

# Campaign to end violence and abuse against retail workers



**Survey  
Results  
2019**

#FFF

*Usdaw*  
Union of Shop, Distributive  
and Allied Workers



# Contents

Page

Introduction from the General Secretary	1
Measuring the Experience on the Frontline	2
2019 Results:	
Verbal Abuse and Threats	3
Physical Assaults	4
Triggers for Violence and Abuse	6
What Workers Want	8
Training and Competence	9
Contact with the Police	10
Conclusion	11
Quotes from Workers Interviewed During the Survey	12



## 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 retail workers.

Life on the frontline of retail can be pretty tough for many retail workers, 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 retail workers.

Often, in the course of their duties, retail workers 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 retail workers 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 assaults on workers. This survey shows that over 400 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 is currently progressing through the Scottish Parliament by Daniel Johnson MSP and has been endorsed at committee stage. The Bill creates new criminal offences to give additional protection 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 over half of retail workers who experienced violence, threats or abuse at work did not report the incident to their employer, including 17% 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 retail workers 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 retail workers. Retail staff are an important part of our communities; their role must be valued, respected and protected.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Paddy Lillis**  
**General Secretary**

In 2003, the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw) launched our 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 retail workers 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, recent evidence indicates a marked increase in levels of violence and abuse 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 7,000 retail workers each year to gather first-hand accounts on the extent of violence, threats and abuse against retail workers.

As our survey data is gathered through personal discussion, on a one-to-one basis, with a fellow retail worker it casts a useful light on the issue of under-reporting.

In 2019 we interviewed 6,457 retail workers, one of the largest samples ever studied.



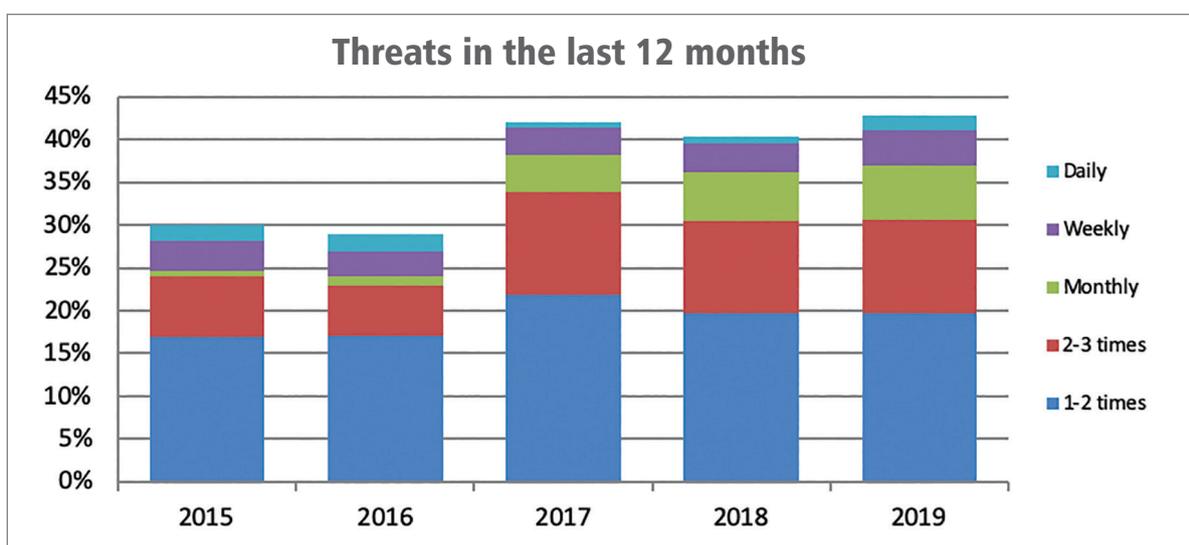
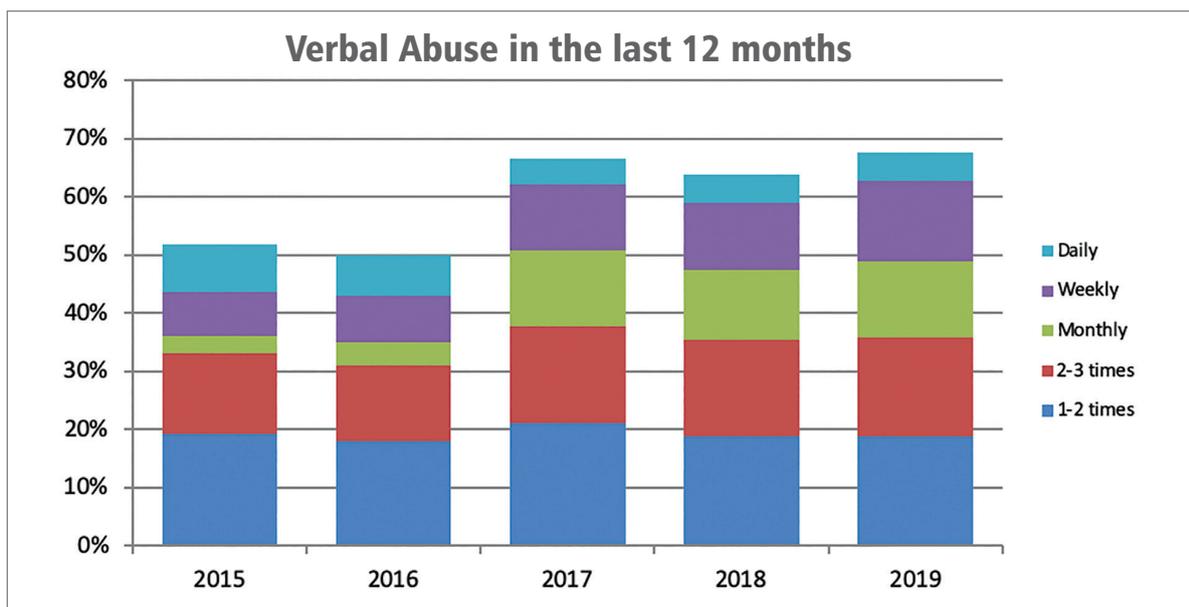


## 2019 Results: Verbal Abuse and Threats

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 over this period, it was toward a slight decline in reports of abuse and threats.

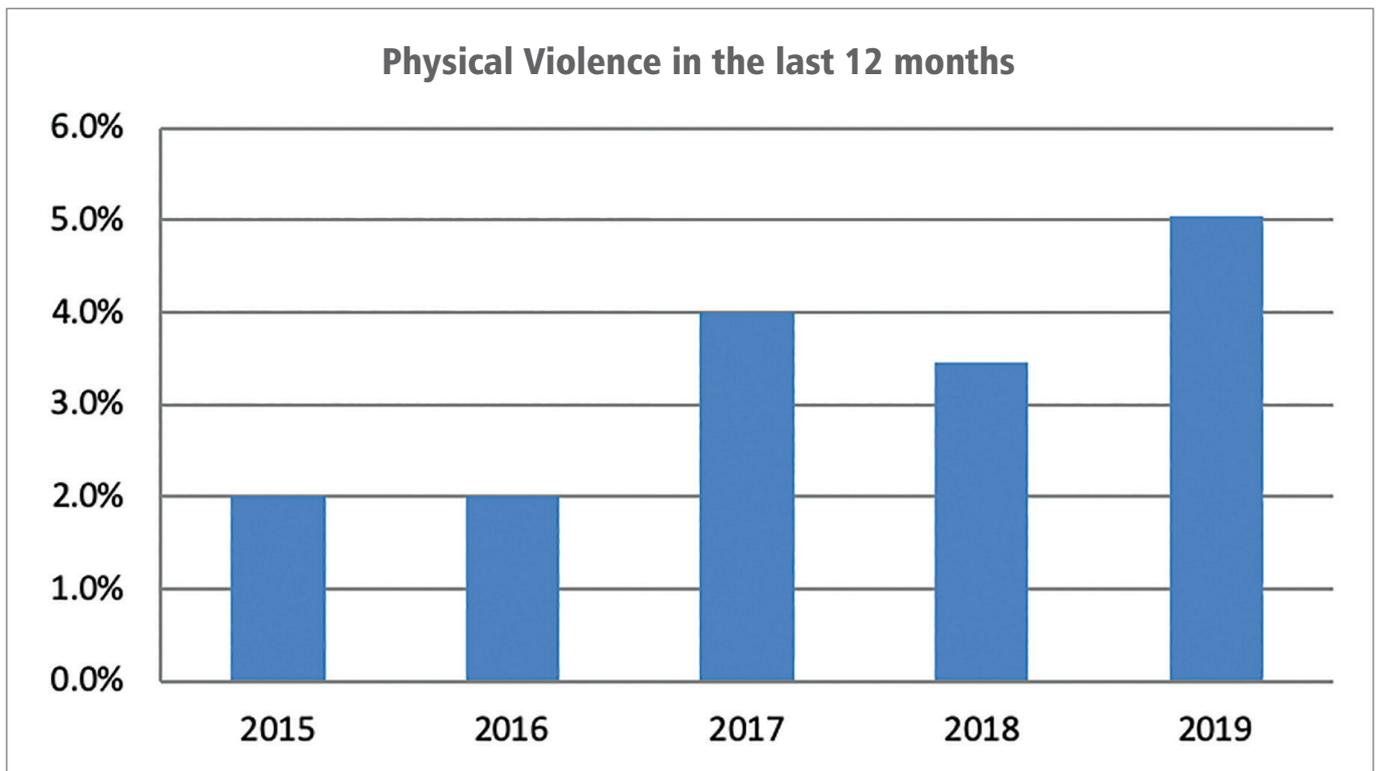
However, in 2017 we found a disturbing and significant increase in both abuse and threats and this upturn has continued in both 2018 and 2019. Based on the levels of violence and abuse reported to us in this survey we estimate that over 400 retail workers are being attacked every day.

Shockingly, our latest survey shows that during 2019, 68% of workers reported they had been verbally abused at least once and 43% said they had been threatened with physical violence.



## Physical Assaults

We also ask if workers were physically assaulted in the last 12 months. In 2017 this figure showed a sharp upturn after five years of decline. Reports of physical assault are even higher in 2019.



One notable feature of this year's responses was the number of times that workers mentioned the use of knives in assaults. Although we did not ask any question about use of weapons nearly one in five of those who were assaulted mentioned that the assailant used a knife. This sharp increase in reported weapons indicates that the severity of abuse against retail staff is increasing dramatically.

As in previous years under-reporting of incidents continues to be an issue. Over half of the workers interviewed said they had never reported an incident to their employer. Even for those who had been subject to physical attack, 17% said that they had not reported the incident.



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 retail workers face, police forces are not going to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves.

*"A customer pulled a knife and threatened to stab me and another colleague with it."*

*"I just had a knife pulled on me early in the morning. I wasn't hurt but shook up because it was unexpected."*

*"I got threatened I'd be stabbed to death with a knife held against my throat."*

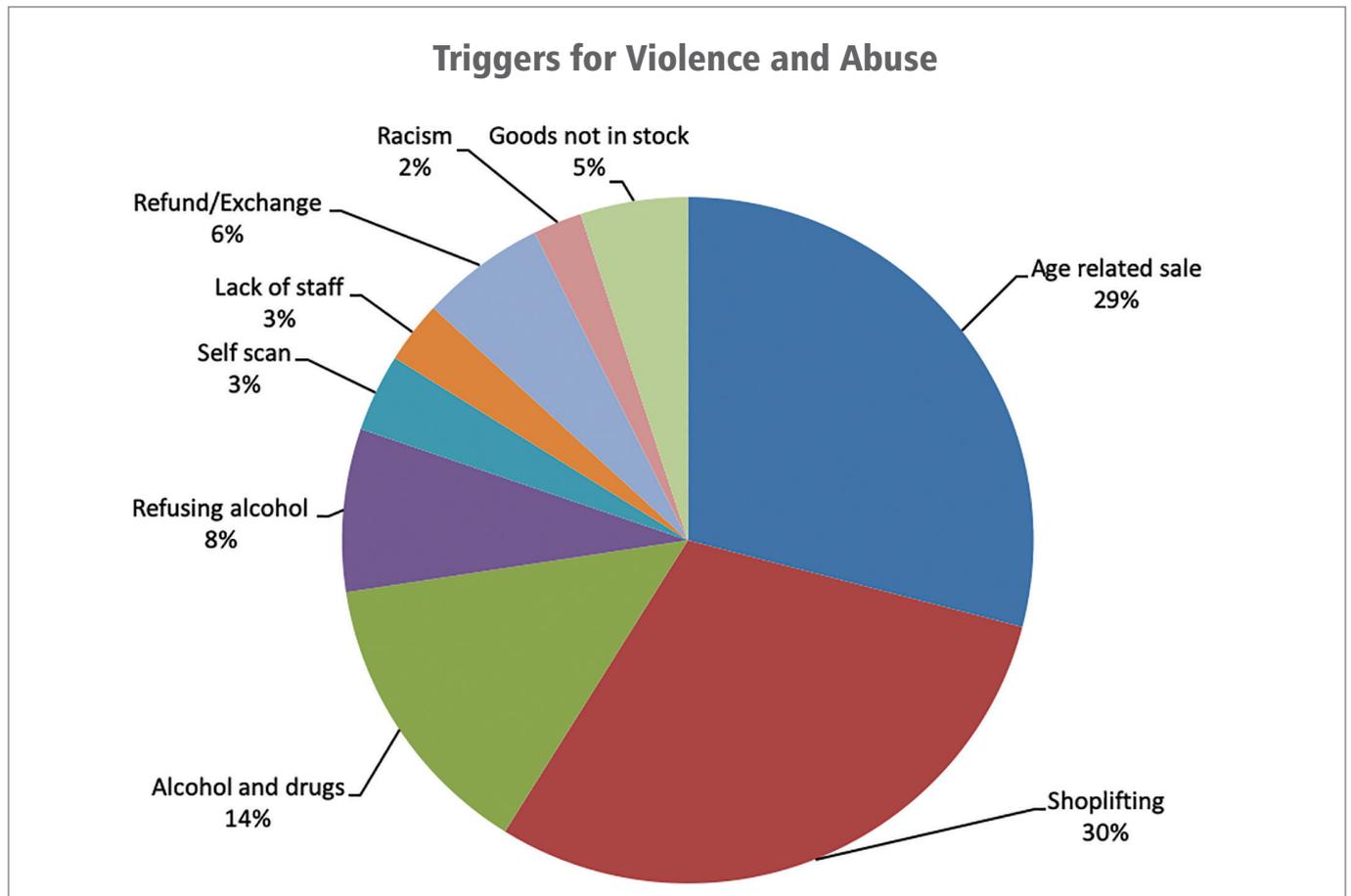
*"I witnessed a colleague with a knife to her throat."*

*"I was held at knifepoint and told my throat would be cut if I didn't open the safe. I had no access to this safe."*

*"A shoplifter threatened to stab us but the manager let him go; no police were called."*

## Triggers for Violence and Abuse

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



As in 2018 there has been another sharp rise in reports that dealing with shoplifters is the main trigger. This is a further indication that shop theft is a growing problem and that the perpetrators are becoming increasingly aggressive. Shoplifting as the trigger has doubled in the four years from 2016 to 2019.

Sale of age-restricted products and the need to ask for proof of age continues to feature as the other main cause of violence and abuse. Retail workers have a legal duty to enforce the law on age-restricted products. The law is necessary for public protection and for health and welfare of young people. But the fear of abuse or even physical violence when a worker has to challenge someone who looks like they may be too young makes it very stressful for workers – especially when they are isolated in a small store or are standing alongside a customer at a self-service till.



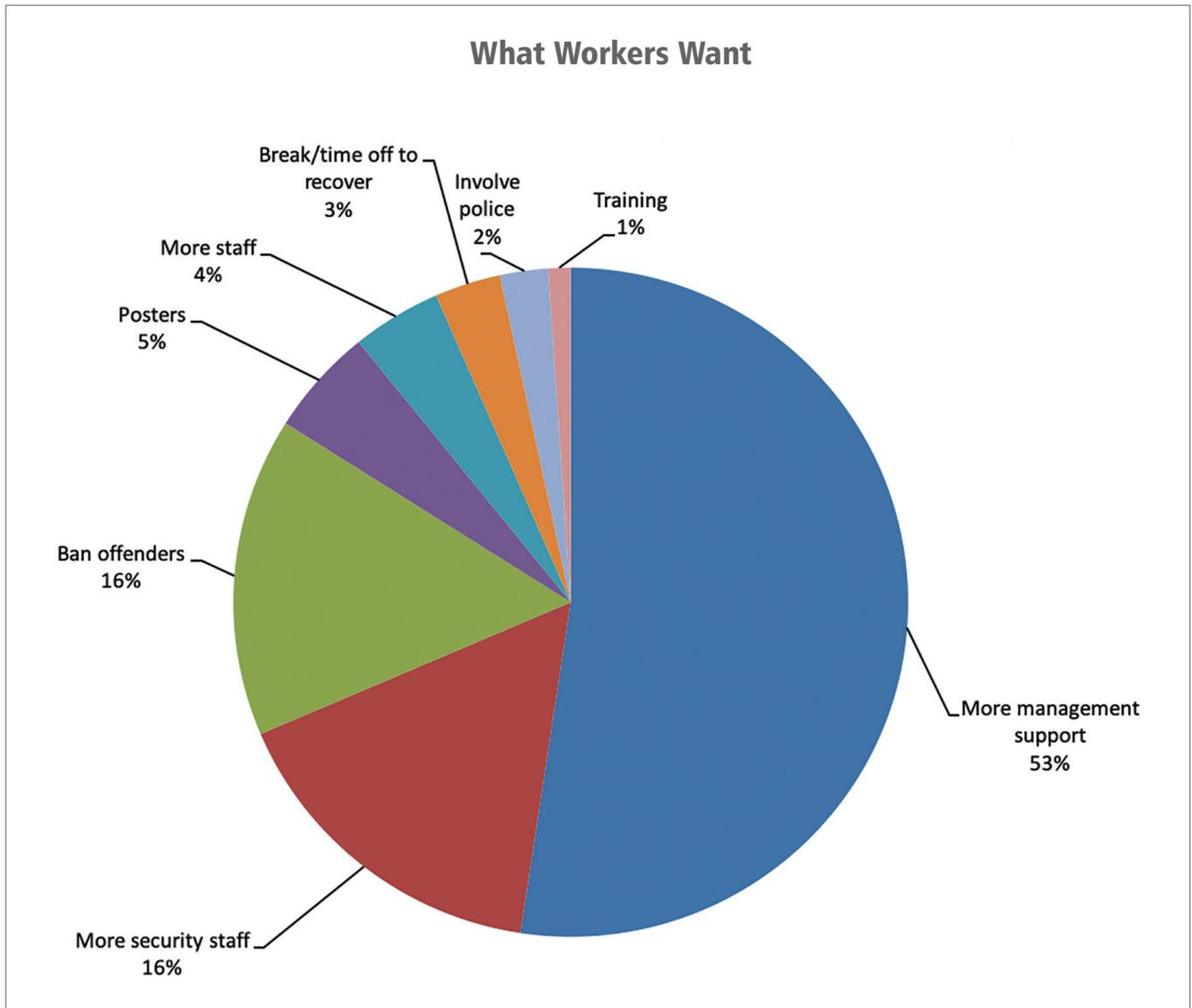
Refusing sales of alcohol to someone who is drunk and dealing with people who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs account for a further 22% of incidents. In 2019 shoplifters, age-restricted sales and problems with alcohol or drugs accounted for one in eight incidents.

Here, retail workers are mandated to enforce the law for the benefit of wider society, yet are clearly let down through a lack of legislative protection. Usdaw's figures, along with those of industry bodies such as the BRC and ACS, clearly highlight the need for a Protection of Workers Bill.



## What Workers Want

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



As in previous years the main call was for management to give more support and back staff up. More uniformed security guarding also continues to be a popular demand. The demand for a zero tolerance approach with banning of offenders has increased in recent years.



## Training and competence

In 2019 we asked workers if they knew what they were expected to do if they were faced with specific situations that are known to be common triggers for violence. This question was designed to assess the level of awareness among retail workers and the effectiveness of any training they receive on conflict management.

### Training and Competence

Do you know what you are expected to do if faced with:	Yes %	No %
An aggressive customer?	84	16
Shoplifter?	86	14
Refusing an age-restricted sale?	93	7
Armed robbery?	65	35

Employers may take some confidence from the fact that the percentage who knew what they were expected to do when facing customer aggression or shop theft were both over 80%. On the other hand the fact that a significant minority said that they did not know what to do is a cause for concern – especially as staffing levels are being reduced and in many smaller stores workers will often be quite isolated and will not have ready access to a colleague or manager when an incident occurs.

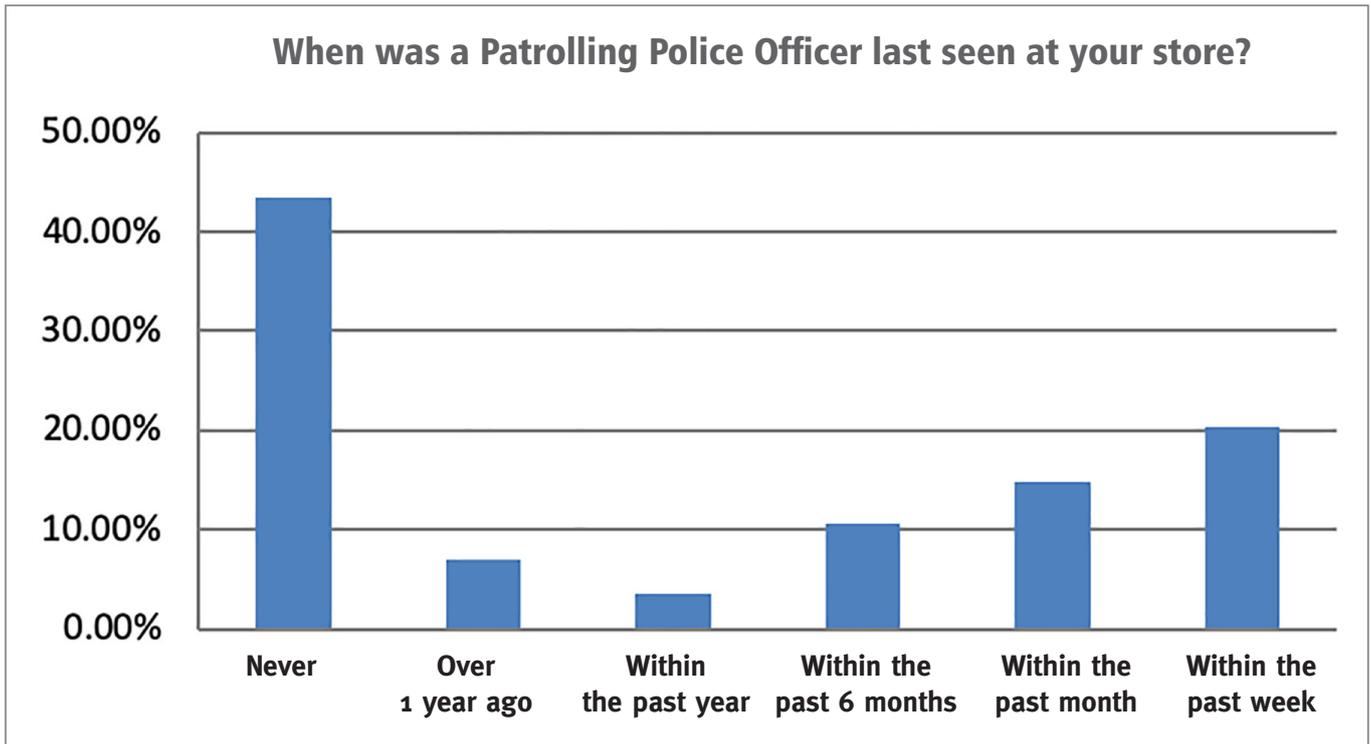
It is to be expected that the number who know what is expected when refusing an age-restricted sale is even higher. The legal duty on the worker and on the employer to enforce the law in this area means that a great deal of effort goes into Think25 training and this is backed up in many stores with test purchases and disciplinary action. Indeed it could be argued that it is surprising that this figure of 93% is not even higher.

It is also not a surprise that the number of workers who know what is expected in an armed robbery is lower. In most stores, armed robbery is not a common occurrence, although sadly the number of armed incidents is increasing significantly and there are some convenience stores where repeated attacks do occur. The fact that 35% of retail staff are not confident that they know what to do is a cause for concern. When a robbery does take place the impact on the store staff can be considerable. It is important that effective training is provided so that staff are better prepared for an attack when it does happen.

Overall the responses to this question show that there is still work to be done by retail employers and by Government to make sure that training for retail workers is effective and to ensure that core messages from that training are regularly refreshed.

## Contact with the Police

Another new question in our 2019 survey concerned the amount of contact that retail workers have with the police. We asked when they last saw a patrolling police officer in their store.



Over half of the workers interviewed said they had not seen a police officer in the last year and 44% could not recall ever seeing a patrolling police officer in the store.

Usdaw gave a detailed response to the Home Office call for evidence on retail crime and violence which took place in the summer of 2019 ([www.usdaw.org.uk/UsdawEvidence](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/UsdawEvidence)). Over 3,000 members provided us with feedback to help with that response. One of the questions we asked was why incidents were not being reported to the police.

Of the 66% who did not report, the most common reason given was that they did not think it was a police matter (especially for verbal abuse or threats). Other reasons were that they did not think the police would do anything, that management said they would deal with the matter and that they were aware of the limitations on police resources.

As we state earlier in this report, under-reporting is a very serious issue. It means that the true scale of the crime and the harm that it is causing remains hidden. The fact that there is so little contact with the police in many areas of the country is significant. It reinforces the message that the police are too busy or that retail crime is seen as a minor issue. With the level and severity of violence and abuse against shop staff increasing significantly, there is a clear need for Police and Crime Commissioners to treat Retail Crime as a priority.



## Conclusion

The Home Office call for evidence in 2019 was in response to continued pressure from retail employers, their trade associations and from Usdaw about the true extent of harm that is being done to retail workers as a result of the levels of abuse and violence that they face.

The results from Usdaw's 2019 survey show all too clearly that the levels of crime and violence are still on the increase.

Unfortunately, the General Election at the end of the year has delayed the Home Office Minister's response to the findings from the call for evidence. Several important initiatives that were being developed through the National Retail Crime Strategy Group have also been put on hold. The work that was being done to develop better guidance for retail employers and their staff, to improve reporting levels and to develop better sharing of information with the police is an important part of the response to the serious situation we currently face. 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 retail 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.

Ushaw will continue to work with employers to make sure they 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.

Since Usdaw launched its Freedom From Fear Campaign a lot of work has been done to protect retail workers. However as a result of major social and commercial changes, levels of violence and abuse are rising sharply. 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

*"I was pushed down with a trolley and told to go back to your country you black bitch."*

*"Customers have shouted in my face for not having items in stock, having the wrong items, discontinued, etc. I've had fingers clicked at me instead of saying "excuse me" – general rudeness, swearing, calling me "sweetheart", "babe" and perved on by old men."*

*"I was physically attacked by a shoplifter at front of store, no police attended and there was no one around to help."*

*"We have also been filmed by teens using their mobile phones as they've abused us. It is depressing and upsetting."*

*"There was a confrontation by a previously banned shoplifter as they were told to leave store, who threatened me with violence after I finished work."*

*"A customer spat in my face when I discovered their £20 note was fake."*

*"Pushed, threats with needles, knives etc, threats of stabbings, infections with AIDS, being spat on, verbally abused daily."*

*"I was punched in the head by customer who was shoplifting."*



*"I've had part of my ear bitten off and often threatened with physical violence. Have had both knives and needles pulled out at me."*

*"A customer threatened to wait for me after work because I asked to see his ID as he looked under 25."*

*"They threatened to kill me and my family. They smashed a bottle and tried to stab me."*

*"I've had hair pulled out of my head, been dragged to the floor which was covered with glass, spat at and threatened."*

*"One person threatened to throw acid at me."*





Sign the Petition at

[petition.parliament.uk/petitions/328621](https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/328621)

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