



# Campaign To End Violence And Abuse Against Retail Workers

Survey Results 2021

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# Message from the General Secretary

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In this second year of the pandemic essential workers in retail have continued to battle with the all too frequent changes in Government rules and guidance and with the different waves and variants of the virus to ensure that shops stay open and customers get the goods and services they need.

It is therefore disturbing to see that the record levels of violence and abuse that they experienced in the first year of the pandemic have increased even further. 90% of workers reported verbal abuse in the last year (up from 88% in 2020). 64% reported threats of violence (up from 60% in 2020) and, most disturbing of all, 12% reported actual physical assaults (up from 9% in 2020).

Violence and abuse is not an acceptable part of the job and it is truly horrific that shopworkers are having to face it on a daily basis.

Although the situation is bleak, there are some early signs that the hard work that the Union has been doing with the retail employers may be starting to make a difference.

The Protection of Workers Act came into force in Scotland in August 2021. By the end of the year nearly 300 cases were under investigation by the Scottish Police. While we still do not have similar laws for England, Wales or Northern Ireland, the Westminster Government has given its support to an amendment to the Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill that would make violence against workers a statutory aggravating factor for sentencing. And there are encouraging pilot projects with some police forces to improve reporting of incidents to the police and to use the evidence to deal with prolific offenders.

Our survey also shows an encouraging increase in reporting of incidents to employers. There has been an increased effort by employers to make people aware that abuse will not be tolerated through, for example, the #ShopKind campaign and, in some stores, it appears that some managers are being more robust in support of their workers.

However, faced with such appallingly high levels of violence and abuse, and with shopworkers' almost complete lack of confidence in the ability of the system to give them the protection they need, much more needs to be done.

The Government must provide the co-ordination needed to turn pilot projects into common practice and to ensure that retail employers, police and the courts work together to make shops safe places for our members to work and for customers to shop.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paddy Lillis".

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

# Introduction

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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. 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 worse and in some respects was being reduced. However in the last couple of years before the Coronavirus pandemic there was disturbing evidence of a sharp upturn. The number of workers experiencing verbal abuse increased from just over half to more than two-thirds in that period. Numbers of physical attacks also rose sharply. It was clear from our surveys and from figures provided by the retail employers that the two main triggers for this violence and abuse were dealing with shoplifters and sales of age-restricted products. Between them these accounted for more than half of the incidents.

Then in 2020 the world was hit by the Coronavirus epidemic and in addition to the underlying causes of violence and abuse that led to the increase in shop theft and aggression, workers in essential shops had to deal with new pressures.

The changes to the shopping experience imposed a new range of responsibilities on front line staff in stores. In the early stage of the pandemic, enforcement of social distancing rules meant restricting the numbers in store at any one time, which meant that queues of shoppers outside the store needed to be managed. Inside the store reminding people of the need to keep 2 metres apart and controlling queues at checkouts were also potential sources of conflict. Particularly in the first few months, panic buying and stock-piling of essentials put pressure on supplies with empty shelves and restrictions on the amount of key products individual customers could buy were necessary. Customers were asked to shop on their own where possible, and regulations on wearing of face coverings were introduced for both customers and staff.

Over the last year the confusion and pressure on shopworkers has increased as different variants of the virus have hit and the rules on social distancing, solo shopping and face coverings have changed. The picture has been further confused as rules have been significantly different in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, in particular, the Westminster Government's see-sawing between relaxation of rules and re-imposition of legal duties has added to confusion and uncertainty. As the epidemic has progressed other factors have added to the pressure on frontline staff. While the majority of the shopping public have done their best to comply with the local rules, the uncertainty about the risk of infection and the behaviour of other shoppers has added to the anxiety of many customers which has resulted in more friction between customers and arguments in which staff have been forced to intervene. Even worse, as the pandemic has progressed, there has been a small but vocal minority of people who do not accept the rules who actively seek to challenge guidance and advice on wearing of face coverings and social distancing.

Given the uncertainties caused by the pandemic and the pressures on key workers in the retail industry, it was no surprise that Usdaw's 2020 report on violence to staff showed a massive upturn in incidents of verbal abuse, threats and even physical violence.

It is perhaps also no surprise that the 2021 report indicates that the shockingly high level of violence and abuse continues.

There are some positives to recognise from the work that the industry has been doing with the Union over recent years. However, there is also disturbing evidence that the underlying causes of violence and abuse that may have been swamped by the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic have not gone away. Depending on the course that the virus takes over the next few years, we may have to live with those underlying pressures and demands imposed by new waves of infection for some time to come.



# 2021 Survey Results

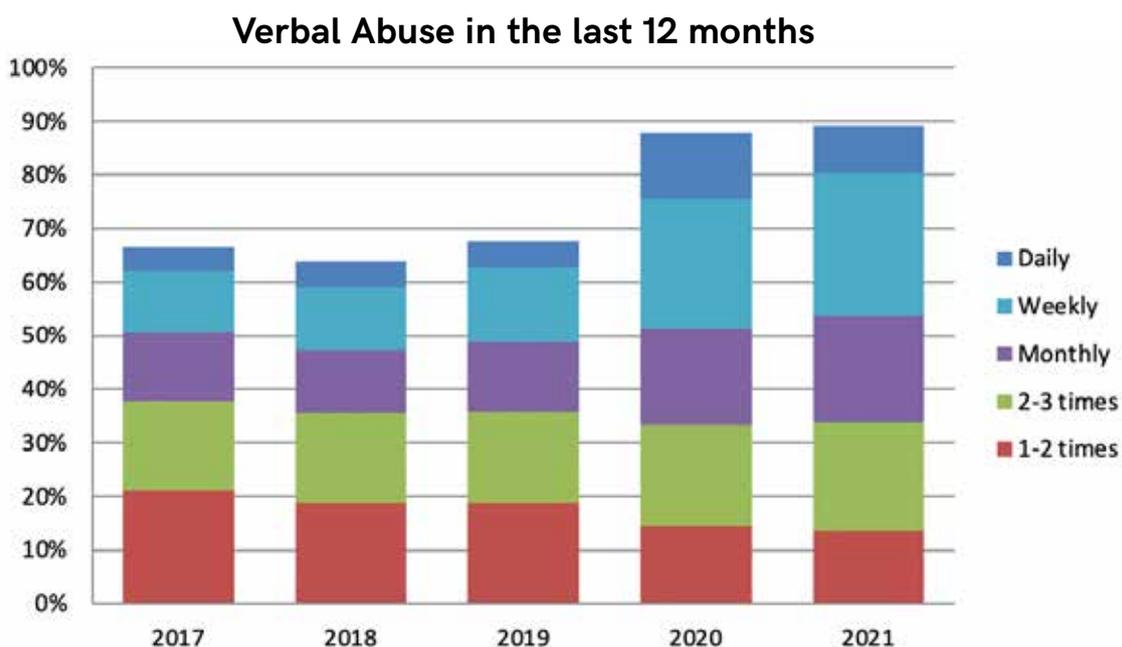
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From 2007 to 2019 Usdaw surveyed between 1,500 and 7,000 shopworkers each year to gather first-hand accounts on the extent of violence, threats and abuse against shop staff. The unique feature of the Usdaw surveys is that they were based on face-to-face interviews conducted by Usdaw reps with fellow workers in shops. As such they were not reliant on workers using reporting systems to report incidents to their employers or to the police. Their design also gives a unique perspective into the workers' perceptions of the risks that they face and the solutions that are needed to reduce or prevent those risks and dramatically exposes the level of under-reporting of incidents over that period. One of the consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020 was that it was obvious that the Union could not conduct its annual survey on violence and abuse in the same way as before. It would not be possible to send Usdaw reps out to do face-to-face interviews with thousands of different shopworkers. Instead we were forced to rely on an online survey.

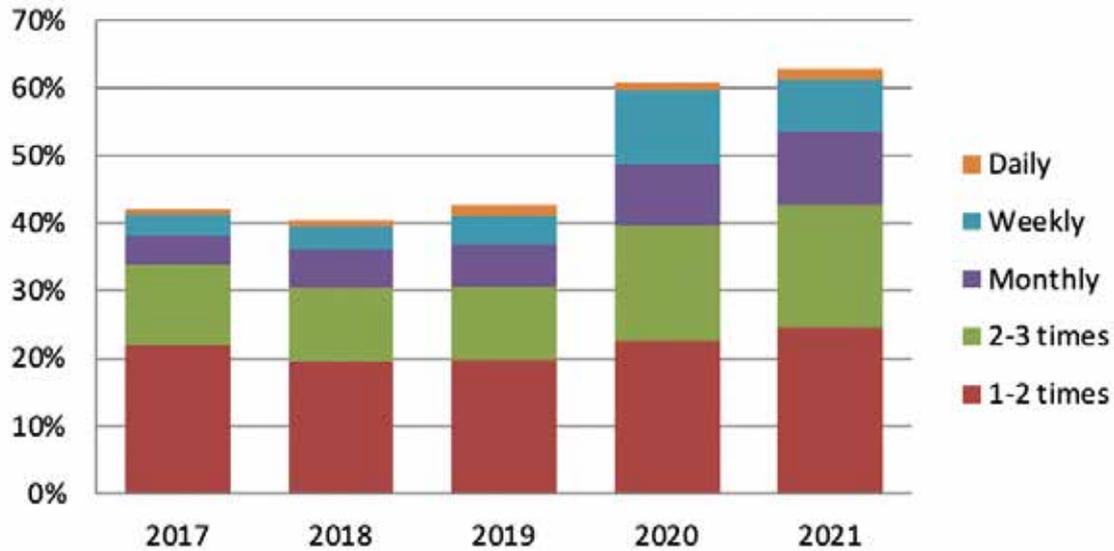
Differing Coronavirus restrictions in different countries over the survey period meant that the 2021 survey was also mainly run as an online survey. This means that any comparison with data from the surveys up to 2019 must be treated with caution, but the results can be safely compared with the 2020 survey.

The survey results are based on 3,464 responses received between July and December 2021. They show that the high levels of abuse and violence recorded in the 2020 survey were exceeded in 2021.

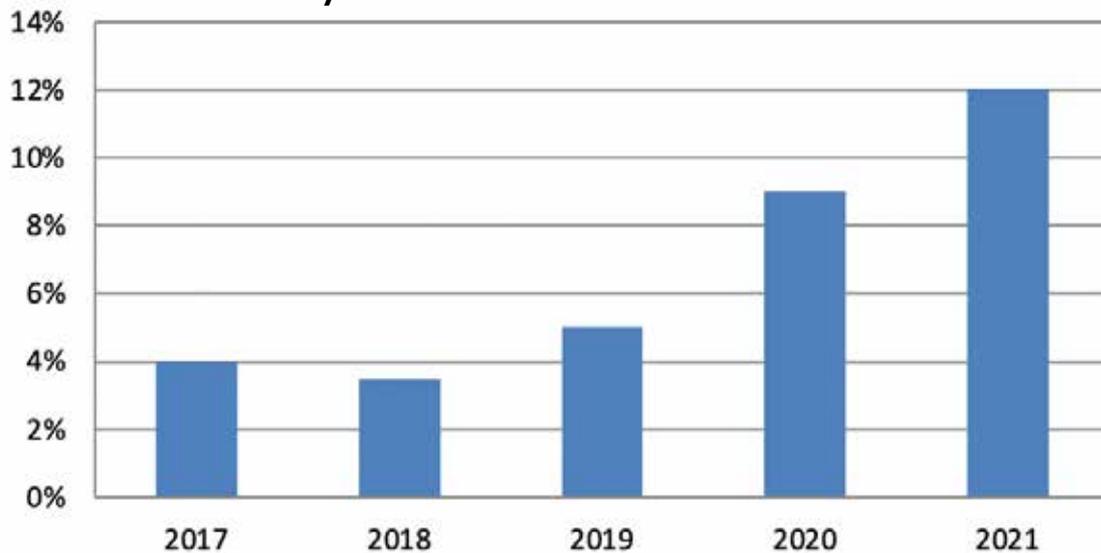
9 out of 10 workers reported verbal abuse. 64% received threats of violence and 12% were physically assaulted during the year. In 2020 the figures were 89% abused, 60% threatened and 9% physically attacked.



### Threats of Violence in the last 12 months



### Physical Assaults in the last 12 months



Physical assaults included being spat at or coughed at, being punched or kicked and attacks with weapons, most commonly knives or needles.

An analysis of the results by gender shows that women were more likely to be the target of verbal abuse - 92% of women against 88% of men. Men were significantly more likely to be physically assaulted - 17% of men against 10% of women.

*"I've worked for this company for 23 years. Been a store manager for 6 years, but after being spat at in June, then 4 weeks later the physical assault, I walked out and went on sick for 8 weeks, had to go onto medication for anxiety and had a breakdown. So I had to remove myself from that role. I handed my keys in and started as a store assistant in September at another store."*

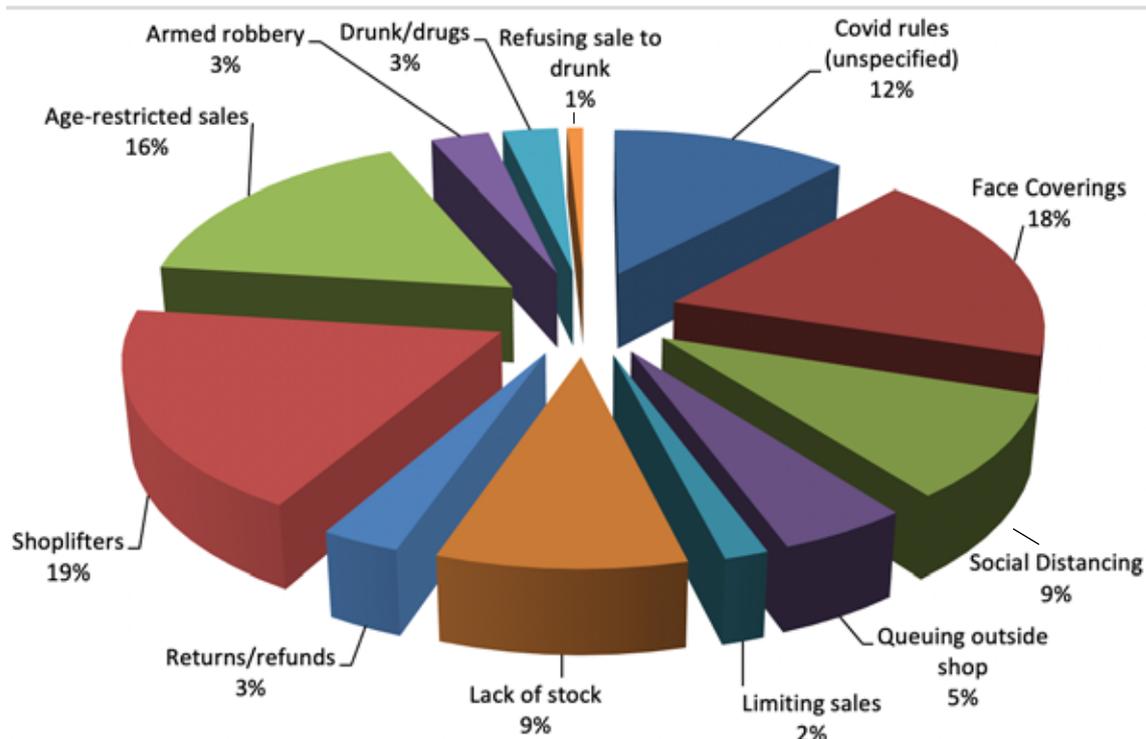
There was a marked improvement in levels of reporting of incidents compared to 2020. Overall 72% said that the incident was reported compared to 46% in 2020. When it comes to physical assaults 92% were reported compared to 80% in 2020.

# Triggers for Violence and Abuse in 2021

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As in previous years we asked an open question about the main triggers for violence and abuse.

**Triggers for Violence and Abuse**



In 2020 Covid precautions such as queues outside the store, face coverings and social distancing made up 85% of triggers and completely swamped the usual picture from previous years in which dealing with shoplifters and age-restricted sales were the most common triggers.

This year Covid precautions continued to be a major source of friction accounting for approximately half of the incidents. However, there were significant changes. Queuing outside the shop, for example, featured much less - reflecting the fact that for a large part of the year queuing restrictions were relaxed in many larger stores or workers standing at the entrance to limit the numbers were often replaced with traffic light systems.

Face coverings remained a significant issue. Most of the larger stores did try to encourage customers to continue to wear face coverings throughout the year despite the Westminster Government's changes to the rules and confusing advice. Workers were attacked and abused both by people who refused to wear face coverings and by others who thought that stores should be doing more to enforce the wearing of face coverings.

Arguments over Covid precautions were a main trigger for verbal abuse but also led to serious physical violence on occasion.

*"Customer in his 60s waited for me to finish my shift then tried to stab me at the bus stop because he had been made to wait in a queue outside the shop."*

*"Customer walked me into a corner and threatened my life for not stopping a maskless customer entering the store."*

Lack of stock and empty shelves continued to be a problem throughout the year as Covid-related absences in the supply chain and Brexit-related problems led to sporadic shortages of various items during the survey period. However, there was less need for rationing of the number of items that individual shoppers could buy so 'limiting sales' did not feature as commonly as it had in 2020.

Covid-related issues also affected workers in other ways. The rise in the number who mentioned returns and refunds as a trigger issue was partly as a result of stores tightening up on return policies because of Covid. And there were a number of workers employed as dotcom or home delivery pickers in stores who described how their job brought them into conflict with some other customers who objected to their presence in the aisles and were unhappy that the pickers were taking items off the shelves at times when supplies were limited.

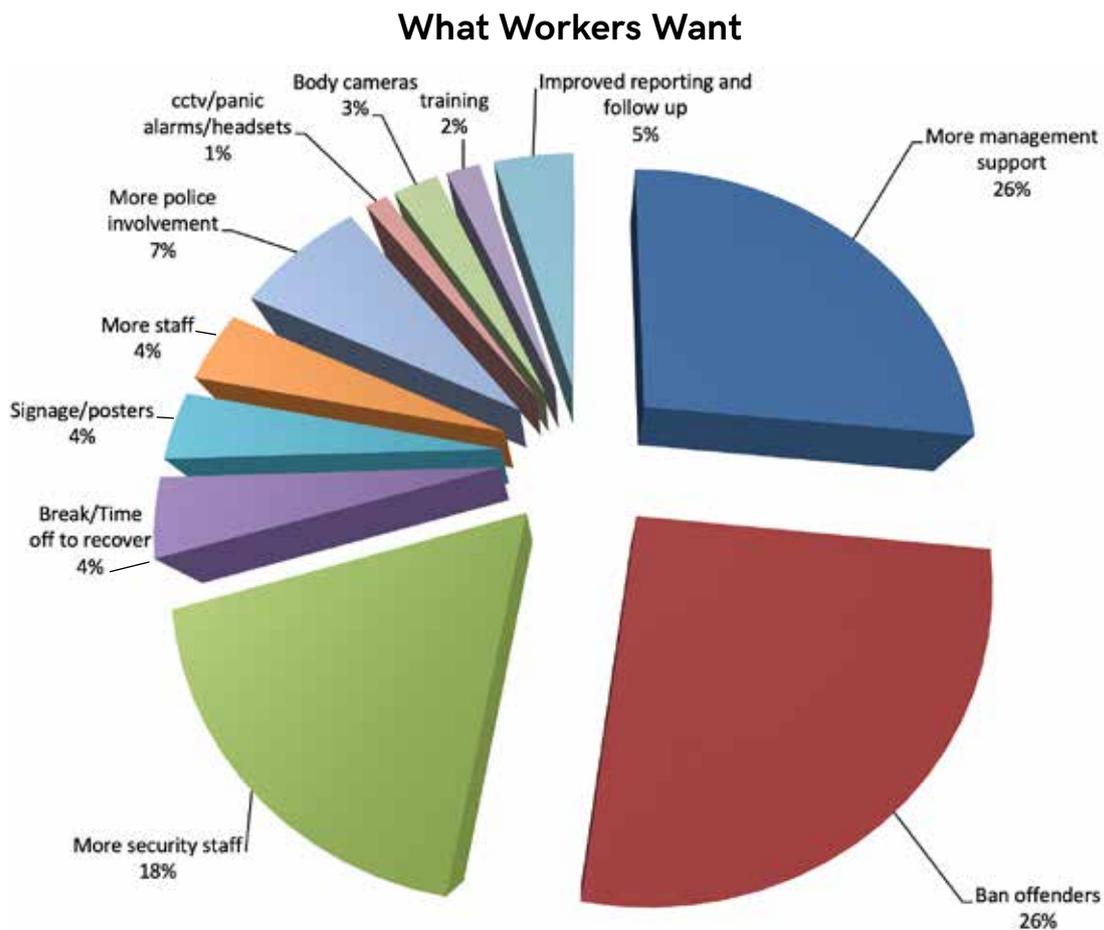
*"I work as a dotcom shopper 28 hours a week. Customers will be rude and vent their frustration on you, saying you're in their way, you are picking the food they need, you shouldn't be picking all the food off the shelves, tell you to move out of their way. They swear at you and say they are paying your wages. Not all customers are like this but when you are picking they let you know they don't appreciate you being there."*

It would be expected that Covid precautions would reduce as a cause of abuse and violence over time as customers and staff become more used to them. It is a cause for concern that the commonest triggers from previous years have returned to prominence. Dealing with shoplifters and the need to ask for proof of age when selling age-restricted products between them account for a quarter of incidents as opposed to 15% in 2020.

# What Workers Want

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The other standard open-text question we ask concerns what more the employer could do to support their workers.



There are a couple of consistent themes that stand out from previous surveys. The call for banning of offenders continues to grow over recent years and the demand for more security guards is also increasingly common.

There is a significant decline this year in the request for more management support - down to 26% from 38% last year. This is an interesting development which suggests that some progress has been made. The requests for more management support (which are consistently the commonest demand year on year) fall into two main categories. There is a minority - approximately 20% this year- which complain that managers are too slow to respond when help is called for when dealing with an abusive customer, or that managers spend too much time hiding in their office and are not visible enough on the shop floor to deal with incidents promptly. The overwhelming majority, however, are calls for managers to back their staff and not to side automatically with the customer when they do intervene. A typical example might be where the member of staff is refusing a refund in line with company policy and when the customer gets abusive the manager intervenes and gives the refund.

Many others describe situations where managers give the aggressive customer a voucher or gift card to placate them. This not only leaves the workers feeling undermined and unsupported. It also appears to be rewarding bad behaviour.

This year it was interesting to see an increase in the number of comments saying that management had done all that they could in the circumstances – removing the offender from the store, banning them where the offence was serious and showing care for the worker’s welfare.

It is also interesting that most of the respondents who were calling for more staff training to deal with incidents specifically demanded better training of managers.

The demand for body cameras has grown from last year as more workers see them in use in other settings.

There has also been a significant increase in the demand for more police involvement and in the call to make it easier to report incidents and to provide more back up in the form of counselling or similar support.

*"Actually ban customers who are abusive to staff. My employer also gives apologies and £50 gift cards to customers who complain even if these complaints have been found to be unsubstantiated. Would be great if they would ask for our side of the story and evidence before rewarding abusive customers and apologising to them when all we have done is politely ask if they have a mask they could wear or asked them to queue when our store is at capacity."*

*"Employers should not only personally support any shopworker facing these situations, but should also make it known to the general public that they will not tolerate such behaviour. The whole atmosphere is of placating customers and giving them vouchers to stop them complaining. This does not stop the abuse however, and customers feel justified in their behaviour."*

*"My management has actually been very helpful, banned any customers straight away that got physical and tried their best to ban customers who spoke badly to us."*

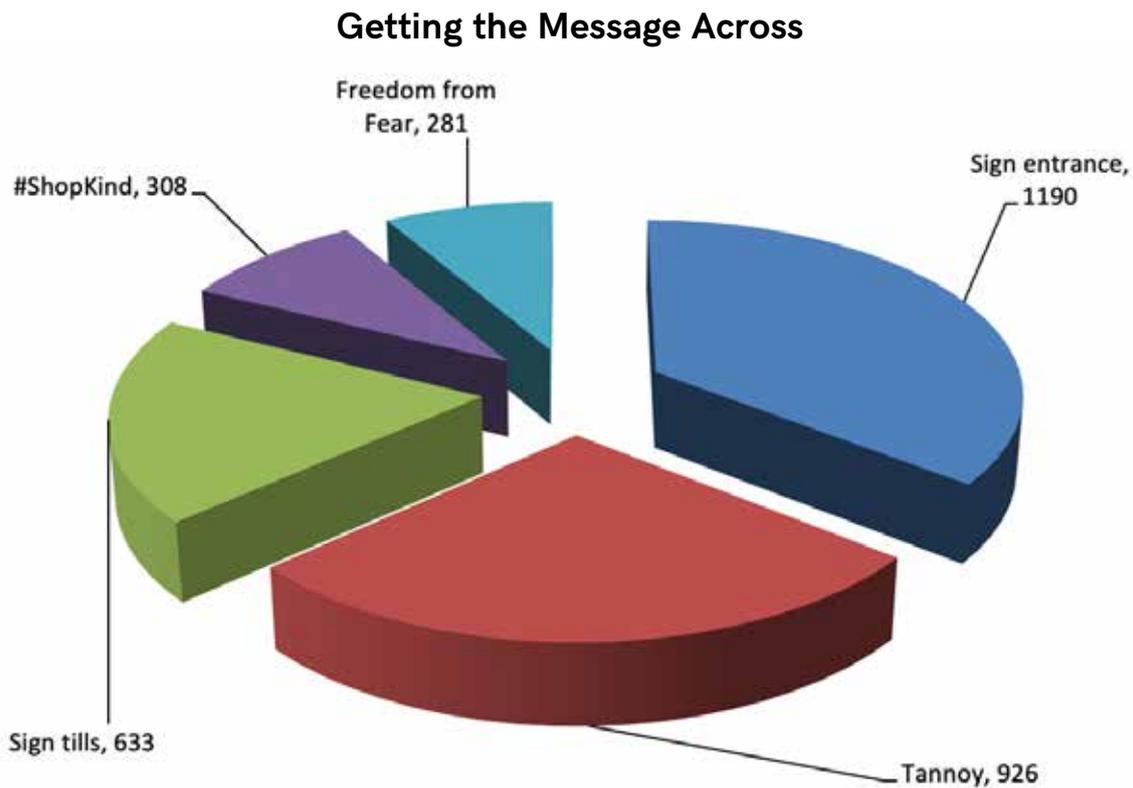
*"Banned them from the shop. Called the police. Made sure the employee was ok within that week/month."*

# Getting the Message Across

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This year we asked a specific question about the messaging that employers use to make the public aware that abuse is not acceptable - for example signage on the doors, signage at the point of sale, messages over the public address system. We also asked specifically about the Home Office funded #ShopKind campaign which was launched in April 2021 and about Usdaw's Freedom From Fear campaign.

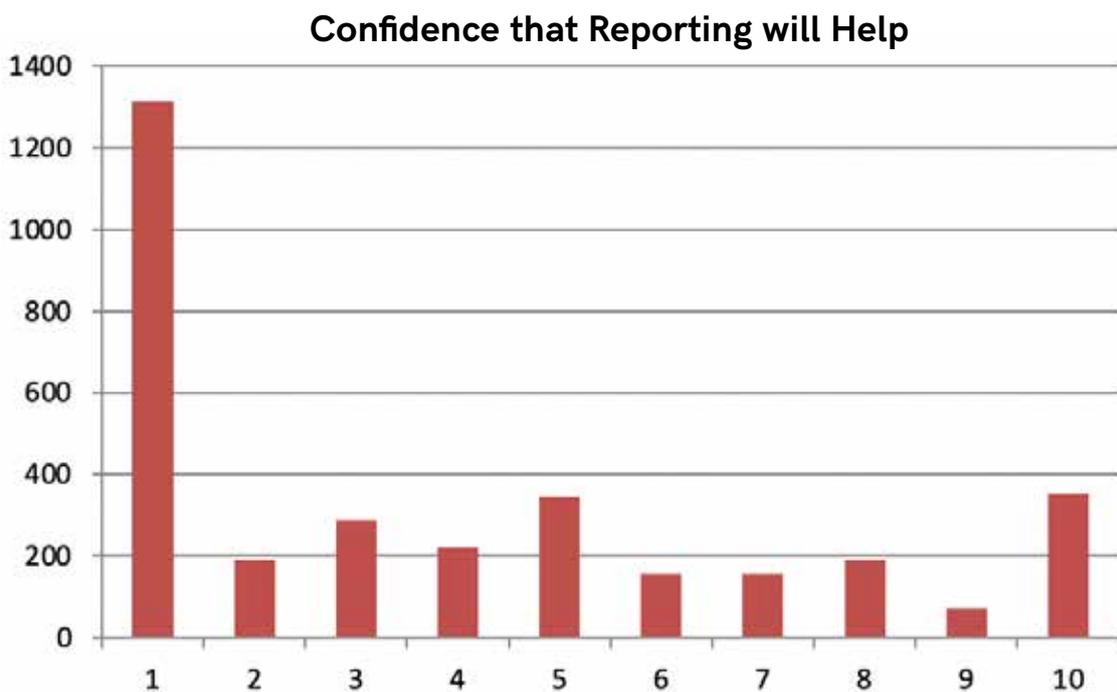
Overall the results were encouraging. Just under a third said that they were unaware of any signage or messages in their workplace. However, among the ones who responded that signage was in use a significant number identified #ShopKind materials by name and were also using Usdaw Freedom From Fear materials to promote the message.



# Confidence in the System

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We asked respondents to give a score on a scale from 1 to 10 to indicate how confident they were that reporting violence and abuse will make a difference. Unfortunately the response to this question was overwhelmingly negative with 61% scoring 4 or less and the main response being 1 - not at all confident.



We also asked if they felt able to resolve issues of violence and abuse on their own. Surprisingly a significant minority - 40% - did feel confident that they could deal with issues themselves.

# Conclusions

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It is disturbing to see that levels of abuse and violence remain at the highest levels since our face-to-face surveying commenced and that levels of physical violence, in particular, are continuing to increase.

It is also a serious matter of concern that, despite the continuing extra pressures of the Coronavirus pandemic, the more traditional triggers of violence and abuse – shop theft and age-restricted products – are re-establishing themselves as major triggers for violence.

On the positive side, it is good to see a significant increase in reporting of incidents to employers. It is unclear how much this increase in reporting has been driven by reporting of pandemic-related incidents such as spitting and coughing at staff or aggression in response to Coronavirus precautions at stores, but it is a welcome trend. Employers must do more to encourage reporting and make it easier to report issues. It is also important that there is feedback to workers who do report so that they know what has happened as a result, and that there is ongoing support to workers when they report and show signs of post-traumatic stress.

The evidence that more employers are using signage and messaging to raise public awareness of the issue is welcome. More needs to be done to reinforce this messaging. The #ShopKind campaign does appear to have had some impact in its early days but it is important that the Home Office continues to support both with funding and with its public endorsement for the future.

The passing of the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age Restricted Goods) Act by the Scottish Parliament was a very welcome development. The Act came into force in August and by the end of December almost 300 cases of abuse were under investigation by the Scottish police.

In Westminster the introduction of protection of workers amendment that would put into statute a sentencing aggravating factor that recognises the public-facing role of the victim in the Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill was a step forward. However it is not as positive a move as the Scottish legislation. If it does get passed into law, more work will still need to be done to improve reporting of incidents to the police and to ensure that cases are actually pursued through the criminal justice system. A statutory aggravating factor is only meaningful if cases reach the court for sentencing. There are a small number of successful pilots between some police forces and retailers in different parts of the country to encourage reporting and make it easier to report. More work needs to be done with co-ordination through the Home Office to spread the good practice from these pilots to other forces. The work that has already been done through the National Business Crime Centre to improve relationships between the police and retail businesses is still in its early stages and needs continued support from Government, police and retail employers.

Violence and abuse has soared to record levels during the pandemic. However there are encouraging signs that the hard work that employers have been doing in co-operation with the Union is beginning to make an impact. Work on the underlying issues of dealing with prolific shoplifters, anti-social behaviour in and around shops and managing the process of sales of under-age products must continue and needs to be better co-ordinated and communicated.

Despite the best efforts of all involved, shopworkers still lack confidence that their employers and the police will provide them with the protection and support that they need. Until there is evidence that shopworkers do feel safe and respected for the essential service they provide, Usdaw will continue its campaigning on this issue and will continue monitoring the levels of abuse our members suffer, examining the effectiveness of the new legislation and encouraging our members to report the incidents they experience.





For further information or to join Usdaw  
call our Helpline on **0800 030 8030**  
or visit **[www.usdaw.org.uk/fff](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/fff)**

FFF Survey Results March 2022  
Stock photography, posed by models



[www.usdaw.org.uk](http://www.usdaw.org.uk)

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