



Umbrella Summary

Counterproductive Work Behavior

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

What is counterproductive work behavior?

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB), also sometimes referred to as workplace deviance, is defined as “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (Robinson & Bennett, 1995, p. 556). CWB is one of the three main domains of workplace performance, along with task performance and [organizational citizenship behavior](#) (OCB; Dalal, 2005). CWB and OCB are thought to be conceptually opposite constructs; CWB is behavior that harms an organization, whereas OCB is behavior that helps an organization. Indeed, CWB and OCB are modestly and negatively related to one another (Dalal, 2005).

CWB is often distinguished based on the target of the deviant behavior, namely interpersonal CWB (CWB-I) or organizational CWB (CWB-O). As the names suggest, CWB-I refers to acts that are directed at other individuals, such as coworkers or one’s supervisor, whereas CWB-O refers to acts that are directed at the organization itself or one’s work tasks. Common categories of deviant behavior include acts such as destruction of property, theft, misuse of time and resources, misuse of information, unsafe behavior, poor-quality work, poor attendance, alcohol/drug use, and inappropriate verbal or physical actions (Gruys & Sackett, 2003).

CWB is most commonly measured using the Workplace Deviance Scale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). The Workplace Deviance Scale asks individuals to rate the frequency with which they have engaged in certain deviant behaviors over the past year, and it includes seven items pertaining to CWB-I (e.g., “Said something hurtful to someone at work,” “Acted rudely toward someone at work”) and 12 items pertaining to CWB-O (e.g., “Taken property from work without permission,” “Intentionally worked slower than you could have worked”). Because CWB often consists of covert behaviors that may not always be observable to coworkers or supervisors, self-report measures like the Workplace Deviance Scale are thought to be best at eliciting the most accurate frequency with which employees engage in workplace deviance (Berry et al., 2012; Carpenter et al., 2017).

Why is counterproductive work behavior important?

By definition, CWB threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both. In action, CWB involves objectively negative and undesirable behaviors. Thus, CWB is important in its own right. CWB is also important because both CWB-I and CWB-O are moderately related to lower task performance (Mackey et al., 2021). It is also thought that CWB may influence turnover, but

the relationship between CWB and actual turnover is unknown. Additionally, when examined at the level of a workgroup or department, CWB is moderately associated with less customer satisfaction, profitability, and productivity (Carpenter et al., 2020). Thus, when organizations face CWB from employees, it is related to both significant personal and organizational costs.

What contributes to counterproductive work behavior?

Meta-analytic research on CWB thus far has focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with CWB, not on causal relationships. Certain individuals seem to be more likely to engage in CWB based on their individual differences like personality or emotional intelligence. Concerning personality, those that are high in neuroticism and negative affectivity or low in agreeableness, conscientiousness, or positive affectivity tend to engage in CWB at higher rates (Mackey et al., 2021). Extraversion and openness to experience are not significantly related to one's likelihood of engaging in CWB (Mackey et al., 2021). Negative personality traits like narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, commonly referred to as the Dark Triad traits, are significantly associated with greater CWB (Ellen et al., 2021). Individuals that engage in CWB also tend to be low in emotional intelligence and low in self-esteem (Mackey et al., 2021).

Demographics also factor into one's likelihood to engage in CWB. Education and tenure are not significantly related to CWB, but those that are younger, have less work experience, or are male tend to engage in CWB at higher rates (Mackey et al., 2021).

Attitudes towards one's job and organization may also relate to one's likelihood of engaging in CWB. Specifically, greater job [engagement](#), job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational identification, perceptions of [organizational justice](#), and perceptions of [organizational support](#) are associated with less CWB (Mackey et al., 2021). Conversely, when employees face job insecurity, workplace stressors, burnout, or [workplace ostracism](#), they are more likely to engage in CWB (Jiang et al., 2022; Mackey et al., 2021; Mazzola & Disselhorst, 2019). Individuals with turnover intentions are also more likely to engage in CWB (Mackey et al., 2021). Other meta-analytic evidence indicates that when individuals are on the receiving end of interpersonal counterproductive work behaviors, they tend to respond in kind by engaging in CWB of equal or greater severity (Greco et al., 2019).

Leader behaviors also contribute to CWB. Positive leader behaviors, like ethical leadership and [leader-member exchange](#), are related to less CWB, while negative leader behaviors, like leader aggression and [abusive supervision](#), are related to increased rates of CWB (Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Mackey et al., 2021).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) is behavior that goes against organizational social norms and harms an organization or its employees.
- ▶ CWB can be classified as either interpersonal (CWB-I) or organizational (CWB-O), depending on who is the intended target of the behavior.
- ▶ CWB-I and CWB-O are moderately and negatively related to job performance.

- ▶ CWB moderately and negatively relates to customer satisfaction, profitability, and productivity.
- ▶ Positive personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness, positive affectivity) are associated with less CWB, whereas negative personality traits (e.g., neuroticism, negative affectivity, narcissism) are associated with more CWB.
- ▶ CWB is more common among males than females, as well as among those who are young and those who have less work experience.
- ▶ Positive perceptions of one's job/organization (e.g., greater job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational identification, justice, and support) are associated with less CWB.
- ▶ Greater burnout and turnover intentions are associated with more CWB.
- ▶ Positive leader behaviors are associated with less CWB among employees, whereas negative leader behaviors are associated with more CWB among employees.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers seeking to measure CWB should consider using the Workplace Deviance Scale (Bennett & Robinson, 2000).

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