

Health and safety

2843 had highest responses  
(1 of 5)



ALBERTA EDUCATION  
EMPLOYEES COMMITTEE  
CUPE

## SURVEY HEALTH AND SAFETY REPORT – MEMBER AND PUBLIC

I truly don't think the public understands the amount and type of violence experienced in schools. I say this as an elementary school support staff. People have this idea that students can be sent home if they're aggressive. They don't see the desks flying. How we place our bodies between objects and other students to protect them. How we place our bodies between students who are struggling with their anger or frustration and other students to protect their privacy and social safety. The loss of so many supports who need them means that more students than ever before are experiencing violence in the classrooms and playgrounds. (Member Voice, 2022)

Why is being assaulted by students considered an acceptable risk for employment? Assault is against the law. (Member Voice, 2022)

CUPE Members working in the K-12 Education sector in Alberta were invited to share their experiences with violence, health and safety in the workplace and employer policies around safety. Almost 1800 members responded from 30 school divisions and 33 CUPE locals.

Sixty-three percent of workers who completed the survey work as education assistants or provide direct student supports. The other third of members work in administrative, custodial, facility maintenance, student transportation and other school division support classifications. Most members identified that they work full-time according to their collective agreement and the majority work a 10-month year.

Eighty-three percent of respondents to the survey identify as women and more than 70% are between the ages of 40 and 60.

We asked members a series of questions to identify not just their experiences of violence in the workplace, but also to identify the risks they may face.

We know anecdotally that members are experiencing violence and harassment at unreasonable levels at work. This survey provided an opportunity to gather data more broadly based on the experiences we have been hearing from members.

### WORKER MENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

I have seen an increase in the violent behaviours of complex need students. To be worried about personal injuries daily is not acceptable in any job. (Member Voice, 2022)

Members were asked if they have experienced any mental health or emotional distress from their workplace experiences, 76 percent of members responded yes and 22 percent responded no. The remainder did not answer the question.

We then asked members if the situation was getting worse. Eighty-two percent of members responded that in the last two years, they have felt an increase in the mental health challenges that they are facing at work.

Despite challenging working conditions, more than half (62%) of members are not taking time off to take care of mental health-related issues. One-quarter of members have taken one to three days off and only 4% have taken more than a month or more off from work.

### EXPERIENCES OF WORKPLACE VIOLENCE

We know that many members, particularly those in direct student support work with children and youth who exhibit extreme behaviours however those experiencing physical violence or threats of violence in schools are more pervasive and extend to members working in all classifications. No worker group was exempt from experiencing violence or the threat of violence.

Members were asked if experiences of violence were decreasing or increasing. Twenty percent of members indicated that there was no change in the past two years however 27% indicate that there is some increase and 24% say that there has been a significant increase.

Despite increasing violence, slip and fall injuries and incidents remain the highest reported incidents for workers in schools. There is a gap in reporting violence or threats of violence to employers and the Workers Compensation Board (WCB).

We asked members to identify if they knew how/could report incidents of violence to their employer or WCB. Forty-five percent of members who responded to the survey know and can submit forms to the employer and WCB however 41% don't know the process or how to get help. Only 24% of members feel like their union is there to help if they need it. Far too many members (16%) feel like they can't get help, that the employer and other staff discourage reporting, that the forms are not available to them and that they just don't feel comfortable reporting incidents of violence.

Members were given a list of violent experiences that have been reported in the past and were asked to identify any (or all) of which they had experienced at work. Forty-two percent of members who completed the survey have been sworn at while at work and 41% have been hit by hands or feet. Answer percentage:

• Gender-based violence	1%
• Domestic violence intruding into the workplace	1%
• Stalking	1%
• Sexuality-based insults	1%
• Sexual harassment	1%
• Cyberbullying [including social media]	1%
• Inappropriate contact outside of work	2%
• Choked	3%
• Racial slurs	3%
• Sexual comments	3%
• Groped	4%
• Targeted bullying	6%
• Use of a weapon (or any item as a weapon) against me	7%
• Other	9%
• Emotional injury (something that induces trauma)	12%
• Psychological violence (e.g., false, malicious, derogatory, or degrading comments)	17%
• Hair pulled	23%
• Spat on	29%
• Bitten	29%
• Shoved/pushed	34%
• Struck with or had object thrown at me	37%
• Scratched	38%
• Threatened/yelled at	39%
• Struck with hand or foot	41%
• Sworn at	42%

We gave members the opportunity to share experiences that they have had at work. Not all the comments relate to student to worker conflicts some of the comments below involve parents, administrators, other colleagues and union executive members. Members were gracious in sharing their experiences and these are some of their responses:

- Parents were very upset/stressed with the lock downs and us sending children home as per Govt protocols etc. We took the brunt of that in the office. Yelled out, sworn at, and made to feel it was our decision. Shooting the messenger type of deal...
- chairs thrown in my direction. Classroom trashed while I was there
- I have witnessed violence toward EA's at my school

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- Deliberate urination and fecal smearing
  - Punched in the face and pinched, bruised
  - Kicked in jaw which resulted with whiplash and concussion
  - Pinched, clothes pulled to be torn, jewelry grabbed and broken, desk/tables thrown at me
  - Constant vandalism from students, makes me work extra harder just to keep facility clean
  - Had my life threatened by student

When issues of safety for workers in schools are brought up at labour management meetings or during bargaining, we often hear from school districts and administrators that there are student safety plans in place and as long as the plans are being followed there should be no incidents. However, for many of the CUPE support staff that work with these students, often one on one, they are not part of building that plan and, in many cases, do not even have access to the plan.

We asked members to identify whether having access to the student safety plans would improve their safety in the workplace. Slightly less than half (46%) of members feel that having access would improve safety however 27% have no opinion and 11% say it wouldn't make anything better.

Many members who responded to the survey feel that the student safety plans are not relevant for their work in the school. Twenty percent of respondents indicate that there are no student safety plans in their school. Only 16% of members who responded to the survey have access to student safety plans that are current and meet their safety needs.

Members were asked if they were given work time to review student safety plans, 40% of members said no they were not given paid time to review the plans that keep them and their students safe and 41% said that they sometimes were given time. Only 17% of members were allowed to read and review student safety plans during work hours.

Although not relevant for all classifications, we asked all members if they were included in the creation of student safety plans, only 6% indicated that they were included.

We know from experience that our members experience violence and harassment from sources other than students. We asked members to identify if they were experiencing angry or abusive behaviours from other school community members. Forty-eight percent of respondents have not, however 26% report experiencing angry and abusive behaviours from parents, 20% from colleagues at their school, 12% from district or administrative staff and 8% from members of the public.

We circled back to incidents with students while at work. We asked members to average out the violent, aggressive, or angry encounters they have had with students over the year and identify what that looks like. Twenty-four percent of members who responded to the survey do not have any of these issues and an equal percentage experience this type of behaviour once or twice per year. Most concerning are the 10% of members who completed the survey that experience this type of behaviour daily.

Most members who experienced angry or abusive behaviours from a student reported that to their supervisor (66%) however, the remaining workers brushed the incident off, didn't feel comfortable reporting it or reported the issue only to their union.

Members who responded that they reported the incidents were asked a follow-up question about what happened when they reported the incident. Forty-six percent of members who reported to a supervisor felt that an appropriate action was taken and a further 22% felt that the steps taken would protect them from future similar incidents. Thirty-six percent reported the incident felt that the actions taken were not enough or that no action was taken to protect them.

It is important to note that only 7% who reported incidents filed or had a WCB report filed.

We also asked members about the severity of violent incidents they were experiencing. The question specifically asked for members to rank the most severe incident only with one being an incident of low severity to 10 being a serious life-changing traumatic event. Most members ranked their incidents in the 1-3 range however too many members are still experiencing extreme life-changing violence on the job.

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1. 16%
  2. 13%
  3. 18%
  4. 9%
  5. 11%
  6. 7%
  7. 6%
  8. 7%
  9. 3%
  10. 3%
- No Answer 7%

Finally, we asked members how many violent incidents they have experienced in the past two years. The average for those experiencing violence at work is 18 experiences over the past two years.

We asked members who completed the survey about risk assessment and the right to refuse unsafe work. As cornerstones of worker safety, it is important to understand how education workers are understanding and being protected by these key pieces of legislation.

We asked survey respondents if risk assessments were done in their workplace, and slightly more than half (56%) indicated that they were. Thirty-seven percent of survey respondents do not think that safety or risk assessments are done in their workplaces and 7% did not answer this question.

For those that answered that there were risk assessments completed at their worksite, we asked if they had access to the results. For slightly more than half (54%) they have access to the results. The remainder do not or did not answer.

We know from talking to members, that many don't feel like they can exercise their right to refuse unsafe work, that in doing so they will put the student or another colleague at risk. We wanted to know about members' experience with refusing unsafe work and asked a series of questions to try and understand members' inhibitions to use the tools in place to protect themselves when faced with situations where they are at risk of harm.

Most members (79%) are familiar with the right to refuse unsafe work. Twenty percent are not. Seventeen percent of respondents have exercised their right to refuse unsafe work.

When members who had refused unsafe work were asked if they felt supported when they stood up for their rights 80% of them felt like they were supported.

We followed up and asked the members who didn't feel supported why and most members felt like the situation wasn't changed or that they were pressured by administration to continue to do the work they felt was unsafe. A small group did not feel like they had adequate support from their union.

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