



Umbrella Summary

Workplace Incivility

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is workplace incivility?

Workplace incivility refers to “low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Uncivil behaviors are characteristically rude and discourteous, displaying a lack of regard for others” (Anderson & Pearson, 1999, p. 457). Though there is some conceptual and empirical overlap between incivility and [ostracism](#), bullying, and [abusive supervision](#), incivility is considered distinct (Yao et al., 2021).

Incivility has been examined from the perspective of both the victim and the instigator, exploring factors related to being the target of incivility and factors related to engaging in uncivil behavior toward others. The most common measure of experienced incivility is the 7-item Workplace Incivility Scale (WIS), which asks respondents to indicate how frequently they have experienced various uncivil behaviors, such as being ignored or excluded from professional camaraderie; being addressed in unprofessional terms, either publicly or privately; or being put down (Cortina et al., 2001). A slightly less-popular measure is the 17-item Uncivil Workplace Behavior Questionnaire (UWBQ), which includes four factors: hostility, privacy invasion, exclusionary behavior, and gossiping (Martin & Hine, 2005). Example items from each factor include, “raised their voice while talking to you,” “opened your desk drawers without prior permission,” “avoided consulting you when they would normally be expected to do so,” and “talked about you behind your back (Martin & Hine, 2005). Whereas the WIS asks respondents to consider experiences over the last five years, the UWBQ only focuses on the past year. Both measures have been adapted in order to assess incivility perpetration, by asking respondents how frequently they have engaged in such behaviors toward others.

Why is workplace incivility important?

Incivility is important because it is associated with an array of job attitudes, stress indicators, and behaviors, both for people who experience incivility as well as for those who engage in uncivil behavior. More specifically, experienced incivility is moderately associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, higher stress and burnout, and greater intention to leave (Han et al., 2021). It is also moderately associated with lower job performance and greater counterproductive work behaviors (e.g., theft, misuse of time or resources). The connection between experienced incivility and turnover is unknown. Those that engage in uncivil behaviors are also likely to experience lower job satisfaction and

organizational commitment, higher stress and burnout, and greater intention to leave (Park & Martinez, 2021).

What contributes to workplace incivility?

Meta-analytic research on incivility thus far has focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with incivility, not on causal relationships. Those that experience incivility in the workplace are more likely to be high in negative affectivity and low in emotional stability, both of which are characterized by a tendency toward negative emotions (Han et al., 2021). They are also more likely to have low self-esteem (Yao et al., 2021). Thus, people with certain types of personality are more likely to be the target of uncivil behaviors. Demographic variables are only very weakly associated with experienced incivility, such that it is slightly more likely among racial minorities and employees who are younger and lower in rank or tenure (Han et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2021). The factors most strongly related to experienced incivility are contextual, including passive leadership, a lack of civility norms, an uncivil climate, and a socially unsupportive climate. Again, though some of these conditions could be the result of uncivil behavior, they may also create conditions where incivility is more likely.

Among employees that engage in uncivil behaviors, a myriad of negative personality types or traits are more likely, including anger, entitlement, Machiavellianism (i.e., manipulative, amoral, cynical), negative affectivity, emotional instability, and psychopathy (Park & Martinez, 2021). In contrast, people who are high in positive personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience are less likely to engage in uncivil behaviors (Park & Martinez, 2021). As with experienced incivility, perpetrated incivility appears to be more likely under certain workplace conditions. Employees are more likely to engage in uncivil behaviors when they have feelings of job insecurity, perceive a violation of their [psychological contract](#) with the organization, have work-life conflict, and perceive [unfairness](#) in the organization (Park & Martinez, 2021). Finally, when employees have perceptions of support, respect, trust, and civility from others, they are less likely to be uncivil toward others (Park & Martinez, 2021).

How can workplace incivility be improved?

Though there is no meta-analytic research on strategies for improving incivility, there are numerous primary studies that show positive effects of CREW (Civility, Respect, and Engagement at Work), which was developed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and implemented in more than 1000 workplaces as of 2014 (Osatuke et al., 2014). CREW involves weekly facilitated group discussions and activities to improve the work climate through more civil and respectful interactions among employees, and engagement. Further details can be found at the [VA's National Center for Organization Development](#).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Experienced incivility is moderately associated with lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, higher stress and burnout, greater intention to leave, lower job performance, and greater counterproductive work behaviors.
- ▶ Those that engage in uncivil behaviors are also likely to experience lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, higher stress and burnout, and greater intention to leave.
- ▶ Demographic variables are only very weakly associated with experienced incivility, such that it is slightly more likely among racial minorities and employees who are younger and lower in rank or tenure.
- ▶ Negative personality traits are associated with being the target of uncivil behaviors and with being the perpetrator of uncivil behaviors.
- ▶ The factors most strongly related to experienced incivility are contextual, including passive leadership, a lack of civility norms, an uncivil climate, and a socially unsupportive climate.
- ▶ The [CREW intervention](#) has shown positive effects on civility, respect, and engagement in the workplace.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers that would like to assess incivility should consider the 7-item Workplace Incivility Scale by Cortina et al. (2001) or the 17-item Uncivil Workplace Behavior Questionnaire by Martin and Hine (2005).

References

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Suggested Citation

Paul, M. (2021, December 15). *Umbrella summary: Workplace incivility*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/workplace-incivility>

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This Summary was developed with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant #HHS-2016-ACF-ACYF-CT-1178. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.