



2021 WBI U.S. WORKPLACE BULLYING SURVEY

The Fifth National Scientific WBI Study
Zogby Analytics, Pollster

8.

EXPLAINING TOXIC & ABUSIVE WORKPLACES

Gary Namie, PhD
Director

workplacebullying.org

FUNDING FROM GENEROUS GOFUNDME CONTRIBUTORS

8. EXPLAINING TOXIC & ABUSIVE WORKPLACES

Question: Which factor best explains why a workplace becomes toxic and abusive?

Table 16

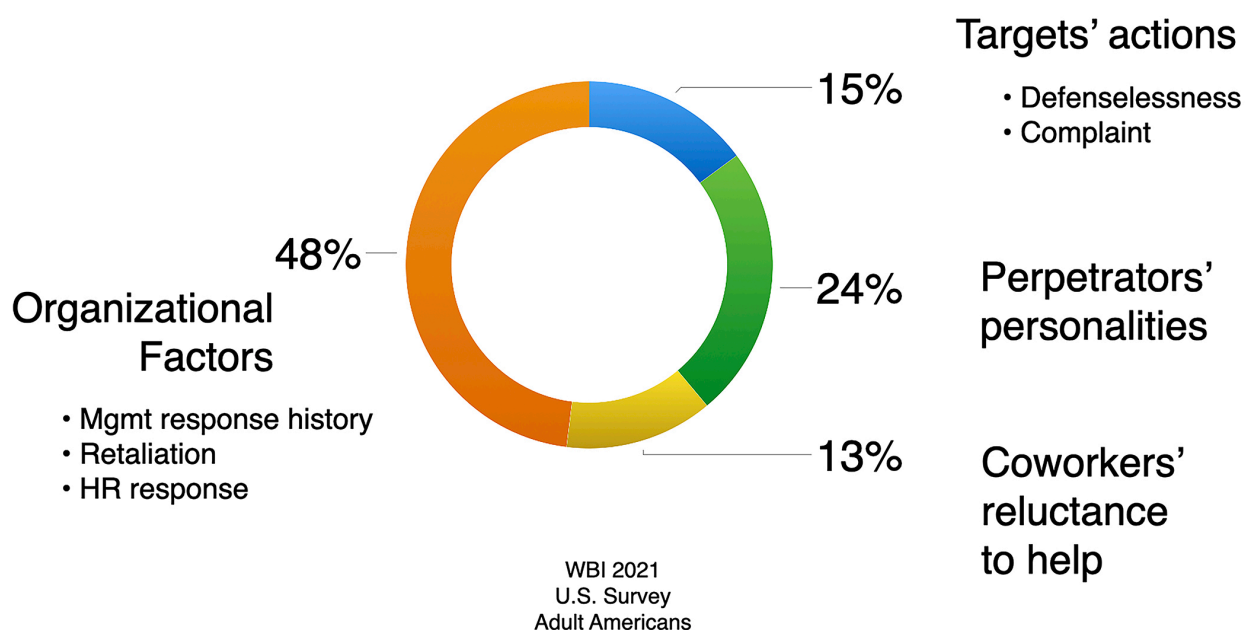
Explanatory Factors	Proportion	Percentage
Targeted people's inability to defend themselves or other personal shortcoming	.0993	10%
Targets' decision to complain about their mistreatment	.0491	5%
<i>Targets' Personal, Dispositional Factors</i>	.1485	15%
Organizational retaliation for filing a complaint	.1589	16%
Management's history of responding to complaints	.2112	21%
HR's response to complaints	.1098	11%
<i>Organizational Factors</i>	.4801	48%
Perpetrators' personalities, they have personal problems	.2405	24%
Coworkers' reluctance to help the targeted person	.1307	13%
<i>Internal & Personal [Perp + CW + Targ]</i>	.5198	52%

© 2021, Workplace Bullying Institute

Unshaded rows in Table 16 were response options for survey respondents in the Adults national sample. The most frequently chosen factor (24%) to explain workplace toxicity was the personality of the perpetrator. The U.S. is a culture that reveres individuals. The correspondence bias leads us to associate bad behavior with an underlying bad character. With this reasoning, bullies are defective people. This belief convinces employers to reflexively send identified offenders to “anger management” to get “fixed.” Unfortunately, the likelihood of redirecting an adult personality is low. There can be no change without changing the context of their performance, the work environment.

The U.S. is a society that blames victims for their fate. Respondents in this survey did not make the attributional error. Only 15% of respondents faulted targets. Nevertheless, when the coworkers’ tendency toward inaction is added to the personality factors for targets and perpetrators, 52% of the factors are classified as internal to individuals. That is, in slightly over half the cases, respondents preferred a dispositional explanation.

Figure 11



The recognition of organizational factors accounted for the other half (48%) of the explanations. Management's history of responding appropriately, or more likely inappropriately, to past complaints about abuse, bullying, or mistreatment was the most significant (21%) component. Employees notice. Retaliation and HR's record of failing to resolve bullying situations convince many prospective complainants to remain silent. Then, the organization loses its chance to correct the current bullying and to prevent it in the future with policy changes.

It is noteworthy that respondents in this 2021 survey were cognizant of the role organizational culture, described via the three factors in the response options, plays in enabling and failing to stop workplace bullying. Solutions require an increased awareness of organizational determination of individuals' conduct with a simultaneous decrease in attention to irreversible individual personalities.



A related survey question explored the potential effect of an important set of events that occurred outside the workplace.

Question: In your opinion has the display of bullying, disrespect and intolerance of the opinions of others by politicians and public figures affected workplaces?

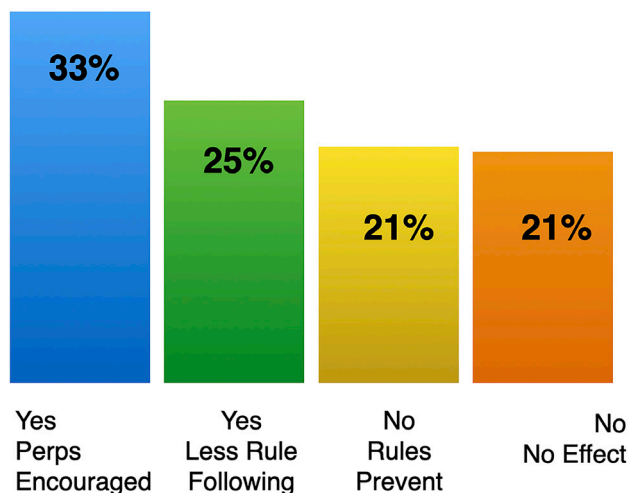
Table 17

Adults sample	Proportion	Percentage
Yes. The public disrespect encourages workplace perpetrators	.3311	33%
Yes. Fewer people believe they should follow rules or laws	.2519	25%
<i>YES it does affect workplaces</i>	<i>.5830</i>	<i>58%</i>
No. Rules and policies prevent the mistreatment of others	.2106	21%
No. Actions by politicians do not affect workplaces	.2062	21%
<i>NO it does not affect workplaces</i>	<i>.4169</i>	<i>42%</i>

© 2021, Workplace Bullying Institute

Unshaded rows in Table 17 were response options for survey respondents in the Adults national sample. There was a preference (58%) for believing that actors in the public sphere did adversely affect the American workplace. The two methods described in this question were disruption by encouragement of aggression (33%) and granting permission to ignore rules (25%). A strong minority (42%) of respondents disagreed. They concluded that employers had guardrails to prevent deviant behavior from taking over (21%) or that what politicians do is irrelevant to the workplace.

Figure 12



WBI 2021 U.S. Survey - Adults

This question posited that a factor external to organizational life might influence the internal workplace culture.

We asked this question at a time that coincided with the end of a tumultuous single presidential term of Donald Trump.

Research on school bullying showed an increase in aggressive behaviors throughout Trump's tenure. It was undeniable that he modeled bullying, abusive interpersonal behavior.

An argument can be made that workplace cultures are inextricably embedded in the national culture where organizations call home. The 58% of respondents seem to have acknowledged this immersion.

When public discourse returns to a moderate degree of civility, if it ever does again, we will ask the question to explore if public and political comity positively affects workplace cultures.