VRS Guide: How Companies Can Identify and Mitigate Emerging Pandemic Era Threats of Conflict & Violence
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About VRS
From increased domestic and workplace violence to elevated hate crimes, rising gun sales, and advanced terrorism plans, new threats continue to plague the nation and the globe as we all grapple with the “new reality” created by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Why and how are these threats emerging and what can we do about it? These are unprecedented times and we are all looking for answers.

While we certainly don’t have all the answers, we hope to stimulate thoughts, ideas, questions, curiosity, and creativity that lead to solutions so we can fight this together. Here we discuss at least five emerging threats that are changing the landscape of our nation’s health and safety -- both during and post-pandemic -- and what measures can be put in place to dramatically reduce these risks.
Domestic Violence

The pandemic has caused an uptick in domestic violence, which can and often does spill over into the workplace. To better understand the roots of this problem, let’s take a look at the mental health effects of the COVID-19 shutdown and then understand its link to domestic violence.

According to a Kaiser Family Foundation Poll (April 2020):

- **69%** Say this is the most stressful time of their career.

- **45%** Of respondents say their mental health is affected by COVID shutdown.

- **19%** Say shutdown has had “major impact” on their mental health.

Studies have examined the link between mental health and violence following the **Great Recession** (2001-2010), **Farm Crisis** (1980’s), and **Great Depression** (1930’s). More recently, an [NIH Study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7162522/) (April 12, 2020), “An increasing risk of family violence during the COVID-19 pandemic: Strengthening community collaborations to save lives,” concluded that because of the length of COVID closures, an “increase in family violence reports during and after COVID-19 may be even greater than the substantial increase observed in reports following other natural disasters and catastrophic events.”
Other studies have developed the “Family Stress Model,” which states that “unemployment and economic hardship lead to economic stress and strains, which lead to marital and family discord.”

Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders have caused an alarming rise in domestic violence. In fact, according to an NBC news poll, 18 out of 22 police departments reported an increase in domestic violence calls in March 2020.

This trend is even more pronounced globally.

Because of long isolation, victims are forced to shelter-in-place with their abusers. And while child abuse calls, for example, are down it’s only because victims are also not able to report abuses while sheltering-in-place and they are going unnoticed to the outside world.
Many companies have become skilled at developing “soft landing” programs for employees who are terminated, laid-off, or fired by improving severance packages, extending unemployment benefits, providing job retraining, and covering the cost of counseling, mental health services, and re-employment support. However, due to the unprecedented nature of COVID-19, most companies have never learned how to develop “soft take-offs” after a large-scale global pandemic such as COVID-19.

Most people are under enormous pressure and strain - from worries about health and safety to financial stress, lockdowns, and shortages of essential items. At the very least, these stresses can often lead to more conflict in the workplace or, in more extreme cases, to rage and violence. As businesses of all sizes prepare to bring their employees back to work, they need to recognize that the stress and collective trauma of COVID-19 will impact employees long after this crisis is over and will need a solid strategy to ease office tensions and uncertainties. The ultimate goal for companies is to be able to maintain safe and sustainable operations under the “new normal” and to also anticipate new threats and challenges of the future workplace.
Rising Gun Sales and Gun Violence

There's no doubt the current health crisis is escalating fear and uncertainty, as is evident in behavior such as a surge in nationwide gun sales. In fact, the national numbers show a sharp increase in gun-related violence this year compared to the same time in 2019. For example, Cincinnati, Ohio saw an increase from 12 to 28 incidents, while Louisville, Ky. experienced a jump from 22 to 36. There have also been nationwide reports about increased burglaries of unoccupied schools and businesses.

According to the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System, initiated gun background check filings for February and March 2020 totaled 6,543,155, compared to 4,698,737 in the same period last year - an increase of more than 1.8 million. Also, according to figures from the FBI, 3.7 million background checks were done in March alone - the most for a single month since the system began in 1998.

Mental health and gun violence experts worry that the soaring sales of firearms could lead to a dramatic rise in suicides, domestic homicides, and accidental injuries and deaths in the coming months.
Hate Crimes

There is growing evidence of a rise in discrimination and racist violence against U.S. residents of Asian and Pacific Island descent due to COVID-19. There have been several incidents across the country, including the following:

- In California’s San Fernando Valley, a 16-year-old boy was physically attacked at the beginning of the outbreak by bullies in his high school who accused him of having the coronavirus simply because he is Asian American.

- In Midland, Texas, a man was arrested for attacking a family of three because he thought they were of Chinese descent and were spreading the virus.

- In Queens, New York, a man was arrested for harassing and pushing a 47-year-old Chinese man walking his son to the bus stop.

The FBI assesses that similar attacks will continue to surge across the U.S., endangering Asian-American communities. In response, many regional law enforcement and government agencies, such as the San Diego District Attorney’s Office, have created hate crime hotlines and online forms to receive reports of hate crimes involving COVID-19.
Emerging Threats of Conflict and Violence

Civil Unrest

While traumatic and highly impactful to lives and businesses, the type of civil unrest Americans have recently witnessed and experienced has typically remained statistically uncommon. Public protests and manifestations in support of social and economic causes occur across the U.S. on a near daily basis, but most remain peaceful and orderly.

Societal catalysts for potential civil unrest, however, are exponentially increasing and remain an elevated risk for most public and private organizations. They include, but are not limited to:

- Labor relations issues
- Socioeconomic dissonance
- Environmental concerns
- Gender pay disparities
- Racial equality
- Political rhetoric
- Public health policies
A company’s response to these and a myriad of other environmental, societal, and corporate governance concerns is being closely scrutinized to ensure that organizations manage these issues responsibly and are in line with the values of their customers, employees, investors, and shareholders.

A longstanding investment measure of a company’s sustainability and societal impact includes the evaluation of an organization’s Environmental, Societal, and Governance (ESG) policies. ESG is quickly emerging as the new matrix to not only help better determine a company’s future financial performance, but to also evaluate an organization’s commitment to the values of environmental impact, human rights, diversity, consumer protection, employee relations, and responsible management practices. Organizations should consider the ramifications of failing to meet these ESG expectations, which may include targeted protests, demonstrations, boycotts, potential civil unrest, and overall damage to a company’s brand and reputation.
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New Domestic & International Terrorism

Experts agree that the current health pandemic also lends itself to potential new terrorist threats and tactics. According to the Department of Justice’s National Security Division, terrorists are expected to speed up plans by finding “new ways to attack and new targets” during the pandemic.

Government officials and researchers warn of global security threats as extremist groups and terrorist organizations exploit the coronavirus pandemic to increase their operations. Security agencies and researchers are also monitoring an increase in racially motivated hate crimes pushed by extremists online. This threat is increased because whole populations have been under stay-at-home orders and spending more time online.

A recent Department of Homeland Security memo stated, “Violent extremists probably are seeking to exploit public fears associated with the spread of COVID-19 to incite violence, intimidate targets and promote their ideologies, and we assess these efforts will intensify in the coming months.”
Among these possible C-19 terrorist activities include extremist organizations calling for supporters to carry out attacks against overburdened healthcare systems in various Western countries.

Domestically here in the United States, we are also dealing with a new set of COVID-19-related terrorism crimes, which have weaponized the spread of the virus, such as:

In Carrollton, Texas, a woman who proclaimed “I’m here at Walmart about to infect everyone, because if I’m going down, all you are going down,” was arrested.

In Tampa, FL, a man was arrested and charged with “perpetrating a biological weapons hoax” for coughing on police officers after two domestic violence calls.
According to a DOJ memo, “Coronavirus appears to meet the definition of a biological agent under 18 USC 178, and such acts could potentially implicate the nation’s terrorism-related statues.”

As we move into the so-called “new normal,” a myriad of other threats are possible, including:

- Attacks using COVID infected saliva.
- Attacks using COVID infected blood or urine.
- Attacks using COVID infected people.
- Attacks on companies creating vaccines.
- Attacks on testing sites.
- Attacks on foreign companies with U.S. locations.
- Attacks on Chinese specific companies with U.S. locations.
- Attacks on Asian-Americans.
- Threats of an attack in order to disrupt business continuity (bomb threats, etc).
- More cyber-attacks due to the rapid increase in virtual work.
- Attacks on corporate entities in order to further disrupt the economy.
- Attacks on government buildings.
- Increased paranoia due to fear, uncertainty and doubt could easily cause an increase in attacks on telecommunications companies and biotech/life science companies.
These new types of threats are rapidly growing and if companies and organizations don’t have an automated process in place to protect them from all of the above, they risk facing both human and financial loss. While overwhelming, these mounting threats can be reduced and lives can be saved by putting in place effective strategies, policies and training. To help companies best identify and mitigate threats of conflict and violence, experts recommend implementing the following four components:

1. **Have an expert perform a full security risk assessment and mitigation plan.**
2. **Install a case management system to track and mitigate threats of conflict and violence.**
3. **Scan company communications for any signals related to elevated levels of conflict and violence.**
4. **Require routine training such as conflict management, situational awareness, and active shooter to keep your team safe and ready.**
A few of the key factors to consider when implementing the above components include employee wellness, workforce resilience and preparedness, and physical and technical security policies. Ask your team questions like:

- **Do our policies align with new and emerging threats?**
- **How do employees report/respond to violations of social distancing?**
- **How do employees report/respond to sick employees?**
- **Do our termination procedures need to change?**
- **Is now the right time to terminate employees?**
- **What is our policy regarding employees who protest governmental pandemic policies?**
- **Do we need or have a threat assessment team?**
- **Do they have adequate training?**
The more appropriate and coordinated the response to the current threat environment, the safer you and your employees and the general public will be. If you feel you don't have the tools or expertise to properly identify and mitigate all threats, we've got you covered -- just reach out and schedule an appointment with us. By working together and developing solutions, we can help prevent and decrease violence and create a safe and healthy environment for everyone.

**Additional Tips for Transitioning Back to Work**

For more general tips on helping transition your team back to work, download our free [VRS Guide: Bring Your Team Back to Work with Maximum Safety and Wellness Post COVID-19](#).
Vigilance Risk Solutions

Founded in 2015, Vigilance Risk Solutions (VRS) is a technology company that specializes in conflict and violence prevention. VRS helps clients to identify and mitigate unknown threats of conflict and violence both within and outside their company, protecting them from the three most damaging consequences of conflict and violence in the workplace: litigation, physical and psychological harm, and brand/reputational damage. If we can be of any help, please book a time to speak with us.

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