



Life on the Frontline

A report on shopworkers' experience of work-related violence and abuse

Usdaw

Union of Shop, Distributive
and Allied Workers

www.usdaw.org.uk

Introduction



This is a report of a survey of shopworkers during one week in a cross-section of retail stores across the country. It details, for the first time, their day-to-day experiences of abuse, threats, harassment and violence from the customers they seek to serve. The survey reflects real incidents that happened to real shopworkers in real stores.

The results show that whilst many shops are relatively free of incidents, a large proportion experience a high level of upsetting and sometimes horrific incidents which have a deep long lasting effect on the staff who work there.

This report concentrates on the voices of those shopworkers. As many direct quotes as possible have been included to give as clear a picture as possible of their experiences.

The findings have wide implications for all of us who are concerned for the safety and welfare of the UK's 2.7 million shopworkers.

Usdaw is the main trade union for retail workers. We are campaigning against abuse and violence against shopworkers with our Freedom From Fear campaign, working with retailers, the Government, police and local authorities to improve safety for staff and to promote respect for shopworkers.

I would like to thank all those who have supported our campaign and urge others to join us in this important work.

I would especially like to thank all the staff and store managers who completed the survey forms and the retail companies who worked with us to ensure that this survey could be run. Those companies and many others are working with Usdaw to improve safety measures, training and procedures to help prevent incidents and to support their staff.

The results of this survey will help that work.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Hannett". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John Hannett
Usdaw General Secretary

For more information on Usdaw's Freedom From Fear campaign visit www.usdaw.org.uk
Please e-mail your feedback and experience to freedomfromfear@usdaw.org.uk



Main Findings

The survey shows very high levels of abuse, threats and violence towards shopworkers by customers (see graph 1). However there were wide variations between stores. Around 40% of stores experienced very few incidents, whilst the remainder experienced much higher levels of abuse, threats and violence.

Tackling crime and anti-social behaviour

The survey shows the valuable role that shopworkers perform in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour. The majority of incidents of abuse, threats and violence were caused by:

- Refusal to serve age-restricted products or requesting proof of age
- Shoplifters
- Dealing with drunken customers

Victims of crime, anti-social behaviour and aggression

The other major causes of all types of incidents were that shopworkers, as frontline staff, were victims of not only criminals, but of anti-social behaviour and very aggressive, rude and insulting customers.

Causes of incidents included:

- Being in the way of shoplifters
- Rudeness and anti-social behaviour

Effects on shopworkers

The level of incidents is reflected in the levels of staff's concern (see graph 2). The majority of shopworkers are concerned about abuse, threats and violence at work. The survey shows that this concern affects many shopworkers both in the workplace and outside, lowering their performance at work, their health and affecting relationships (see graph 3).

The number of examples of abuse and attacks occurring outside work that are linked to incidents in work is extremely worrying for retail workers, their employers and Usdaw. These incidents may well not be recorded by the police or by the employer as being work-related, but it is vital that shopworkers are given as much support as possible, that offences are taken seriously and that offenders are dealt with effectively.

With over 2.7 million shopworkers in the UK, the findings have implications not only for retailers and for Usdaw, but for the Government, police and local authorities as well.



Policy Conclusions

Most incidents in stores are caused by a small number of persistent offenders causing specific problems.

The causes of these problems need to be addressed wherever possible. Usdaw is working hard with retail employers to improve safety measures, training and procedures but we need to work with others to tackle the causes:

- **Persistent offenders:** More links between retailers and local authority Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships need to be set up. The police need to work more closely with stores in many areas to help deal with persistent offenders.
- **Proof of age:** A robust scheme of age identity needs to be adopted. Some youngsters are trying to abuse, bully and threaten retail staff into making a sale. A robust identity scheme would take the guessing out of age-restricted sales and would significantly contribute to reducing abuse, threats and violent incidents against shopworkers.
- **Drunkenness:** The Government's alcohol strategy is much needed. Survey results show that consideration must be paid to shopworkers who are being threatened and attacked for upholding the law and refusing to sell alcohol to drunks. The position of shopworkers should be considered by licensing boards when they are looking at licensing hours.

- **Respect for shopworkers:** Greater consideration needs to be given to shopworkers as individuals. Customers should not feel they have a right to abuse, threaten or harass shopworkers. Usdaw is working to increase public awareness with its Freedom From Fear campaign.
- We are also working with employers to ensure that they make it clear to their customers that abuse of their staff will not be tolerated.

These actions will not only improve shopworkers' working lives, but help to tackle many of the problems of anti-social behaviour that beset many communities.

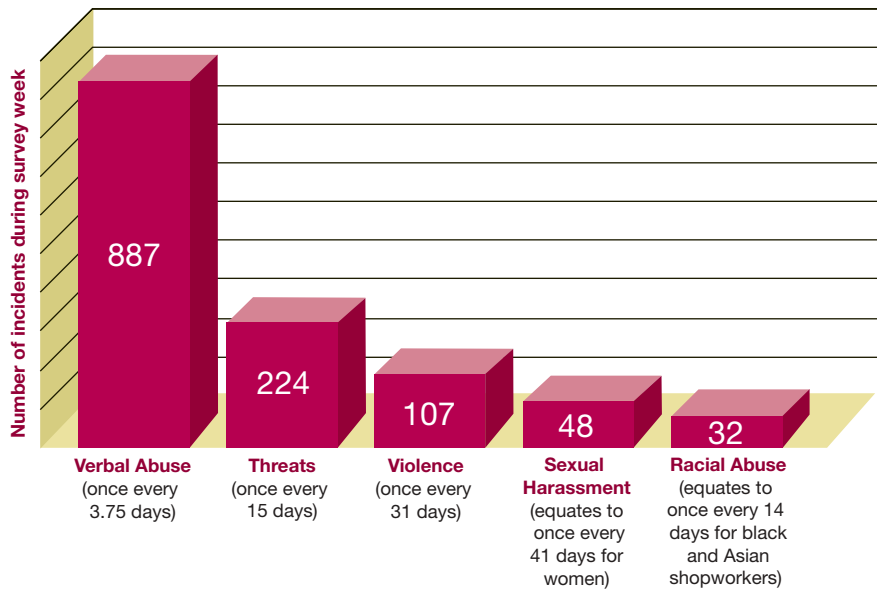
“You don't feel safe as you don't know who is coming into the shop next. Security would solve the problem.”



Summary

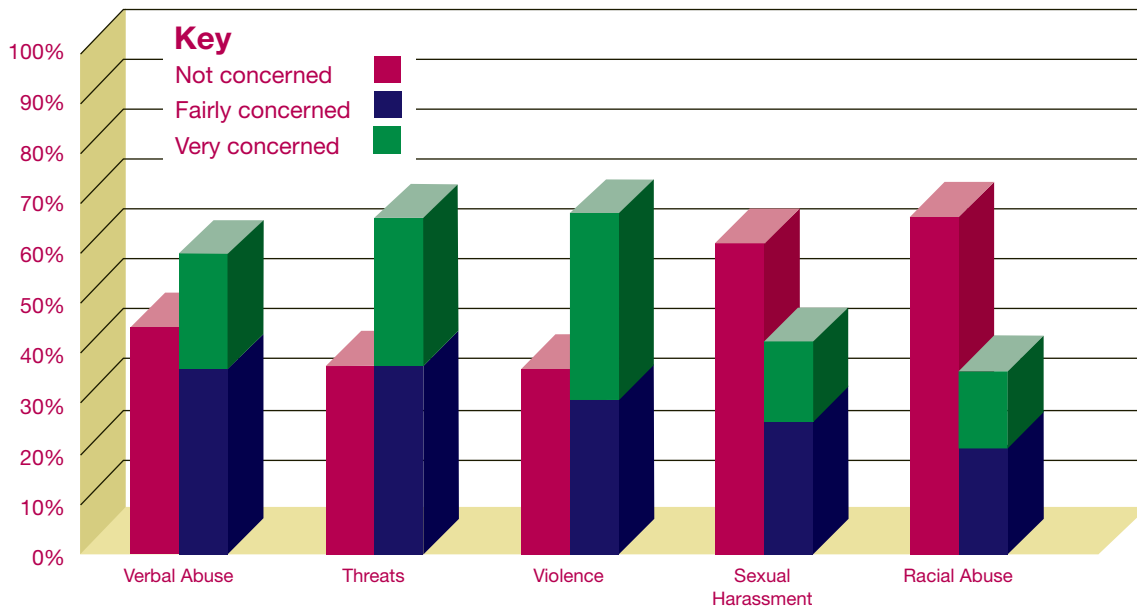
Incidents during the survey week

Graph 1 (Figures in brackets indicate, on average, how frequently a shopworker is affected.)



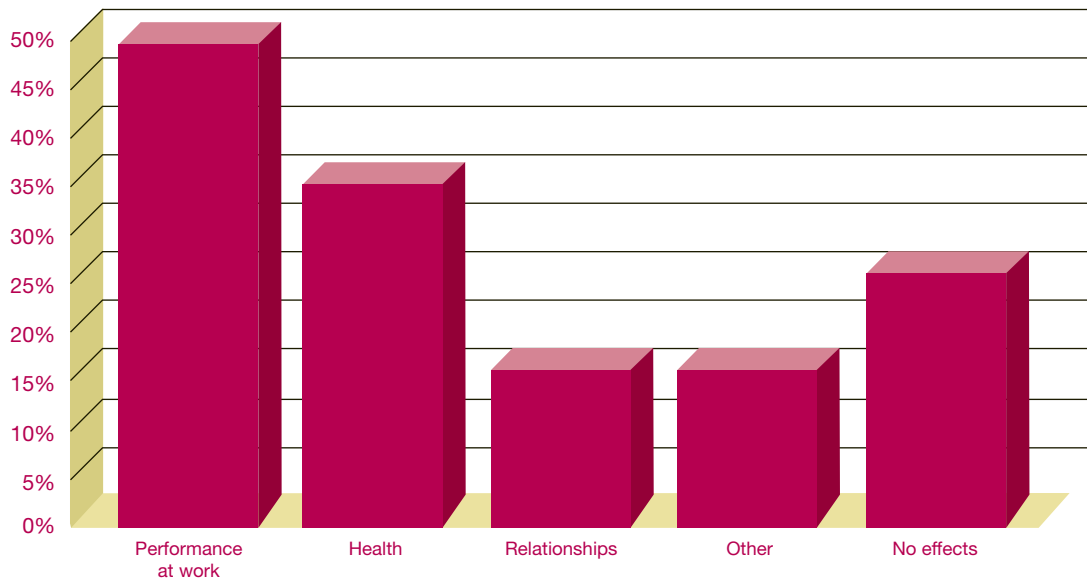
Do you feel concerned about abuse, threats and violence?

Graph 2



If you are concerned, how does this affect you?

Graph 3



Manager's Survey

Police response

- Response to incidents with violence: attended 48% of call-outs.
- Response to incidents without violence: attended 62% of call-outs.
- Do you generally receive a good response from the police to incidents with violence? Yes – 59%.

Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs)

- 30% of managers were aware of the local CDRP.
- 15% of store managers had been contacted by their local CDRP.
- 13% of store managers had found the CDRP helpful (i.e. 88% of those contacted).



Background

Usdaw has always been concerned about the levels of violence, threats and abuse that our members have to face on a daily basis. Usdaw has been producing advice for members and successfully negotiating with employers for extra safety measures at work for many years.

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) has been producing statistics of retail crime from employers' reports of incidents for a decade. In 2002 the 9th Annual Retail Crime Survey, showed that violent incidents against shopworkers had risen by 75% over incidents in previous years.

However, retailers tend to only collect systematic evidence of incidents where an insurance claim is involved. Therefore only violent attacks resulting in serious injury are recorded consistently.

As a union, Usdaw realised there was a need for evidence of the day-to-day experience of shopworkers and the wide range of incidents that are not currently recorded. Then we can identify problems and work with employers and health and safety reps to find solutions.

In October 2002 Usdaw conducted a survey of approximately 100 retail union lay representatives at its annual Retail Trades Conference. The results, published in Usdaw's report *Voices From The Frontline* showed the experiences of those representatives and the members in their stores over a twelve month period:

- 47% reported physical assaults in their store.
- 72% reported shopworkers being threatened with violence.
- 86% reported incidents of verbal abuse.

This survey led Usdaw to launch the Freedom From Fear campaign, which has the following main aims:

- To engage with the **Government** and lobby for policies that would improve the safety of shopworkers.
- To negotiate with **employers** and spread best practice on how to deal with violence, threats and abuse in the workplace.
- To promote respect for shopworkers with the **general public** and raise awareness of the issue.

The campaign has so far proved to be very successful with the Government, employers and the public supporting the campaign.

“I've learnt to deal with abuse from past experiences.”



The Survey

Usdaw worked in partnership with the following employers:

- Sainsbury's
- Tesco
- Woolworths
- Kwik Save/Somerfield
- The Co-operative Group
- Co-operative Societies

The survey focussed on incidents that took place over a seven day period at the start of June 2004, asking each employee to record the numbers of incidents and give examples of:

- Verbal abuse
- Threats
- Violent incidents
- Sexual harassment
- Racial abuse

We also asked employees for their level of concern (if any) about each of the above, and what effect that concern had on their lives.

Report forms for managers and union reps asked for the following additional information:

- Region
- Number of employees
- Existing security measures
- Police response
- Contact with the local Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership

In all, 660 completed staff survey forms and 113 managers' forms were analysed. Three-quarters of respondents worked in convenience stores.

“When wearing name badges I had two men calling my name up the street when I finished work.”

“I was shoved by the mother of a child I refused to serve cigarettes to.”



Verbal Abuse

Level of incidents

The 660 survey respondents recorded 887 incidents of verbal abuse during the week – an average of 1.34 incidents per respondent.

However, incidents were spread unevenly. Many staff experienced no abuse at all, whereas a proportion experienced several incidents. Staff on duty late in the evening, at weekends and on kiosks selling alcohol and cigarettes seemed to experience the most incidents.

The definition of verbal abuse was ‘shouting, swearing or insults directed at you’. Incidents included rudeness, being sworn at, called names, spat at and insulted.

Main causes

- Asking for proof of age and/or refusing to serve minors with alcohol or cigarettes.
- General rudeness and anti-social behaviour.
- Customers that enter the shop drunk.
- Complaints about service, such as queues at tills or lack of stock on shelves.

Examples of incidents

Asking for proof of age and/or refusing to serve minors with alcohol or cigarettes

“A customer spat and swore at me after I asked him for i.d. to prove his age.”

“Customer pointing finger in my face, under age related sales.”

*“Customer called me ‘low life piece of s****’ when I wouldn’t serve him with alcohol.”*

*“Called a f***** w***** for asking for proof of age over alcohol sale.”*

“(Abused) when refused to serve cigarettes to schoolboys.”

“On kiosk, when asking for i.d. for cigarettes and alcohol, and they haven’t any they often swear at you.”

“Swearing when teenagers try to buy alcohol and steal sweets.”

General rudeness and anti-social behaviour

“Every day someone is rude to you.”

“Large group of kids outside shop, shouting and swearing at me and customers. One threw a carton of milk at me.”

“Been threatened and called names.

Lots of swearing from children aged 5-19, also drug addicts.”

“Verbal abuse in store and outside.”

“A couple of times per week we get customers who are very rude and sometimes an apology from staff is not good enough.”

“Sworn and spat at.”

*“Oi, c*** come and show me where this is!”*

*“Told to f*** off loads of times and have been called a bitch and a whore.”*



Customers that enter the shop drunk

"A drunk customer told me to shut up and spat."

"(Abused) when refused to serve alcohol to drunk woman."

"Insults directed at me (four times) when ejecting drunks from store."

"A customer accused me of not doing my job properly and hurled abuse at me. He was drunk at the time."

(Abused five times) "mostly down to refusing service because of being drunk."

Complaints about service

*"I was told 'you're a thick s*** and too slow on the till' by a customer."*

"When pointing out at tills that I can't take more than a certain number of items, a customer broke into a tirade of abuse demanding that I serve them anyway."

"Customer shouts at me about queues at tills. I apologise but this wasn't enough and I receive more abuse."

"Told we were bloody useless because there wasn't enough staff to serve."

*"F***** bitch f***** do your job properly or I'll jump over the counter and knock you out!"*

*"I told the customer that we did not have the product they wanted. They called me a 'f***** idiot'."*

Levels of concern

Not concerned: 43%

Fairly concerned: 36%

Very concerned: 21%

The level of concern generally reflected the level of incidents in stores. Over half of shopworkers (57%) were fairly or very concerned about verbal abuse, and over a fifth (21%) were very concerned.

"A customer accused me of not doing my job properly and hurled abuse at me. He was drunk at the time."



Threats

Level of incidents

224 threats were experienced by the 660 staff during the week of the survey – an average of 0.34 per person per week.

These statistics equate to a shopworker being threatened on average once every 15 working days, although again incidents varied widely between stores. In some stores, shopworkers reported frequent threats, others none.

The cases recorded are all horrific – especially those that threaten shopworkers when they leave work. As later evidence on violence and the effects on retail workers shows, not all threats are idle. Faced with threats such as these, shopworkers are constantly in fear – whether in work or outside.

Examples of threats

“Threatening to come back later and burn the shop down.”

“You four-eyed, goggle-eyed slag; I’ll be back later to do you.”

“Was told I would be got when I left the store.”

“I was told I would get my tyres slashed.”

“Jump over the counter to knock me out. Wait ’til the shop closes and come back and sort me out.”

“Threatened to be stabbed twice with a needle.”

“I’m going to get you outside of work.”

“Threatened three times this week.”

“Threatened to be killed.”

Main causes

- Refusing to serve minors with alcohol or cigarettes.
- Customers drunk or under the influence of drugs.
- Dealing with shoplifters, particularly catching them.

Examples of incidents

Refusing to serve minors with alcohol or cigarettes

“Told I would be ‘cut by their mates’ because I refused to serve a bottle of beer.”

“Young man said he would wait for me after work after being refused.”

(“Frequent” threats due to) “refusal of drink, mostly weekends. Under ages.”

(Threats) “from those refused who said would wait for me.”

“Jump over the counter to knock me out. Wait ’til the shop closes and come back and sort me out.”



Customers drunk or under the influence of drugs

“Customer said he would set me on fire when I refused to sell him alcohol while very drunk.”

“Customer approached me with a clenched fist because I asked him to leave as he was drunk.”

(Threatened) “Alcohol refusal to drink. Police came in store and removed.”

(Threatened frequently by) “local drunks when had far too much to drink.”

Dealing with shoplifters

“Shoplifter was stopped and said he had AIDS and would infect me if I didn’t release him.”

“Stopped three males at the front door, when I asked to see what was in their bags all three threatened and abused me.”

“Was threatened to have my head kicked in by (name), a known thief and druggie.”

“Shoplifter threatened to ‘cut me up’.”

“Threatened by a woman caught shoplifting (with knife) said she was HIV positive.”

“To break my nose for barring from the shop.”

Levels of concern

Not concerned: 36%

Fairly concerned: 36%

Very concerned: 28%

These levels of concern are slightly higher than those for verbal abuse.

Almost two thirds (64%) of staff were fairly or very concerned about threats.

Over a quarter (28%) were very concerned.

In stores where threats occurred, not surprisingly, almost all staff were concerned about them.

“Customer said he would set me on fire when I refused to sell him alcohol while very drunk.”

“Shoplifter threatened to ‘cut me up’.”



Violence

Level of incidents

107 cases of violence were recorded by the 660 staff during the week – an average of 0.16 incidents per person.

This equates to a shopworker being attacked on average once every 31 working days.

Our definition of violence was deliberately broad – including ‘any physical attack – for example, a slap, kick or shove as well as more extreme violence’. Incidents ranged from shoves, slaps and pushes to staff having stock thrown at them, an attempted stabbing and being put through a window.

Even more worrying are examples of attacks perpetrated outside work due to incidents inside the store.

Examples of violence – in work

“I was pushed by a girl’s dad, who would have bit me if he wasn’t being held.”

“Put through a window.”

“A man came up behind me, pushed me and tried to punch me.”

“I was bit by the tailgate of a delivery van because kids pressed the button, had stock chucked at me.”

“We are always being shoved, sometimes gently, sometimes roughly, out of the way of customers in too much of a hurry.”

Examples of violence outside work

“I got attacked on the street because of incidents at work – spat at, bit, kicked, had drinks poured over my head. Three incidents in seven days.”

“Attack in street on way to work by someone I removed and banned from the store.”

Main causes

- Tackling and apprehending shoplifters.
- Getting in the way of shoplifters and till snatchers.
- Asking for proof of age or refusing to serve minors with alcohol or cigarettes.
- Complaints about service.

Examples

Tackling and apprehending shoplifters

“Shoplifter, when apprehended, grabbed a fork in the staff room and tried to stab me, then was kicking me.”

“Shoplifter we stopped at entrance door leaving with spirits from store struggled to get free (punched).”

(Two incidents of violence) “As a Duty Manager I have to deal with drunks and shoplifters.”



Getting in the way of shoplifters and till snatchers

"I was attacked on the till and had my till snatched."

"Pushed out of doorway by a shoplifter."

Asking for proof of age or refusing to serve minors with alcohol or cigarettes

"I refused a young lad alcohol and the next day I got a bit beaten up for it."

"I was shoved by the mother of a child I refused to serve cigarettes to."

"I was spat on by a youth because I refused to serve cigarettes."

"When I refused to sell a young fella drink he hit me."

Complaints about service

"I had to close a checkout down because it was time for me to go. A man came to the till and I said I was closing. I had the closing sign up but he got angry because he had to wait. He was holding a pack of minced beef and because I wouldn't serve him he threw it at me."

"Sometimes customers slap your hand away if you give them change when they are not ready for it, but wouldn't call it violence."

"Shoved for not selling drink after 10.30pm on Sunday nights."

Levels of concern

Not concerned: 35%

Fairly concerned: 29%

Very concerned: 36%

Levels of concern were the highest of all the incidents.

Almost two thirds (65%) were fairly or very concerned about violence, and over a third of respondents (36%) were very worried.

"I refused a young lad alcohol and the next day I got a bit beaten up for it."

"When I refused to sell a young fella drink he hit me."



Sexual Harassment

Level of incidents

48 incidents of sexual harassment were recorded, most by women, but a couple by men. For women respondents, this equates to an average of 0.12 incidents per respondent, or one incident every 41 working days.

We described sexual harassment in the survey as 'any unwanted advances, remarks or other behaviour which you find offensive.'

Types of incident

- Lewd or suggestive comments
- Abusive comments
- Touching

Examples of incidents

Lewd or suggestive comments

"Elderly gentleman, a regular, during a friendly conversation made remarks about, 'I would like to see you naked'. I was struck dumb by the remark and didn't reply."

"From older men and if they have been drinking. I've had a few remarks about looks and eyes etc, it gives me the creeps."

"Customer said, 'I would like to see you naked lying beside me'. This customer was drunk."

"From one old man, some too rude to print! It's not nice, but he's a loyal customer."

"Man took it upon himself to say I fancied him and was I going to do something about it. Yeah right!!!!"

(Two incidents) "Mainly drunk females coming in and making advances."

"Customer said he would take me to the fair and give me a good seeing to."

Abusive comments

*"Get your fat a*** on the checkout, there's big queues."*

"When wearing name badges I had two men calling my name up the street when I finished work."

Touching

"My bottom was slapped when bending over to put some stock out."

"An old man making sexual comments, being personal, staring me up and down, tapping me on the bum with stick. Being generally perverted."

"Grabbed from behind by female customer."

"A customer came up behind me and grabbed my hips, whilst I was standing on a stool, then he hit my bum."

Levels of concern

Not concerned:	60%
Fairly concerned:	25%
Very concerned:	15%

40% of staff were fairly or very concerned about sexual harassment. The incidents seem to make them feel uncomfortable and insecure at work.

The lower numbers of staff concerned reflect the lower levels of incidents and that 40% of our respondents are men, who are much less likely to be subjected to sexual harassment. However, even among those affected there seems to be a feeling that they have to put up with suggestive and rude comments.



Racial Abuse

Level of incidents

32 incidents of racial abuse were reported. This would equate to an average of 0.48 incidents per week for black and Asian staff. However, some racial abuse was reported that was directed at other customers or staff, but which the member of staff found offensive.

We described racial abuse as 'any abuse or behaviour of a racist nature which you find offensive'.

Many black and Asian respondents who reported racial abuse also reported verbal abuse and threats, indicating that black and Asian staff may suffer more from customers' aggression.

Examples of incidents

"None directed at me personally, but lots of it between customers. Some comments have really offended me as my family is of foreign background."

*"Tell that n****r bitch to get out. Tell that n****r bitch I will be waiting 'til she comes out."*

"Go back to your country."

"Called a black bastard."

"Customer made a comment about one of my colleagues."

*"A customer called me a Scottish c****."*

Levels of concern

Not concerned: 66%

Fairly concerned: 20%

Very concerned: 14%

Over a third of respondents (34%) were fairly or very concerned about racial abuse. This is far higher than the proportion of black and Asian respondents and may well indicate the intolerance of racism demonstrated by some respondents' comments.

"Go back to your country."

"Some comments have really offended me as my family is of foreign background."



Effects on Staff

484 out of the 660 respondents (73%) indicated that they had concerns about either abuse, threats, harassment and violence from customers.

Of these 484, 362 respondents (75%) indicated that their concern affected them adversely:

- 234 (35% of all respondents) said their performance at work was affected.
- 163 (25% of all respondents) said their health was affected.
- 73 (11% of all respondents) said their concern affected their relationships.
- 72 gave examples of other effects.

Respondents describing the effects of incidents on them vary. We have categorised them as best as possible:

- Not affected.
- Those who have some concerns.
- Those who are very concerned at work.
- Those who are affected by incidents outside work.

Examples of effects

Not affected

“It doesn’t affect me – I’m thick skinned.”

“I’ve got broad shoulders – it doesn’t affect me.”

“I just try to get on with my job.”

“It doesn’t really affect me, I’ve learnt to deal with it from past experiences.”

Those who have some concerns

“Having a security guard gives me some peace of mind.”

“It doesn’t make coming to work as easy as it could be. Security guards should be in store more often. Safety precautions have been taken but not to good enough effect.”

“You get occasional verbal abuse from customers, nothing violent has happened – yet!”

Those who are very concerned at work

“Generally uneasy when working, always threatening and menacing overtones to any shift. Usually worse at weekends. High levels of stress due to dual role as staff and security, especially when short staffed. Never feel totally secure and safe at work.”

“Scared in case abuse is thrown at me again by angry customers.”

“Just made to feel exposed in the workplace as it seems safety is not high on the priority list.”

“A bit nervous when scary (name) comes in.”

“You don’t want to come to work. Feel stressed.”

“Scared to approach some people.”

“You don’t feel as safe as you don’t know who is coming into the shop next. Whether it is a drug person who is a shoplifter. Security would solve the problem.”



“I get nervous when a large group of males enter the shop together (we are situated in a very rough area). I have also suffered panic attacks when faced with certain people. I dread confrontation with any customer.”

“Very wary when in work and on guard at all times.”

“You’re not sure what thieves will do to you when you catch them.”

“I would not work nights because of the abuse and threats you get from drunks and drug addicts.”

“I’m frightened of being attacked.”

“I’m very nervous and wary of people. There is a lot of unease amongst staff.”

“Leaves you feeling a bit shaky and a bit nervous.”

Those who are affected by incidents outside work

“I only live local, so I am afraid they will follow me home.”

“Angry customers have targeted my car and house.”

“Many of the youths that come in know me and what car I drive. I feel my car could be damaged one day.”

“I have had stones thrown at my windows and door. Shouted at on the street even when I’m not working. Abuse from drunks and druggies.”

“You’re not sure what thieves will do to you when you catch them.”

“I have had stones thrown at my windows and door. Shouted at on the street even when I’m not working. Abuse from drunks and druggies.”

“I only live local, so I am afraid they will follow me home.”



Police Assistance

67 of the 113 store managers (59%) reported that the response from police to incidents with violence was 'generally good'.

However, this still leaves a worrying 41% who felt that the response to violent incidents was not good.

This is particularly worrying for retail staff who have to attempt to detain a violent offender until the police arrive. If there is no certainty that the police will respond to the call, staff are deterred from attempting to detain the offender. In consequence, the offender is less likely to be apprehended for the crime and is able to continue offending.

- During the week of the survey, the police were called 23 times to violent incidents. Of these call-outs, the police attended 11 (48%).
- Of the 63 incidents without violence to which police were called, they attended 39 (62%). This response may have been at a much later time.
- Police response times to incidents during the week were: 40% less than one hour; 60% over one hour.

Usdaw is encouraging best practice of police and retailers to working together to collect evidence and deal with persistent offenders, often using anti-social behaviour legislation.

Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs)

Only 34 of the 113 managers (30%) were aware of their local CDRP.

However, of these only 17 (15%) had been contacted by the CDRP.

Promisingly, of those who had been contacted, 15 managers (88% of those contacted) found the CDRP had been helpful.

This shows that although few CDRPs have yet contacted local stores, the vast majority of those that do make contact are helpful to the store manager.

Usdaw is keen to encourage more CDRPs to work with retailers who can be a valuable resource to them in tackling persistent offenders.

“Just made to feel exposed in the workplace as it seems safety is not high on the priority list.”





To find out more, visit our web site:
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