

Surveys of violence and abuse against shop staff
in 2017

Usdaw
Union of Shop, Distributive
and Allied Workers



Freedom From Fear

**Shopworkers at
the sharp end as
violence is on the increase**

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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 around 265 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. The Scottish Grocers' Federation reported that 99% of retail workers have experienced verbal or physical abuse whilst at work. We hope that all parties in the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government listen to the evidence and support the Bill proposal.

Worryingly 56% of shopworkers who experienced violence, threats or abuse at work did not report the incident to their employer, including 22% 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 a 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.

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 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, over the 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 shop workers 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 shop worker the survey casts useful light on the issue of under-reporting.

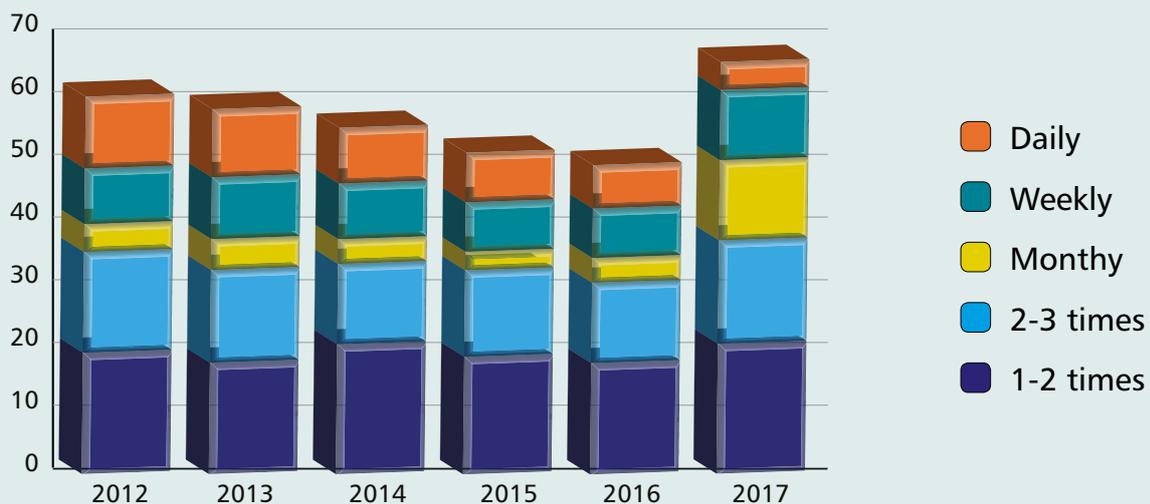


2017 Results: Verbal Abuse and Threats

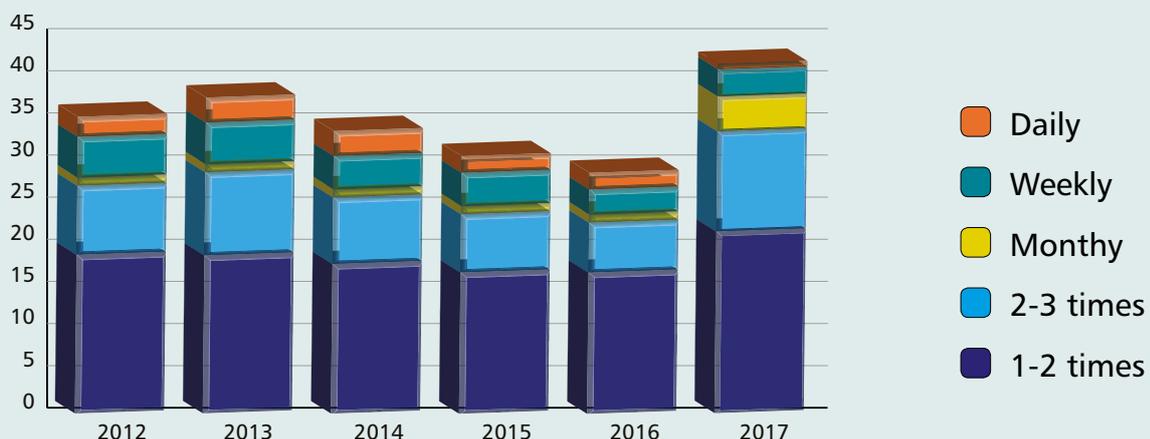
Over the last 10 years, the results have been remarkably consistent. Typically between 50 to 60% of workers report at least one incident of verbal abuse in the last 12 months and 30-35% report at least one incident of threat of physical violence in the last year. If there was any trend it was toward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

However, the 2017 results show a disturbing and significant increase in both abuse and threats. 66% reported verbal abuse and the proportion reporting threats of physical violence increased to 42%.

Verbal abuse in the last 12 months



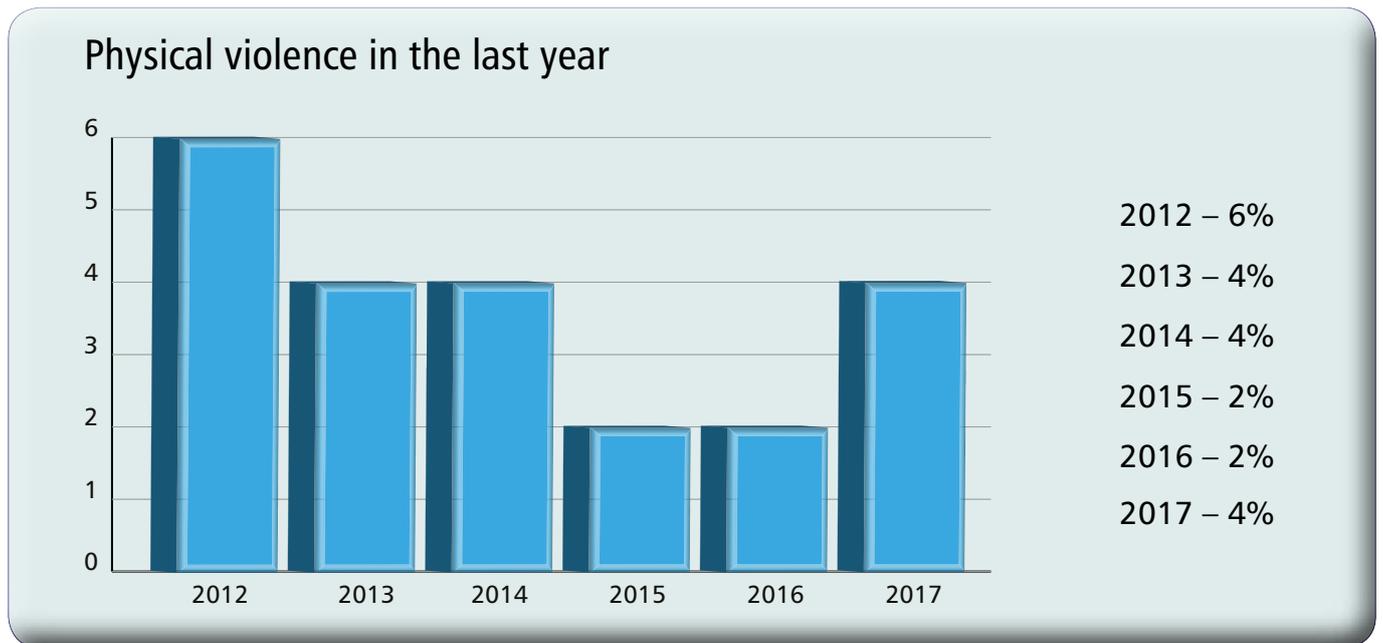
Threatened in the last 12 months





Physical Assaults

For the last six years we have asked if workers were physically assaulted in the last 12 months. This figure also shows a sharp upturn after 5 years of decline.



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 for 2017 compared to 2016.

Triggers for Violence and Abuse 2017



Triggers for Violence and Abuse 2016



Age-restricted sales still remains the most common trigger at around 30%. It is laudable that retailers have introduced voluntary schemes to control the sale of corrosive substances and the sale of high-caffeine drinks to younger people. But it must be acknowledged that such policies are likely to increase the risk of abuse for the shopworkers who are obliged to implement them.

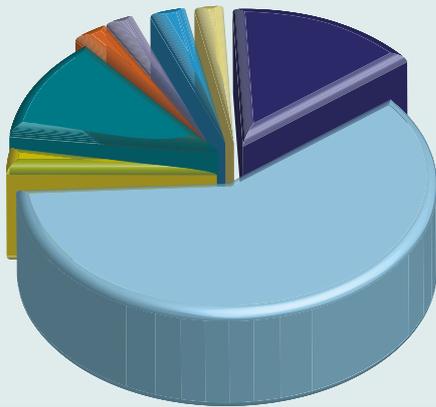
Shop theft has increased from 15% to 21%. For the first time, there is mention of concern about low staffing levels. And racism is identified as a trigger in 4% of reports. This matches reports from other sources of increased hate crime following the Brexit vote and the rise in anti-Muslim hatred.

The rise in shop theft as a trigger may be linked to the view of nearly 70% of workers that shop theft has increased in the last year.

What Workers Want

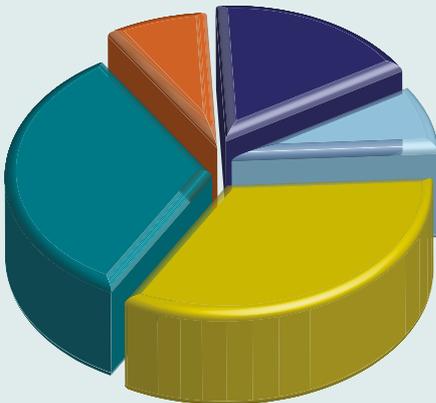
There are also major changes to the responses to the other open text question asking workers what else they would like to see employers doing.

What Workers Want 2017



Customer banned from store	15%
More support from managers	60%
More staff	3%
More security guards	12%
Police/prosecution	3%
Time off/break	2%
Posters	3%
Security (CCTV/panic buttons)	2%

What Workers Want 2016



More staff	17%
More training	8%
More support from managers	34%
More security guards	33%
Security (CCTV/panic buttons)	8%

The most obvious difference is the massive growth in the demand for more support from managers up from 34% in 2016 to 60% in 2017. And for the first time a clear call for a 'zero tolerance' approach toward the perpetrators with banning of offenders and involvement of the police.

A Worrying Increase

Taken with the evidence from other surveys such as the BRC Retail Crime survey and the ACS Crime Report, there has been a serious increase in the levels of the violence and abuse – much of it linked to a rise in shop theft. The BRC survey reported a doubling of reports of violence with injury and the ACS reported a similar rise in attacks as well as a massive increase in shop theft. More recently the latest Home Office Commercial Victimization survey has also reported a 3-fold increase in assaults on retail workers from 2016 to 2017.

The Usdaw survey shows that workers are feeling much more vulnerable as a result. The protective measures which employers may have in place are not proving effective against the rising tide of violence.

Why Are Things Getting Worse?

Shop theft is on the increase. There is also solid evidence that hate crime has increased. At the same time police resources have been slashed and pressure on the police to deal with other crimes is increasing.

Austerity cuts have also affected social welfare provision. There has been a rise in the numbers of rough sleepers and beggars outside stores. Cuts to support services for drug and alcohol users and others have put more pressure on all public-facing workers including shop staff.

Competitive pressures in retail have led to major restructuring resulting in fewer staff in many stores and management re-organisation which has resulted in the loss of valuable expertise, skills and knowledge. Training and procedures developed 10 years ago are no longer appropriate for the current situation.

To give just one example, most training on refusing a sale to someone who may be under-age is still based on the worker standing behind a counter/checkout and dealing with the customer individually. Yet for workers monitoring a bank of self-scan checkouts, the worker has to stand beside the person they are challenging for ID and also has to be keeping an eye on up to 8-10 other customers at the same time.

It is hardly surprising that retail workers are feeling more vulnerable as a result of all these changes.





The Way Forward

The good news is that other major stakeholders have also recognised the seriousness of the situation. Both BRC and ACS have identified violence to staff as the most significant risk in the sector. The National Business Crime Centre has made it their priority. All are working alongside Usdaw on the Violence Reduction Working Group set up by the Home Office National Retail Crime Steering Group.

Udaw will continue to campaign for stricter sentencing where shop workers are assaulted or abused in the course of their job. The union supports the proposed Scottish Parliament Bill from Daniel Johnson MSP to increase legal protection for workers who are required to uphold the law on age-restricted products.

Much more needs to be done to ensure co-operation between retailers, police and Government to treat such crimes with the seriousness they deserve. For example, we need better reporting to ensure that the retailer can provide the right evidence so that incidents where workers are assaulted or abused are not simply reported as having a shoplifter in the store and the police and courts can respond appropriately.

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.

As part of that process we will be developing a simple survey tool that Usdaw health and safety reps can use to check that staff feel protected in their store.

To raise public awareness, the union will press employers to make more use of customer communications and in-store signage to convey the basic message that abuse is not part of the job. We will continue to promote our highly successful Respect campaigns which have increasing support from local politicians, local councils, police forces and business crime partnerships.

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

*"Listen to the staff.
It always seems as though
the customer is right, even
when they are wrong."*

*"During nightshift a man came
into the store and threatened me
with a knife, it was 2am – he stole
a box of beer. We later found out
that a little earlier before he came
into the store he had stabbed a
man in the neck."*

*"Customers get aggressive
when they don't get their own way.
I have been called every name under
the sun and made to feel worthless.
Sometimes I dread going into work
because of the abuse some people
think it's ok to give a sales assistant.
You are not human when you are in
uniform stood behind a counter."*

*"Whilst they are
supportive, nothing is
said to customer, I think
they should be asked to
apologise or leave the
store, we need signs
that inform customers
that we don't tolerate
threats, violence or
verbal abuse."*

*"When refusing age restricted
sales customers can become
abusive, one even threatened to
burn my house down and hoped
my children would die"*



For more information about our
Freedom From Fear Campaign, go to
www.usdaw.org.uk/fff

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