

Surveys of violence and abuse against shop staff  
in 2018

*Usdaw*  
Union of Shop, Distributive  
and Allied Workers



## Freedom From Fear

The true scale  
of the issue and the  
under-reporting problem

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## Introduction from the General Secretary

Too often retail employees are confronted with violence, threats and abuse as a part of their daily working lives and it is really important we stand together and ask people to respect shopworkers.

Life on the frontline of retail can be pretty tough for many shopworkers, there needs to be Government action to protect them. The police must have the resources from Government to respond to incidents and investigate shop thefts and the Government must legislate for stiffer sentences for the thugs that attack shopworkers.

Often, in the course of their duties, shopworkers are expected to enforce the law. Whether that is preventing under-age purchases of products like knives, tobacco or alcohol, or detaining shoplifters until the police arrive, they can be put in real danger. Parliament has given shopworkers the duty to enforce the law, so Parliament should provide the necessary protection.

I have been shocked by the leniency of some of the sentences for assault of workers. This survey shows that over 280 retail staff are violently attacked every day, with many more threatened and verbally abused, so it is time to say enough is enough. The Government must act to address this issue and act quickly. Recent reports from the British Retail Consortium, Association of Convenience Stores and police recorded crime figures all agree with our report that abuse of retail staff is getting worse.

A Bill has been lodged in the Scottish Parliament by Daniel Johnson MSP after a public consultation on the proposal received overwhelming support. The Bill creates new criminal offences to give additional protections for workers in the retail sector, and those who sell age-restricted items, such as bar and restaurant staff. We hope that all parties in the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government listen to the evidence and support the Bill proposal.

Worryingly 57% of shopworkers who experienced violence, threats or abuse at work did not report the incident to their employer, including 20% who were physically attacked. We are told that sometimes staff don't feel it would make any difference if they do report incidents or that it's just a part of being in a frontline job, dealing with the public and the problems that sometimes throws up. Our message to shopworkers is very clear, abuse is not part of the job. We are talking to employers to ensure that reporting systems are easily accessible and will make a real difference. It is really important that staff do tell their manager when they experience violence, threats or abuse.

If they report it we can help sort it.

We want to see retailers, police and the courts working in partnership to ensure better protection for shopworkers. Retail staff are an important part of our communities; their role must be valued, respected and protected.



**Paddy Lillis**  
General Secretary





**In 2003, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw) launched its Freedom From Fear Campaign in response to members' concerns about increasing levels of violence and abuse.**

**Since then Usdaw has worked with the public, retail employers, the police and with Government to protect shopworkers and, for several years, it looked as if the problem was being contained.**

**Figures from Government surveys, reports from employers and the Union's own surveys suggested that the problem was, at the very least, not getting much worse and in some respects was being reduced. However, evidence indicates a marked increase in levels of abuse and violence in the last couple of years and the need for the campaign is more pressing than ever.**

## **Measuring the Experience on the Frontline**

Since 2007, Usdaw has surveyed between 1,500 and 5,000 shopworkers each year to collect information on the extent of the problem.

As it involves personal discussion on a one-to-one basis with a fellow shopworker the survey casts useful light on the issue of under-reporting.

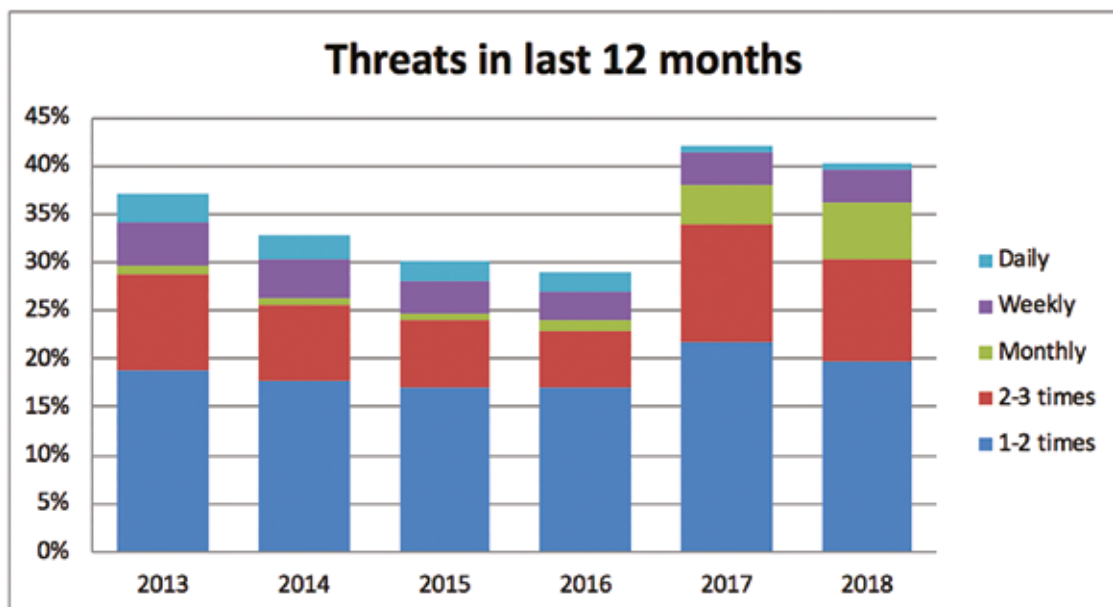
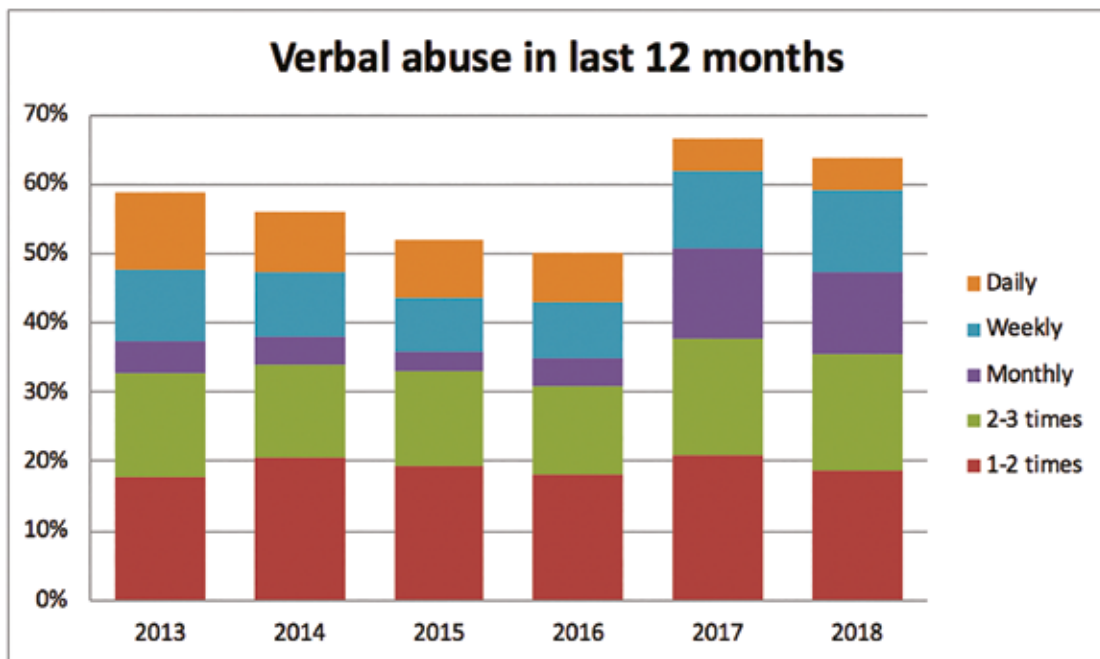
In 2018 we interviewed 6,725 shop workers, one of the largest samples ever studied.



## 2018 Results: Verbal Abuse and Threats

Over the last 10 years, the results have been remarkably consistent. Typically between 50 to 60% of workers report at least one incident of verbal abuse in the last 12 months and 30-35% report at least one incident of threat of physical violence in the last year. If there was any trend it was toward a slight decline in reports of abuse and threats.

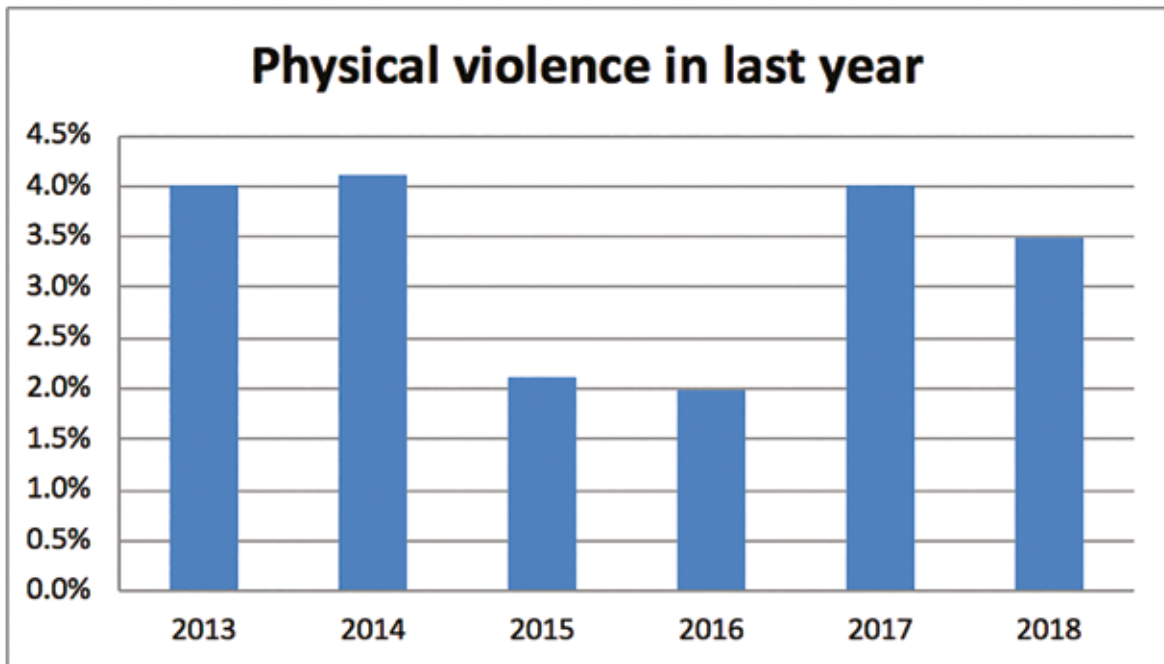
However, in 2017 we found a disturbing and significant increase in both abuse and threats. 66% reported verbal abuse and the proportion reporting threats of physical violence shot up to 42%. The levels of abuse and threat have stayed at this heightened level in 2018 with 64% reporting verbal abuse at least once in the last year and 40% threats of physical violence.





## Physical Assaults

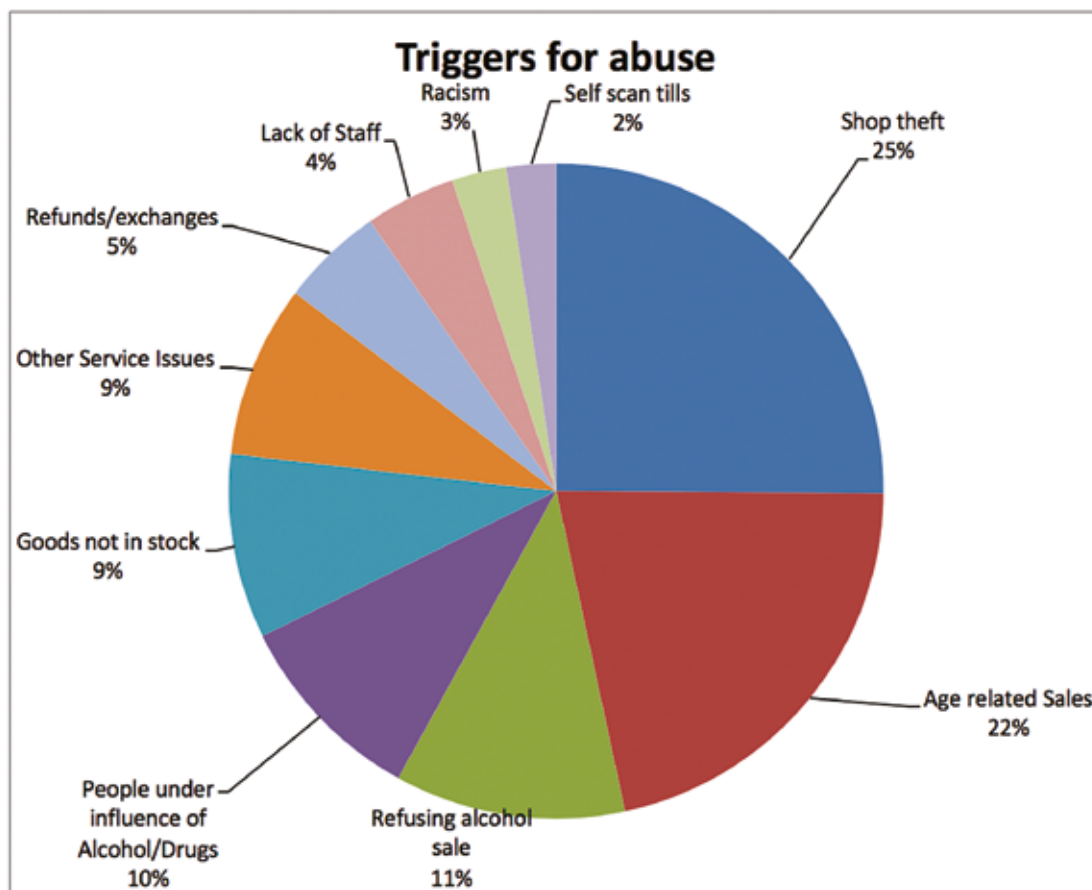
For the last seven years we have asked if workers were physically assaulted in the last 12 months. Last year this figure also showed a sharp upturn after 5 years of decline. This figure has also stayed at the higher level in 2018.





## Triggers for Violence and Abuse

We ask an open text question about what happened to them, to identify triggers for violence and abuse. Analysis of the answers reveals significant changes in the responses over recent years.



The most shocking figure is the continuing rise of shop theft as a trigger. It has grown from 15% of incidents in 2016 to 21% in 2017 and 25% in 2018.

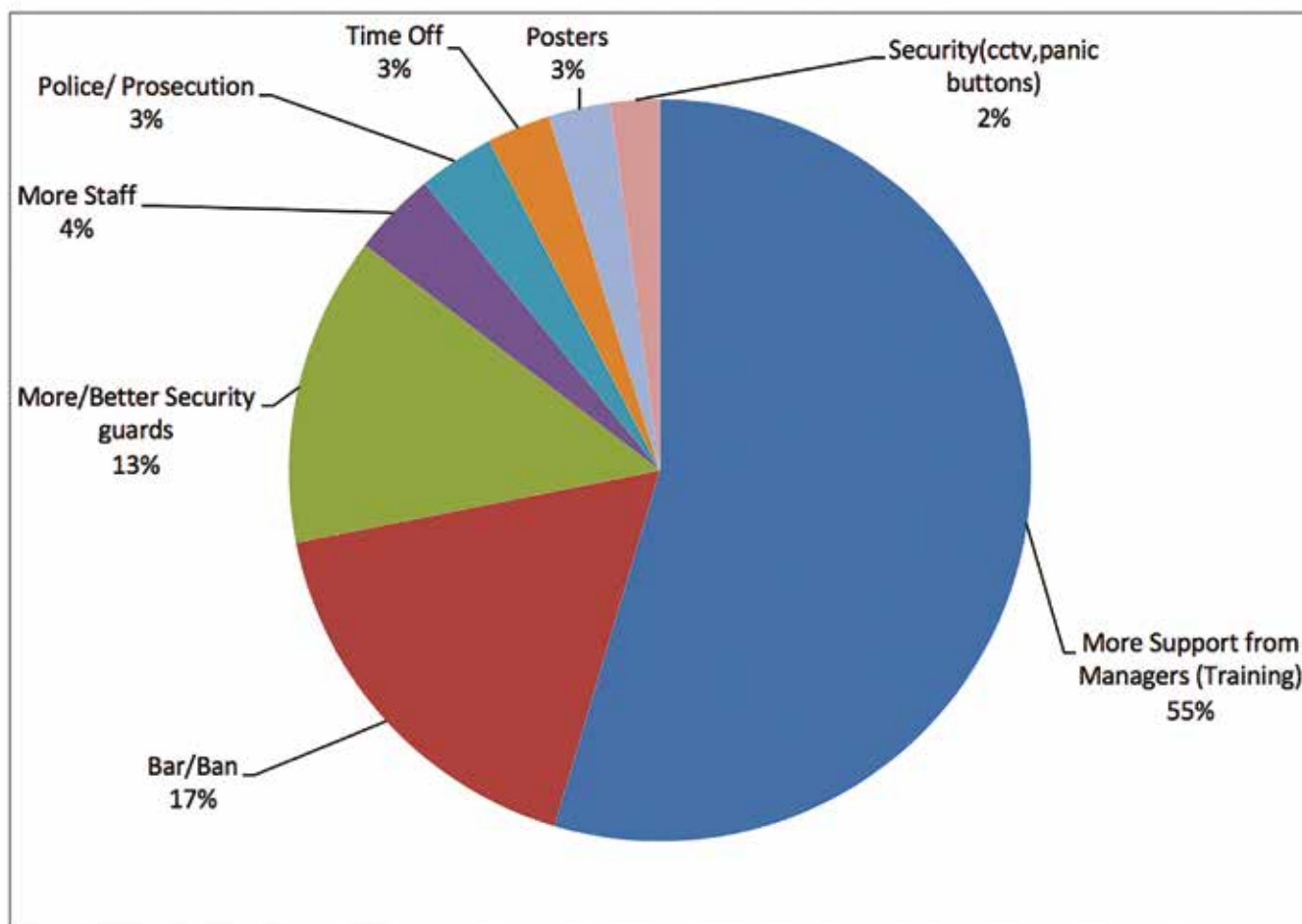
The rise in shop theft as a trigger has pushed age-restricted sales into second place – down from 30% in 2017 to 22% in 2018. 1 in 20 of the age-restricted incidents in 2018 concerned young people attempting to buy high-caffeine drinks. At present there is no legal restriction on the sale of these drinks but there is a voluntary code applied by retailers. Usdaw understands and supports the public health reasons for this restriction, but the figures illustrate that it does increase the risk of abuse against shopworkers. That is why Usdaw argued for better legal protection for shopworkers in the Offensive Weapons Bill which will make it illegal to sell corrosive substances to young people.

Note also that refusing sales of alcohol to someone who is drunk and dealing with people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs account for a further 21% of incidents. Between them these three triggers account for over two thirds of incidents.



## What Workers Want

We also ask workers what else they would like to see their employer do to improve things.



In comparison with 2017 there has been a growth in the call for stricter action to bar abusive people from the store and concerns about low staffing levels have also increased. However the overwhelming demand is for a more supportive approach from managers as it was in 2017.



## The Under-Reporting Problem

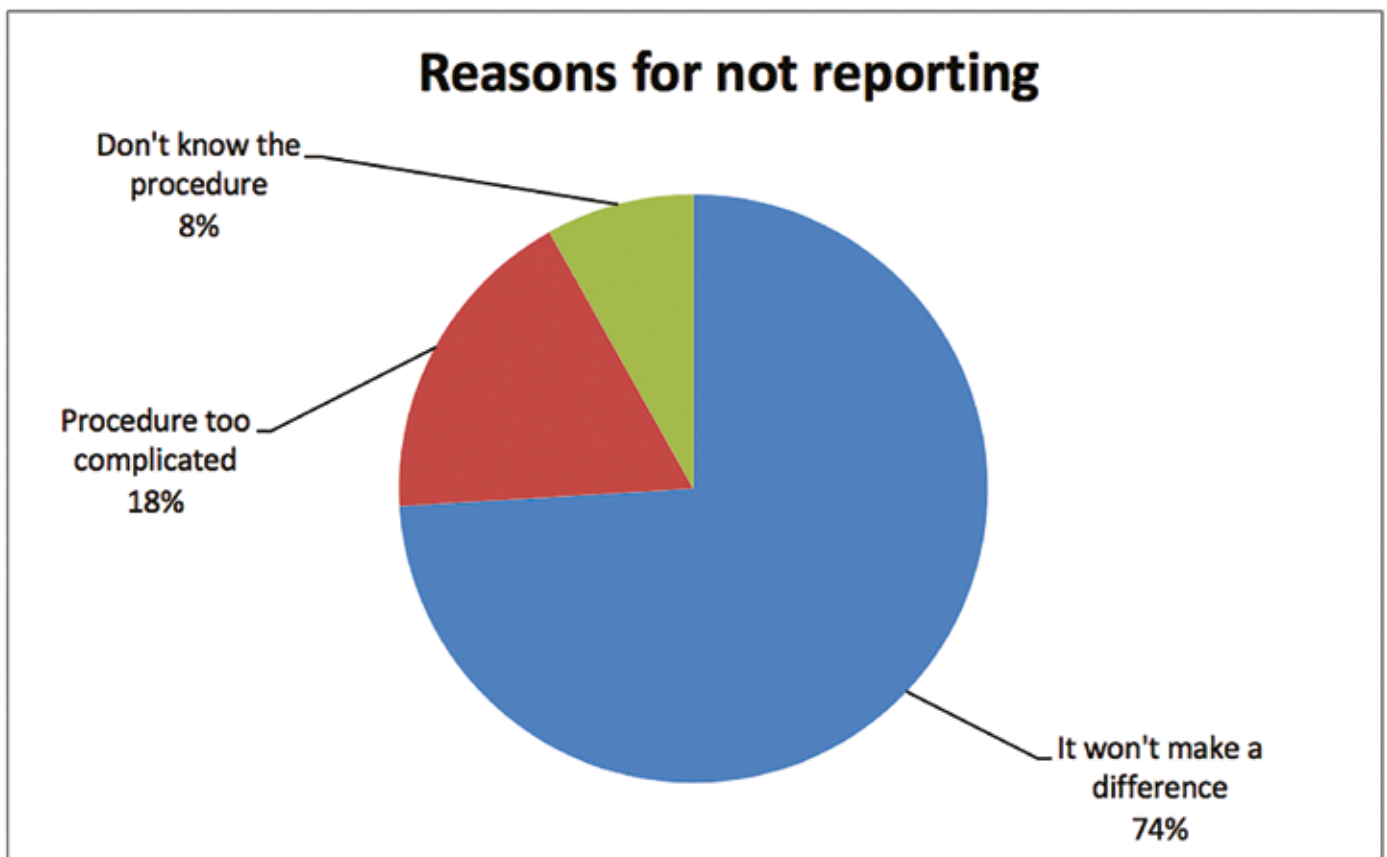
For 2018 we decided to ask for more detail about the under-reporting problem. In all the years that we have been doing the face-to-face survey it has been obvious that under-reporting is a massive issue.


As in previous years, over 50% of those who were verbally abused did not report it to their employer. In 2018 1 in 5 of those who were physically assaulted also failed to report it to their employer.

When we asked people the reason for not reporting incidents of abuse or even incidents of physical assault the results were quite shocking.

8% of respondents were not aware of the procedure for reporting incidents in their store. Nearly 1 in 5 said the procedure was too complicated – either because the forms involved were lengthy and took time to complete or because the procedure involved finding a manager who was required to fill a complicated form on your behalf and to submit the form.

But, overwhelmingly, nearly three quarters said the main reason for not reporting was that it would make no difference if they did.





Where incidents are not even reported through internal reporting systems, it is highly likely that the same incidents are not being reported to the police. At a time when police forces are facing increased demand because of other forms of crime and have suffered significant cuts in resources, this is a serious concern. If they are not aware of the extent of threat and violence that shopworkers face, police forces are not going to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves.

The work that is being done through the National Retail Crime Strategy Group to develop better guidance for retail businesses and their staff on reporting of crime is very important. In particular the need to make it clear how workers should report when they feel threatened or are assaulted in the course of that crime is crucial. However, on its own, it will not achieve the change in attitude that is needed to ensure that the serious nature of this violence attracts the support it needs from the police and the criminal justice system.

All too often criminals who assault staff are not even sent to court. Those who are can receive derisory sentences. In other cases, where the offender isn't even charged, victims are left feeling that no one cares that they were assaulted. That is why Usdaw is continuing to campaign for better legal protection for shop staff. The union wants to see stiffer penalties for those who assault workers - a simple stand-alone offence that is widely recognised and understood by the public, police, CPS, the judiciary and most importantly criminals

Clearly there is a lot more to be done to make sure that employers' reporting systems are easy to access and simple to use, to train workers so that they know how to report and, most importantly, to give workers confidence that it is worthwhile to report because they will be listened to and their concerns will be addressed.

Udaw will continue to challenge employers to make sure they do have effective procedures in place to protect staff by doing what they can to prevent incidents and by providing more effective support to workers when they are involved in incidents. Key issues include practical and realistic training for all staff and, in particular, giving store managers and their immediate bosses the tools and knowledge so they can intervene when staff need their support. But it also involves re-visiting procedures at all levels to make sure they are fit for purpose. Store-based risk assessment must involve store staff and reporting of incidents has to be encouraged to give a more accurate picture of the scale of the problem.

Since Usdaw launched its Freedom from Fear campaign a lot of work has been done to protect shopworkers. However as a result of major social and commercial change, levels of violence and abuse are now on the rise. We look forward to continued co-operation from retail employers and other stakeholders to make shops safer places for our members to work and for customers to visit.

## Quotes from Workers Interviewed During the Survey

### Theft:

*"Black eye, as a result of detaining a shoplifter who was violent when stopped for the theft." – "Shoplifter, told me to get out of the way or get stabbed with a syringe." – "Shoplifter broke my wrist."*

### Assaults:

*"I have had a customer ram a trolley into my leg as he said I was in the way!" – "Punched in the face by shoplifter I was stopping from leaving the store with stolen goods." – "Aggressive customers thinking it's okay to shout, scream and use inappropriate hitting of arms etc."*

### Christmas:

*"Customer not being happy about Christmas congestion and took it out on me." – "A frozen gammon was thrown at me by an irate customer at Xmas." – "On the customer service desk I was told to 'cheer up it's nearly Christmas, you miserable bitch' in a nasty tone."*

### Threats:

*"A guy threatened to smash my face in with a bottle of alcohol." – "Angry customers ranting. One man threatened to wait outside for me." – "I had lasses waiting for me outside the shop and lads following me to my house".*

### Alcohol:

*"Called names and swore at by a customer whom I'd just refused a sale because they were intoxicated. Pointing her finger in my face and making threats." – "Didn't have enough money, wanted alcohol. I refused sale and the customer was abusive." – "Ranting when refused alcohol sale when drunk and after 10pm."*

### Throwing goods:

*"Customer throwing card machines." – "Didn't have enough money, threw product at me and stormed off." – "Customer chucked a chicken bake at me."*

### Verbal Abuse:

*"Customer came to checkout and was in a rush. Told me to f\*\*\*ing hurry up." – "Customers can be really rude, whistling for attention or clicking fingers" – "Customer told me to stick receipt up my a\*\*e. I just ignored him."*

### Weapons:

*"Held up three times. Hammer-blade-scissors." – "Racist and sexist comments and drunks threatening to beat people up with a bat!" – "Threatened with a needle, threatened to be punched in the face and pushed into a wall."*





For more information about our  
Freedom From Fear Campaign, go to  
[www.usdaw.org.uk/fff](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/fff)

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