

UNIT

3

Safety in Social Work Settings

Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. Security does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than exposure.

—Adapted from Helen Keller

Have you wondered about your physical safety at your practicum site? Does the thought of home visits stir feelings of anxiety? Have family members worried about your choice of profession because of safety issues? Have you heard other students and faculty discuss agency safety issues?

Many students, especially beginning students, have concerns about safety and security and struggle with the decision to voice their concerns to their professors, other students, and their field instructors. Students may be reluctant to discuss safety fears and concerns with others for fear of being viewed as uncommitted to the profession or to clients. Other students may assume that the role of the social worker is viewed as strictly one of helper and enabler and cannot fathom being viewed as a threat. However, the practice of social work typically does involve some degree of risk. If not addressed, concerns about personal safety can significantly affect learning opportunities in the field placement. This unit will address safety concerns associated with social work and provide guidelines that can assist you in minimizing the risk of harm.

The Scope of Personal Safety Risks in Social Work

On her first day of practicum, Corina was given a tour of the detention facility, introduced to all of the staff, oriented to the various systems, and provided with agency manuals and policy guidelines. She began shadowing other social workers and sat in on their group therapy sessions. On the third day, she remembered to ask about the unusual name of the unit in which she would be completing her practicum. She was told it was named after a staff member who had been shot to death by a client in the office a year ago. She was shocked. She had no idea that this practicum could pose a threat to her well-being. Are her fears real? What would you do?

Faced with this kind of information, most students would be concerned about working within the agency. Some might even contemplate requesting a transfer to another agency. Other students might consider the likelihood of this kind of incident occurring twice to be very small and so disregard safety as a serious matter.

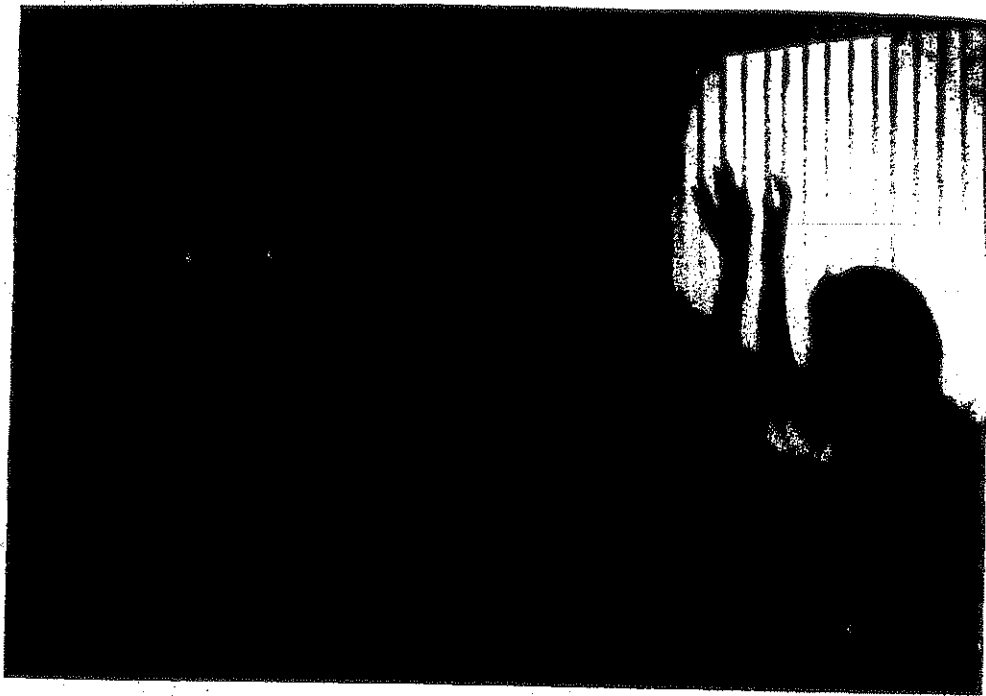
Should safety be a concern for students in practicum? According to recent research findings and anecdotal information, concern over personal safety issues in social work is warranted. The number and lethality of safety risk incidents on the job has increased for social workers (1). Social workers are second only to police officers in terms of the risk of having work-related violence directed at them (2). On an annual basis, 1 of every 10 child welfare workers is either physically or psychologically assaulted by one or more clients (3). Physical assaults include minor attacks (e.g., hitting or shoving) as well as lethal injuries (e.g., shooting) (3). Approximately one-fourth of social work field instructors have been physically attacked by clients, and 62 percent have been verbally assaulted by clients (4). One-third of school social workers report that they experience fear for their safety approximately once per month, and 35 percent have been physically assaulted or threatened during the past year (5).

Several factors have merged in recent decades to increase the level of danger faced by social workers (6):

- A shift to a more law enforcement (versus psychosocial) approach with the passage of child abuse acts, the expansion of child protective services, passage of adult and elder protective laws, and increased efforts to collect child support on the federal government level
- Increased public awareness of and expectations that social workers will solve violent family situations
- An increase in the involvement of court systems in the lives of families
- The increasing complexity of cases correlating to greater societal violence and an increase in the number of families with few available supports

Safety in the Practicum Setting

Social work practitioners and students are increasingly subject to threats in the workplace. Students are well advised to consider safety and liability issues when considering practicum sites and learning activities. The anxiety felt by many students regarding safety is justified by the experience of previous students. Although most students never experience any personal risk (7), approximately one-fourth of Master of Social Work (MSW) and Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) practicum students have experienced some form of violence in the field placement, the majority of cases occurring within the practicum agency (4). Approximately one-third of schools of social work have been affected by violence, directed toward either students or alumni (8). More than half of students in one study were verbally or physically threatened by a client at least once during their practica (7). The most common form of threat to a practicum student is a verbal threat from clients, paraprofessionals, or other professionals (4, 9, 10).



The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) policy standards (11) do not address physical safety, assessment of potentially dangerous clients, or strategies for ensuring safety in the workplace (10). Social work programs vary widely in their knowledge of and approach to safety concerns. Thirty-five percent of social work programs report that they rely on the university or practicum site safety policies or well-defined school or practicum program policies or the inclusion of safety training and discussion in the curriculum (10). Those programs whose students have experienced assaults or threats in the field are not more likely to offer safety programs (10).

Reasonable Concerns and Caution

Social workers often work in neighborhoods, in communities, and with groups and clients that others may deem unsafe. Social work practitioners often work with the impoverished in high-crime areas. Although being careful is always important, you should strive to separate stereotypes and myths from reality. You must have a realistic portrayal of your risks in order to be effective. If not addressed, the beginning anxiety that you may feel can impede a willingness to draft ambitious and valuable learning plans. Talking with other students currently in practicum at your site, other current and former practicum students at the agency, and your field instructor can help you determine the level of risk involved in conducting specific tasks and your comfort level in completing those tasks. You must ensure your safety and avoid allowing unfounded fears or inexperience to become impediments to the delivery of effective services.

The type of agency setting can significantly influence the level of perceived risk to the staff. If you are working in a residential setting (e.g., a children's residential facility, hospital, substance abuse treatment facility, domestic violence facility, or a correctional facility), you will likely encounter a highly structured setting with specific procedures regarding some or all of the following:

- Locks
- Confidentiality regarding location
- Client restraints
- Situations in which staff must work in teams to ensure safety
- Standard precautions (e.g., universal precautions) for avoiding exposure to illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and tuberculosis (12)
- The completion of safety and violence response workshops in which you are trained to respond to violent aggression by clients and are expected to intervene physically with clients

At the other end of the continuum, if you are working in a community-based agency, you may encounter a more flexible agency setting with fewer (if any) protocols and safety guidelines. Situations posing physical threats to social workers can occur in any setting, and students are well advised to exercise due caution regardless of the perceived risk.

Under optimal circumstances, your field instructor will discuss safety matters with you during the interview process for the practicum so that you have a realistic view of risk prior to your commitment to the agency. Whether or not this occurred prior to the start of your practicum, completing the following practice applications can help you gain a realistic perception of the safety risks in your setting and implement agency safety policies.

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.1

Gathering Information

Completing this exercise will enable you to gather pertinent, current, and accurate information about the safety risks, resources, and protocols associated with social work practice in your practicum site as well as the safety resources and protocols of your social work program.

At Your Practicum Site

- Inquire about the number of recent incidents of physical or verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and other violence that staff have experienced inside or outside the agency.
- If not included in the orientation, inquire about agency safety protocols (e.g., telephone number for emergency assistance, location of the first aid kit, emergency exit procedures for the building, and locations of fire extinguishers).

(continued)

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.1 Continued

- Request a tour of the surrounding neighborhood, particularly if you will be conducting home visits.
- Ask whether certain neighborhoods or areas are avoided or approached with more caution than usual by staff members for safety reasons, and be prepared to follow suit when working independently.
- Observe safety protocols implemented by staff members conducting similar duties to those you have planned for the practicum both inside and outside the agency.

Within Your Social Work Program

- Ask how many students have experienced problems related to safety in practicum in recent years.
- Research the safety protocols of your social work program, if any.
- Take advantage of safety resources available from your social work program, or ask the faculty for assistance in obtaining resources such as safety training, seminars, videos, handouts, and discussions.

After you have gathered all the information noted, demonstrate the knowledge you have gained through a discussion with your field instructor, a reflection paper for your integrative seminar class, or a journal entry.

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.2

Gaining Skills

Ask to be observed by a staff member as you are making the transition to independent work with clients, and ask for feedback regarding safety risks and the implementation of safety guidelines. Journal about these early experiences related to safety issues as well as safety precautions utilized and not utilized by you or by staff.

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.3

Assessment and Reflection

Discuss and critique the following with a member of your practicum team:

- Information gathered regarding safety issues in the practicum site
- Skills you are developing related to the implementation of safety guidelines
- The safety protocols of the both the agency and your social work program (Were the protocols sufficient? Reasonable?)
- Your apprehensions or fears concerning your safety while conducting practicum activities (Are your apprehensions based on reality and experience? How much of a factor could myths, stereotypes, inexperience, or bias be playing in your fears?)

Assessment of Potentially Violent Clients

Due to the increased safety risks faced by social workers in many settings, it is critical that you be able to assess potential risk accurately. Although you will not always be able to determine risk accurately in advance of an actual threat to your safety, you should be aware that certain factors may increase the risk of harm (see Box 3.1). Caution should be exercised when working with certain client groups under the following circumstances:

- Young male clients with criminal records or histories of substance abuse, weapons possession, or violent behavior (13)
- Clients with a mental illness with specific risk factors and symptoms (i.e., paranoid delusions, command hallucinations, and syndromes such as mania, paranoid schizophrenia, and panic) (13)
- A history of weapons possession (14)
- A history of violence, substance abuse, or ritualistic or cult practices (14)
- Pending or actual removal of a family member (14)
- Geographic location that may pose danger (i.e., rural, isolated, or high-crime area) (14)
- Working into the evening hours (14)
- The presence of animals in the home that may pose a threat (14)

BOX 3.1

Factors That Increase the Risk of Harm

History is often the best prediction of risk. Increased caution should be exercised when working with clients who have these characteristics (14):

1. Severely violent behavior
2. A history of remorseless parental brutality
3. A history of fighting and school problems
4. Difficulty getting along with others and authority figures
5. A history of overt parental seductiveness
6. A familiarity with weapons
7. Are currently under the influence of drugs or alcohol
8. Are currently under severe stress and are feeling overwhelmed or hopeless
9. Currently verbalize being upset and angry or will not communicate with you
10. Are currently threatening to you either verbally or physically
11. Are currently involved in illegal activities
12. Have erupted verbally or physically in the last 30 to 40 minutes
13. Are unable to sit still or are pacing
14. Are currently suicidal



Specific Guidelines for Safety within the Office

Many students will meet with their clients in an office setting and encounter few problems: However, even in the most structured setting, the office setting cannot guarantee complete safety. The following suggestions can reduce the chances of experiencing physical harm in the office:

- Follow agency safety policies to the letter.
- When possible, study the case files of all clients before interacting with them to ascertain the risk involved in working with them (14).
- Ask another staff member to accompany you when working with a client with a violent history or one who exhibits behaviors that may pose a threat (14).
- Remove all objects from your desk (pens, staplers, and paper weights) that could be used as weapons (14).
- Leave a client who is becoming belligerent or threatening, and seek help from a colleague (15).
- If there is not one in place, develop a system whereby you can discreetly signal another staff member that you need assistance. As an example, you might develop a system by which you will call another staff member, state the name of the client, and say that you need "the progress folder" (14).
- Arrange the furniture so that you are closest to the door (14).

- When possible, develop relationships with those who are charged with ensuring your safety. Let them know when you will be working late, and ask the guards/safety patrol officers to escort you to your car after work when needed.
- Maintain a confidential, locked location for your valuables while at the agency (16).
- If clients have access to the office in which you are working, lock it whenever you leave (16).

While all violence cannot be prevented, these steps represent the efforts that you can make to help ensure your safety in the office setting. If safety is an issue within the practicum office and some of the aforementioned suggestions are not being utilized, consider suggesting some of the procedures. It is important to take safety issues seriously within an office setting.

Interacting with Clients within the Home and the Community

Ben was unsure about the contents of the long case in the client's hand. The client walked quickly, put the case in the backseat, and joined Ben in the front seat. As Ben greeted him and reiterated the need for the trip to the office, the client began to ramble incoherently. However, Ben was able to understand that the client wished to go first to a different location to pick up a check. When Ben objected, the client referred to the shotgun he had placed in the backseat. Furthermore, the client made disparaging remarks about Ben's obvious Asian heritage. Frightened and unclear about what he should do, Ben drove to the office the client requested and then drove him home. As Ben debriefed later with his field instructor, he found himself shaking and short of breath. Did he do the right thing in this situation? How did diversity issues affect the interaction?

As Ben discovered, stepping into the community to serve clients entails leaving the structured environment of the office setting. Working with clients outside an office setting can also, as in Ben's case, leave a practitioner wondering which course of action is best as an interaction with a client unfolds in the real world. Making home visits and encountering clients in the community can offer the opportunity to gather a rich array of information about them that is not available from a meeting in the office. The home visit enhances the delivery of services to clients in their natural setting. While interacting with clients outside of the agency can be intimidating for a new professional, the delivery of professional services on the "home turf" of the client can be essential to the success of the intervention.

In recent decades, a rapid expansion of home-based services has occurred, evidenced in part by such organizations as the U.S. General Accounting Office (17) recommending the delivery of services to the home. Social workers can expect this trend to continue. Although not every home visit will pose a safety risk, following

these suggestions on a routine basis can significantly decrease the potential for harm.

Preparation. Preparing for work with clients outside of the agency can minimize your risk of physical harm and liability.

Transportation. If you will be transporting clients in a car, check the following (15):

- The ages of any children you may be transporting. Make arrangements for carseats for young children.
- The number and condition of seatbelts.
- The travel resources in your car. Have a current street map of the metro area, and practice using the map prior to independent home/community visits.
- Whether your car is equipped for emergencies. Equipment that may be needed includes a spare tire (and the necessary changing equipment), ample fuel, and battery cables. If your work will involve extensive travel, consider obtaining emergency roadside assistance coverage.
- Adjustments may be needed to ensure insurance coverage for clients transported in your personal vehicle. Before using an agency vehicle, verify that students and volunteers are covered by the policy carried by the agency.
- Keep only necessary keys on your key ring. Consider obtaining a two-part key ring that allows you to detach a portion that contains your car keys.

Other. The following precautions may minimize your risk in the community (14, 15, 18):

- Before leaving for a home visit, review the case file at the agency to assess any known risks. Note how many individuals live at the home and whether there is a history of violence in the family.
- Leave a schedule with someone at the agency with the addresses of the clients you plan to visit, your expected route, and your expected arrival time back at the agency. If you suspect a potential for danger, arrange for someone to call you during your visit, and if possible, take another staff member with you.
- Take only materials that are absolutely necessary for the home visit, and leave valuables (e.g., extra cash, unneeded credit cards, and jewelry) at the agency or at home.
- Schedule home visits in the morning when possible. Neighborhoods and homes tend to be calmer during the morning hours than at any other time of day.
- If you have reason to exercise caution, visit new clients during the day or in the evening at a neutral (public) site.
- If cellular phones or beepers are standard for other staff in the field, consider asking for a loan of this equipment during your practicum. Also know that

they can be tempting for thieves. If not available from the agency, consider obtaining your own cellular phone. Plan to keep it concealed but turned on during your visits so that you can use it at a moment's notice.

- Prominently display forms of identification to the client (e.g., agency name badge, business card, or logo on the agency vehicle).
- Pattern your dress after the other field staff. Some agencies prefer a professional look in the field, while others promote a casual dress style. Limit your jewelry.
- Have clear written directions to the home location. Allow extra time if you are unfamiliar with the area. If you get lost, retrace your route. If you must ask for directions, go to a public place to do so. Do not ask directions from persons on the street, and *never* allow anyone to get into your car to show you the way to your destination.
- Listen to and trust your instincts. If the situation seems uncomfortable and you sense the possibility for trouble, reschedule the appointment or make alternative arrangements.

During the Visit. Adhering to the following suggestions can ensure safety during home visits (14, 15, 18):

- Park your car as close to the client's home as possible, and store unnecessary belongings in the trunk (e.g., large bags, backpacks, coats, a purse, or items to be delivered to another client).
- Lock all car doors, and keep your keys in a place in which you have quick, easy access to them (e.g., pocket, on your clipboard).
- Note the presence of any animals on the property, and ask the client for assistance with any unleashed animals.
- Avoid walking through a group of unknown individuals when attempting to enter the house. (You may wish to leave and call to reschedule.)
- Take note of individuals present in the home, and ask the client about strangers. If you are uncomfortable in the presence of others in the home, ask if you can meet with the client alone or somewhere quiet. Encourage the client to keep confidential the information you will be discussing by asking others to leave the home.
- If possible, sit with your back to a wall on a hard chair so that you can leave quickly if necessary.
- Take note of all exits as you enter the house.
- Avoid talking with a client in the bedroom or in the kitchen, as weapons are frequently stored in these rooms.
- Leave the home immediately if weapons or drugs are visible.
- After the visit, move your car to another location to complete the paperwork. Avoid sitting in a car in front of a client's home after a home visit. Document any risks associated with your visit.

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.4**Role-Play: Offsite Safety Rules**

Review and role-play the physical safety protocols practiced by your agency for offsite work with your field instructor. Situations to role play include (1) leaving the agency, (2) arriving at the home; (3) interacting within a home; (4) leaving a home; and (5) returning to the agency. In the role-plays, include such details as the following:

1. Making an appointment with a client
2. Obtaining directions to the home
3. Time of day of visit
4. Ensuring that the vehicle is in optimum working order
5. Appropriate personal and professional items to take and safe methods of transporting and carrying them
6. Appropriate attire
7. Appropriate locations to stand/sit in the home
8. Greeting the client with a review of the purpose of the meeting
9. Ending the visit and leaving
10. Documentation and follow-up with the field instructor
11. Appropriate responses for various situations that warrant caution (e.g., walking past a crowd on the front porch, presence of a dog, presence of unknown individuals, a loud argument occurring in the house, or vague reference to weapons nearby by the client).

Developed by Ellen Burkemper, PhD, LCSW

Working with Angry, Resistant, or Aggressive Clients

Despite the best planning, preparation, and adherence to protocol, you may find yourself in a situation with an angry, resistant, or aggressive client. Ideally, you would be able to leave a situation or attempt to get help. If this is not an option, consider the following strategies (14, 18):

- Maintain a quiet, calm, and firm demeanor. Avoid exhibiting any alarm, hostility, distress, or defensiveness. Talk to the client with simple, direct sentences.
- Offer positive choices to the client (e.g., "Would you like to move over to my desk so that we can sit and discuss this?").
- Attempt to slow down the pace of the interaction so that the client has time to ventilate, calm down, and think.
- Avoid any physical contact with the client.
- Attempt to engage verbally with a client at the first outward signs of agitation to allow for ventilation at the earliest possible point.

- Allow ample room between the two of you (more than one arm's length) to give the client plenty of personal space.
- Make every effort to seat the client. If it is not feasible to sit, allow ample room between the two of you and stand off center to the client to give yourself plenty of room to maneuver.
- Use minimal force if attacked. Apply only the amount of force needed to restrain the person or to free yourself and move to another location for assistance.

Working with agitated clients requires a calm, professional demeanor and preparation. If you are presented with a risky situation in the office or in the field, these suggestions can serve to defuse a potentially dangerous interaction.

Follow-Up to Crises

Even with the best preparation and planning, crises still occur. If you are involved in an incident, report the incident to your field instructor in a manner that is in accordance with the policy of your agency. Your field instructor should communicate with agency administration and provide you with the support and guidance you need. Agencies should thoroughly review an incident and support those who are involved in and those who are affected by a serious incident. Such efforts might include filing a police report, holding debriefing sessions, making changes to staff schedules and suggested routes, and identifying resources and protocols to ensure staff safety in the future (6).

Regardless of the response of your field instructor and agency, take advantage of the peer-support networks available at your agency and within your social work program as well as your personal support system. If the incident involved a high degree of risk or you are finding that you have been deeply affected by the situation, you may wish to consider contacting a mental health practitioner to process and work through the incident.

Ethical Dilemmas Involving Safety Issues

What should I do if my agency physically restrains clients and I hold a personal philosophy against this? How do I decide whether to carry out activities in my practicum that my family or friends have asked me not to do? What should I do if I observe another staff member not following agency safety procedures? What should I do if I am required to conduct a home visit even after I discuss my uneasiness about the arrangements with my field instructor? What should I do if I am required to work at night even though I feel uncomfortable doing so? These questions are evidence that even under the best circumstances with clear guidelines, students sometimes encounter situations that demand difficult decisions.

At times, difficult situations involving conflict between your personal beliefs, agency protocols, and client interests may emerge. At the practicum site, you may

be asked to carry out activities to which you are personally opposed. In addition, you may be asked to conduct practicum activities under circumstances about which you feel uneasy. Although the NASW *Code of Ethics* (19) is silent on the matter of safety, the primacy of client interests is clear (Section 1.01: "In general, clients' interests are primary"). Furthermore, the *Code of Ethics* discusses the obligation social workers have to carry out the work of their employers in good faith (Section 3.09: "Social workers generally should adhere to commitments made to employers and employing organizations"); however, the *Code* does not explicitly require social workers to follow agency policies and procedures. This can leave you in a quandary when determining the best course of action in a situation that involves conflict between your beliefs and comfort level, agency procedures, and client interests.

Ideally, you were informed of the need for the activities in question prior to your commitment to the agency and you either made a decision to allow the interests of the agency and the clients to supersede your feelings or negotiated different arrangements prior to your commitment. However, if expectations or arrangements related to safety emerge after your commitment, you may decide to do one of the following:

1. Negotiate your involvement with activities about which you feel strongly with your field instructor/agency after you begin the practicum.
2. Make a decision to engage in the activities in question, regardless of your feelings.
3. Process and explore your feelings to determine whether your fears are founded.
4. Discuss your experiences and feeling in integrative seminar in order to determine a course of action.
5. Discuss the situation with your faculty liaison.
6. Attempt to switch to another practicum site if you are unable to resolve the conflict.

Although the guidelines outlined in this unit serve as suggestions, situations are rarely clear cut, and students are often left to their own best judgments to discern a course of action. Indeed, students often struggle with the same dilemmas faced by seasoned social workers. As social workers strive to deliver quality services under increasingly volatile circumstances, the struggle to integrate personal feelings with professional demands and to resolve safety dilemmas becomes more difficult and more common.

Sexual Harassment

An openly homosexual female staff member has asked Lauren out several times for drinks after work. Despite Lauren's repeated refusals, she continues to ask. She seems to create reasons for contact with Lauren and brings her small gifts

of food. Lauren surmises that the staff member perceives that she is also lesbian. The field instructor and staff member are good friends. In discussions with her family about the situation, Lauren has been pressured to end the problem by involving administrators or outside agencies. Is she being harassed? What should she do?

Situations such as this call for careful thought, tact, and a judgment call. It may be very difficult to distinguish between friendliness and harassment. It is important to note that an additional form of violence that occurs to social work practitioners is *sexual harassment*. Armed with good intentions, the NASW Code of Ethics, and some social work professional work experience, many students conclude that sexual harassment will not be an issue for them. Given the value base and humanist orientation of the profession, you might think that the social work workplace would be free of sexual harassment. However, social workers do encounter sexual harassment in their workplaces (20, 21, 22, 23). Approximately one-third of female social workers experience sexual harassment (21, 22), and one-third of social work students encounter at least one instance of harassment (24, 25). Social work practicum students can expect to encounter sexual harassment as frequently as do social work practitioners.

Sexual harassment "exists on a widespread basis in human service agencies, despite the commonly held view that it is largely confined to the public sector" (21). Although the majority of those experiencing sexual harassment are female, male workers are not immune. One-seventh of male social workers report a previous experience of sexual harassment by co-workers, clients, supervisors, or administrators (22). Over half of social work programs experience problems with sexual harassment, and one-fourth of the complaints target field supervisors (26).

Defining Features of Harassment

Sexual harassment occurs in many forms, ranging from jokes involving sexual themes to sexual intercourse. Early studies of the issue focused solely on behaviors and verbalizations, such as provocative jokes, asking for unwanted dates, and unwanted touching (20, 21, 22). Later work in this area has defined sexual harassment more broadly. *Sexual harassment* is currently defined as verbal (pressure for sexual activity, comments about the female or male body, sexual boasting, and sexist and homophobic comments); nonverbal (looking up dresses or down shirts, obscene gestures, and suggestive sounds); physical contact (touching, patting, pinching, kissing, etc.); or environmental (sexually offensive literature, pictures, or music). Verbal harassment is the most common form of harassment (20, 22).

Agencies are compelled by law to address the issue of sexual harassment by "seek[ing] solutions to such work-related abuse through programs of prevention, clear policies, and effective mediation and discipline" (23). In response to increasing awareness and complaints, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act provided legal protection against sexual harassment (20) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) issued guidelines in 1980 to provide guidance to agencies on

the matter (21). In addition, the NASW *Code of Ethics* (19) drives the social work profession's response to this issue. The *Code* requires social workers to reject sexual activities with clients under all circumstances, to renounce all forms of discrimination, and to avoid relationships that pose a conflict of interest as well as to maintain a clear interest in social justice and to preserve human dignity. Both your field instructor and your agency have a clear interest in maintaining an atmosphere that is free of harassment.

Intervention

What should you do if you encounter sexual harassment at the practicum? The circumstances of the harassment will assist to fashion the response. Consider the following steps:

- Document the circumstances of the harassment, including dates, times, quotations, other details of the interaction/situation, and verification from any witnesses (27).
- Document your work accomplishments, and maintain copies of evaluations. This documentation may be critical if your work performance becomes an issue when you take action against the harassment.
- Seek other victims of harassment and consider taking action as a group.
- Confront the harasser in person or in written form. Include the facts, your feelings, and a clear directive to stop the harassment (27).
- If appropriate, report the experience(s) to your field instructor at the agency and your faculty liaison with your social work program.
- Explore the complaint process available at the agency, as well as within your social work program, and consider filing a formal complaint.
- Consult with other social work students. Take advantage of field seminars or other mechanisms to consult with and receive support from other students (27).
- If a complaint process does not exist, consider advocating for one. Having a formal complaint system within agencies appears to deter sexual harassment activities more effectively than does having an organizational policy (21).
- Consider contacting outside resources. You may wish to contact an attorney or a local, state, or federal agency charged with addressing complaints of harassment (e.g., the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission), a nonprofit organization (e.g., NAACP), or another resource (27). (Addresses and contact information for these organizations can often be found in the telephone book.)

Regardless of the order in which you take the actions suggested, it is important to take action if confronted with this problem. Victims of sexual harassment must take action to address this serious issue. It is important that all victims of this type of harassment advocate for themselves, use the resources that are available, and seek support from others.

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.5

Safety: Your Comfort Zone

To increase your comfort zone, role-play the following situation with your field instructor:

- During a routine office visit, one of your clients begins to share her despondency over her life situation. She has just broken up with her abusive boyfriend and discusses her suicidal thoughts with you. She mentions that she has a gun and is tempted to "do it" now and "get it over with." In her rambling, she talks about how no one, not even you, has been able to help her, and she is angry. As she continues to talk about killing herself, she mentions "taking you with her."

Should you take the threat seriously? What should you do?

PRACTICE APPLICATION 3.6

Role-Play: Sexual Harassment

Read the two vignettes presented here, and select one for role-playing with your field instructor, colleague, or classmate:

1. You are a female social worker. You are preparing to take some clients of the day treatment center for the chronically mentally ill on an outing. A male client of a different ethnicity has approached you as you climb into the agency vehicle. This client has made several remarks to you in the past that have been of a sexual nature. He has also commented that he thinks you will not date him because he is of a different ethnicity. When you discussed the situation with your field supervisor, she suggested that you confront the client. While obviously leering at you, he comments, "Boy, you have a great set of wheels there! Will you take me for a ride?"
 2. You are a male social worker. You have been uncomfortable working around an older, recently divorced, female staff member at work. She has dropped by your desk several times without reason, has asked many questions about your personal life, and has exhibited flirting behavior in several encounters. Other staff are beginning to tease you about this staff member. She is in the administration of the agency and a friend of your field instructor; therefore, you have a fair amount of interaction with her. You are uncomfortable with her behavior and are contemplating how to approach a discussion with your field instructor about this issue. Several other issues also are involved in the situation: (1) you would like a job at this agency when you graduate and wish to maintain good relationships with the staff; (2) you are questioning whether her behaviors constitute sexual harassment; (3) you are contemplating whether to use the agency grievance procedure about her behavior; and (4) you wonder whether your field instructor will take the situation seriously. As you engage in a dialogue with your field instructor about this, you would like to role-play a confrontation with the staff member.
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Ethical Dilemma: Confidential Medical Information

Rosa facilitates a group of Hispanic mothers in a weekly parenting support group. She has recently learned some information with which she is struggling. One of the mothers in the group shared privately with Rosa that she was recently diagnosed as HIV positive. Rosa has observed infants being passed around during the group meeting and mothers and children in the group having close physical contact. She is uncertain whether this client's HIV status should change any of the practices of the group. She is also unclear whether she should ask the women to stop this practice or to use universal precautions during the group. Finally, she does not want to violate HIPAA or agency confidentiality practices.

- *What are the appropriate steps for Rosa?*

Helping to Ensure Client Safety

As a practicum student, you also have a responsibility to implement agency policies designed to ensure clients' safety. For example, as a student, you must follow agency policies and procedures to avoid falls and other injuries. The *NASW Code of Ethics* (19) requires social workers (and you as a practicum student) to provide appropriate professional services during "public emergencies," such as public disasters, when a client needs immediate medical attention (e.g., CPR), or during and after terrorist activities. Depending on your setting, you may also need to use *universal precautions* to protect yourself and your clients, such as the use of materials that serve as protective barriers (e.g., gloves, masks, and protective eyewear).

Summary

This unit addressed the issue of safety in the social work setting. Topics discussed included the scope of personal safety risks in social work; safety in the practicum setting; reasonable concerns and caution; assessment of potentially violent clients; specific guidelines for safety within the office and the community; safety suggestions for home/community visits; working with angry, resistant, or aggressive clients; follow-up to crises; dilemmas involving safety issues; sexual harassment; and client safety. In your capacity as a social work student, you are well advised to explore the topics of safety risks and safety procedures with your field supervisor. Know the risks, implement safety procedures, use the resources at hand, and serve your clients well.

Raising the issue of safety with faculty, other students, and your field instructor is an important facet of your practicum experience as it enables you to take the appropriate precautions when working with clients. After all, many dangerous situations can be avoided if the practitioner requests assistance from a colleague (13). Practitioners and students are well advised to trust their gut instincts about

their safety and to seek support whenever needed. Indeed, you cannot adequately serve your clients in a state of significant mental or physical impairment. Your safety is imperative to the effectiveness of your work and, ultimately, to the benefit of your clients.

STUDENT SCENARIO POSTSCRIPTS

Corina's fear after hearing of a homicide of a worker at the site immobilized her for the remainder of the day. She realized that she could not function without addressing her concerns. In her supervision session with her field instructor the next day, she inquired about the incident. Although she had been informed about security procedures during orientation, she raised questions regarding these issues:

- The security procedures that had been in place at the time of the incident
- The changes in security procedures that had been implemented since this incident
- The prevalence of dangerous encounters with clients in the office

To increase her comfort level, she also role-played a dangerous situation with her field instructor. Are there any other reasonable steps that she could take to ensure her safety?

Ben shared with his field instructor that he responded to the client's rambling about the shotgun in the backseat only out of fear and that he never considered the safety of the client while in the interaction. In their discussion, the field instructor allowed him to ventilate his feelings and then began to problem solve with him. Other options for a response they discussed included the following:

- Confronting the client while in the car, thereby risking agitating the client (and harm)
- Getting out of the car immediately and fleeing the scene
- Driving to the office over the objections of the client
- Driving to the location the client preferred, following the client inside the office, and placing a phone call to the authorities

Can you think of other alternatives? What response would you have made? Why?

Lauren decided that she must do something about the staff member who has made uncomfortable overtures to her. The next time she asked Lauren to have drinks after work, Lauren decided to confront the situation. She began by thanking the staff member for the invitation and commented on the friendliness of the staff at the shelter. She informed her that due to a demanding work, practicum, school, and family schedule, she had decided to eliminate most of her social life for the semester and was turning down all invitations. Therefore, she was unable to join the staff at any social occasions but appreciated the offer.

Did she confront the situation? How would you handle the situation?

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