related suicide at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/medExam/NVDRS.htm>.

(43%), conflict with an intimate partner (43%), a recent life crisis (29%), and recent or impending criminal charges (16%).



Of the 13 work-related suicides, the most common problem (46%) was that the decedent owned a failing business. In some cases the decedent was starting to file for bankruptcy or to shut down the business, and in other cases the end of the business was certain in a short period of time. Next most common (31%) were persons who were facing discipline or termination from their job. In 15%, the decedent was upset over unrequited love with a co-worker.

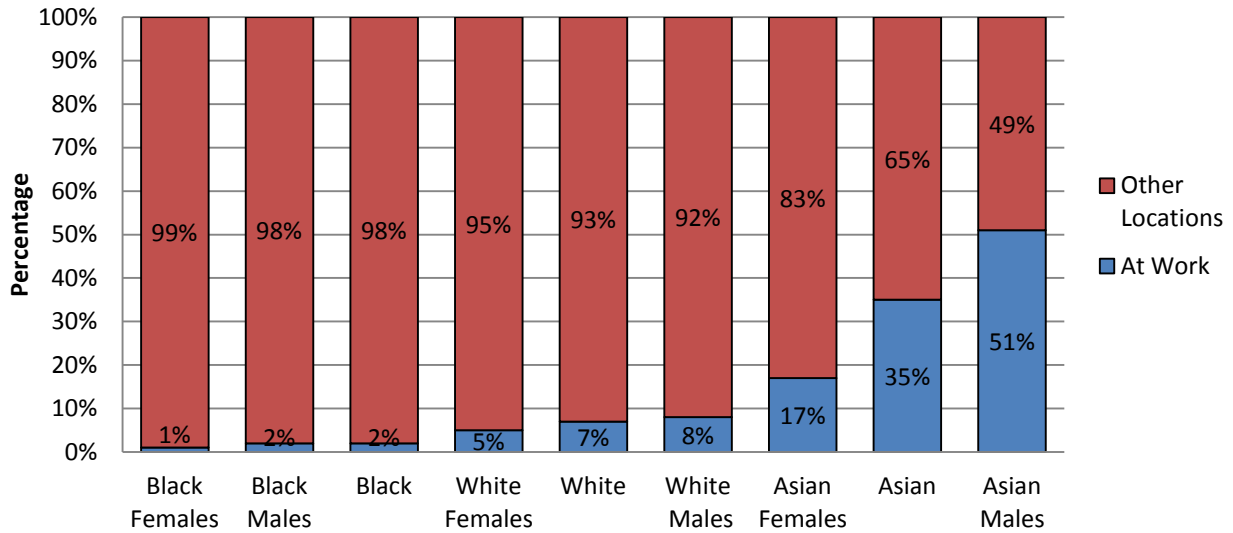
While at-work suicides took place all over Virginia, the most common location for a work-related suicide was in the Northern Virginia area (46%).

**Homicide**

Most at-work deaths (62%) were homicides. Males, already the likely victims of homicide, made up most at-work homicide decedents (81%). The majority of at-work homicide decedents were White (59%) followed by Black (23%) and Asian (16%). The racial composition for at-work homicide is notably different from other homicide, where most victims are Black (62%).

At-work homicide disproportionately affects Asians; 35% of all Asian homicides occur at work, compared to 7% among Whites and 2% among Blacks. Among Asian males, 51% of homicides occur at work. Given that just 4% of all homicides occur at work, it is remarkable that over half of Asian male homicides take place at work (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Selected Race and Gender of Homicide Decedents by Where Homicides Occur, Virginia: 2003-2010**



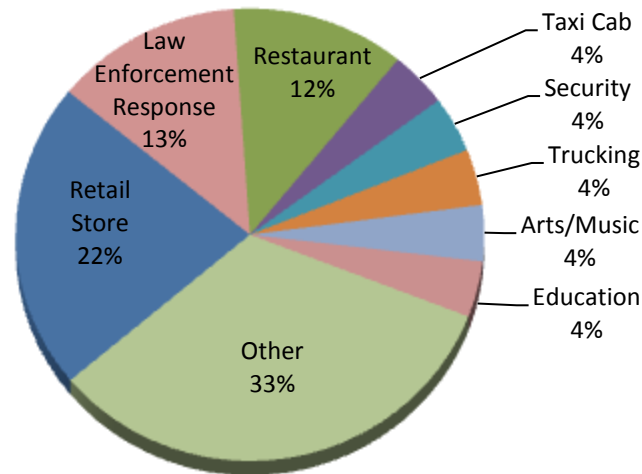
The median age for an at-work homicide victim was 45, well above the median of 28 for other homicides. This age difference, coupled with the race and gender differences, shows that at-work homicides reflect different at-risk groups when compared with other homicides.

Most at-work homicides are committed with a firearm (81%) or a sharp instrument (12%). In 8 cases (6%) the fatal method of injury was known to come from the workplace. The business was typically open at the time of the incident (89%).

More than three-fourths (77%) of at-work homicides were work-related. In 11% of at-work homicides the death was clearly *unrelated* to work. In 12% it was unclear or unknown if the homicide was work-related.

The single most common occupation among at-work homicide decedents was a cashier or clerk at a retail store (22%), including store owners who were working at the time. Of the 31 at-work deaths that took place in a retail store, 28 were work-related and 19 were in convenience-type stores. The second most common occupation was a law enforcement officer who was killed in the line of duty (13%). Of all the persons killed at work, law enforcement officer is the one occupation where a violent death is seen as an expected risk of the job. The third most common occupation was a worker in a restaurant (12%) including food delivery drivers. These deaths were primarily related to robberies. Other frequent occupations at 4% each were taxi drivers, security guards or bouncers, and truck drivers. In total, 56% of at-work homicide decedents worked in locations where cash was exchanged for goods and services or where cash was known to be stored.

**Figure 3. Most Common Settings for At-Work Homicides, Virginia: 2003-2010**



The single most common circumstance was a homicide related to another crime; in 55% of at-work homicides the event was initiated by another crime, typically robbery (40% of all cases). In non-workplace homicides, 25% were precipitated by another crime, and 15% were precipitated by a robbery.

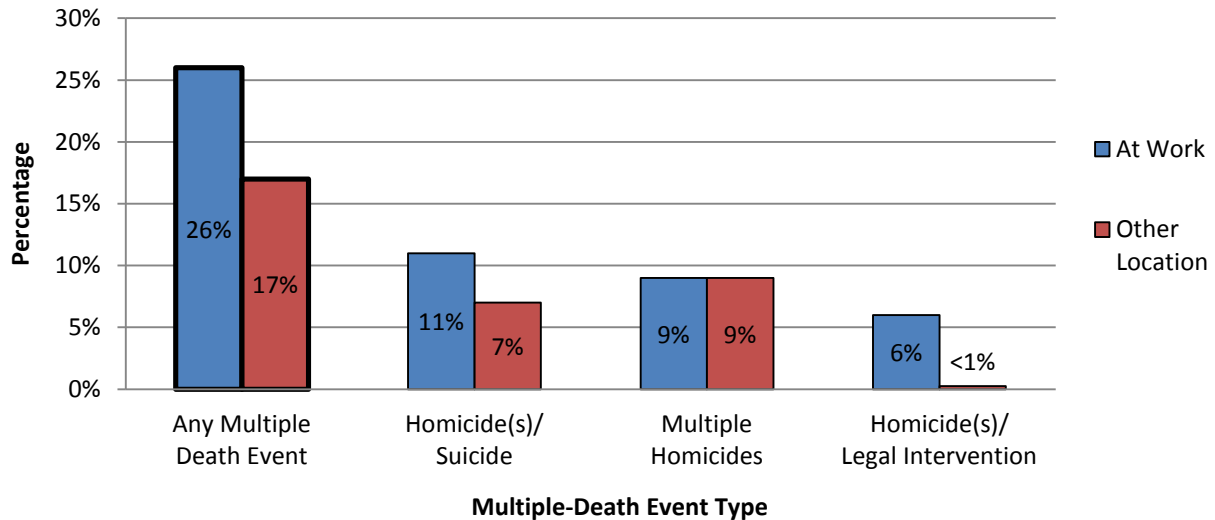
In a number of cases (11%) the workplace was incidental and not directly related to the homicide. The workplace was a location where the victim could be found and therefore could be killed. Of the homicides where it was clear that the death was *not* work-related, most (73%) were related to intimate partner violence or intimate partner jealousy.

Multiple-death events were common for at-work homicides; in total, 26% of at-work homicide deaths were part of an event where at least two people died. This includes 11% that were part of a homicide-suicide, 9% that were part of a multiple homicide, and 6% that were part of homicide-legal intervention. By contrast, 17% of all other (not at work) homicides involved multiple deaths. Even when excluding police officer deaths, at-work homicides were more often multi-victim than other homicides.

At-work homicides took place all over Virginia, but the highest concentrations of work-related homicides were in the Central (25%), Eastern (25%), and Southwest (23%) regions of the state. Richmond City had the single-largest proportion of work-related homicides (11%).



**Figure 4. Multiple-Death Events by Where Homicides Occur, Virginia: 2003-2010**



### **Conclusion**

Violent death at work functions quite differently for suicide and homicide. Most suicides were incidental to the workplace – the decedent simply chose work as a place to end their life. This choice may have been out of convenience or timing. At-work homicide was most often directly related to occupation and the nature of the job. Two-fifths of workplace homicides relate directly to a robbery – the homicide decedent was someone who stood between the perpetrator and money.

Overall, at-work suicides are similar to other suicides. Those suicides that were work-related tended to involve persons who were business owners or supervisors, and therefore had more personal or financial investment in the workplace. Workplace homicides are, by nature, different from other homicides. There is a notable difference in the age and race of at-work homicide decedents and other homicide decedents. While other homicides encompass a wide-range of precipitating and motivating factors, at-work homicides tend to be related to economic crimes. See the appendix for a brief summary table on these and other differences.

The number of at-work homicides related to intimate partner conflict should help inform safety planning for persons experiencing domestic violence. The workplace is a physical location where persons are known to be at set hours and therefore makes workplace violence an option for abusers.

For at-work homicides that are work-related, steps must be taken to protect those working in retail stores and other occupational settings where cash is exchanged for goods or where cash is stored. While no workplace is immune from violence, these types of settings, especially retail stores, restaurants, and food delivery drivers, seem to be at high risk for robbery and possible homicide. The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration acknowledges that retail trades have the highest number of workplace homicides and provide several tips for preventing robbery and violence.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.osha.gov/> for more information.

**Appendix. At-Work and Other Suicide and Homicide in Virginia, 2003-2010: Selected Comparisons.**

	Suicide		Homicide	
	At-Work	Other	At-Work	Other
<i>Death Related to Work</i>	17%	n/a	77%	n/a
<i>Business open at time of injury</i>	46%	n/a	89%	n/a
<i>Most common occupations<sup>4</sup></i>	Construction/trades (15%) Retail store worker (12%) Military (8%)	Construction/trades (16%) Factory/plant worker (5%) Retail store worker (5%)	Retail store worker (22%) Law enforcement (13%) Restaurant worker (12%)	Construction/trades (21%) Restaurant worker (7%) Factory/plant worker (5%)
<i>Most common gender</i>	Male (95%)	Male (77%)	Male (81%)	Male (76%)
<i>Most common races</i>	White (84%) Black (12%)	White (86%) Black (11%)	White (59%) Black (23%)	Black (62%) White (35%)
<i>Asian decedents</i>	1%	3%	16%	1%
<i>Median age (years)</i>	47	46	45	28
<i>Most common age group</i>	45-54 (29%)	45-54 (22%)	45-54 (26%)	25-34 (24%)
<i>Most common fatal method</i>	Firearm (54%) Hanging/Suffocation (28%)	Firearm (57%) Hanging/Suffocation (20%)	Firearm (81%) Sharp Instrument (12%)	Firearm (70%) Sharp Instrument (14%)
<i>Multiple decedent incidents</i>	3%	3%	26%	17%
<i>Most common Health Planning Region of Injury</i>	Northern (26%)	Southwest (24%)	Central (29%)	Eastern (35%)

<sup>4</sup> Percentages are based on the number of persons who are employed.