

Campaign to end violence and abuse against retail workers



**Survey
Results
2020**

#FFF

Usdaw
Union of Shop, Distributive
and Allied Workers

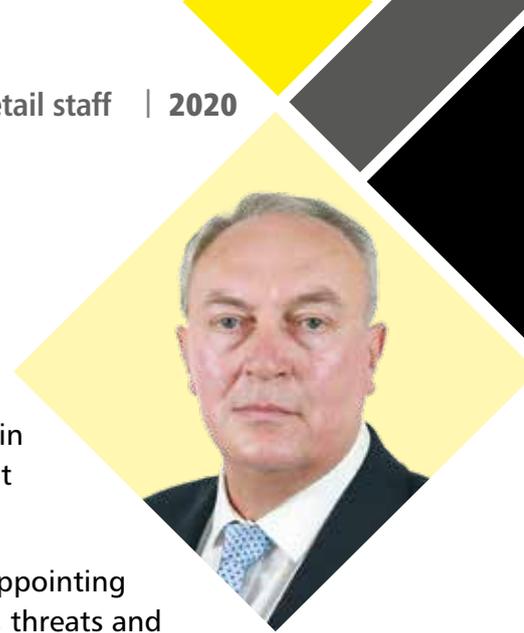




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Introduction from the General Secretary

Throughout the Coronavirus crisis, key workers across the retail sector have played an essential role in our communities, ensuring we can remain fed. Without the incredible contributions of these workers, it is clear that the country would not have been able to get through the crisis.

However, despite the heroic efforts of these workers, it is incredibly disappointing that the Coronavirus crisis has resulted in a significant increase in abuse, threats and violence towards retail workers. Usdaw's survey at the height of the first wave of the pandemic showed that abuse against retail workers had doubled as a result of the crisis.

Unfortunately, the results of this survey show that this increase in abuse has not abated. Our latest survey of over 2,700 retail workers shows that almost 9 in 10 were verbally abused last year. 60% reported threats of physical violence and 9% said they had been physically assaulted.

Abuse should never be part of the job, however, according to the results of this survey nearly 1 in 10 retail workers were physically assaulted simply as a result of going to work. It is alarming that the issue has now got so bad that many retail workers believe that a key way to protect themselves is to wear a body camera at all times while at work.

All too often, the very measures which have been put in place to keep the shopping public safe during the crisis have resulted in the abuse of retail staff. Yet, this is clearly not just an issue caused by the pandemic. Between 2017 and 2019, the proportion of retail workers facing abuse rose from just over half to more than two-thirds.

The long-term trend of increasing and unacceptable abuse of retail staff clearly shows that it is time for the Westminster Government to create a stand-alone offence of abusing, threatening or assaulting a retail worker. Such an offence would be easily understood by retail workers, the general public, the police, the judiciary and most importantly criminals.

In Scotland, thanks to Usdaw's campaign with Scottish Labour, a Protection of Workers Bill has now been passed by the Scottish Parliament which will give retail workers the protection they deserve. Usdaw will continue to campaign to ensure that similar provisions are in place to protect retail workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

At the same time, we will continue to work with employers so that processes and practices are in place to protect retail staff. We will also continue to raise the issue with police forces to ensure retail crime, including the abuse of shop workers, is given the priority it deserves.

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

Measuring the Experience on the Frontline

From 2007 to 2019 Usdaw surveyed between 1,500 and 7,000 shop workers each year to gather first-hand accounts of the extent of violence, threats and abuse against retail staff. These surveys were conducted through personal face-to-face discussions with Usdaw reps who were fellow retail workers. As such, the results provide a valuable insight into the causes of violence and abuse against retail workers and dramatically demonstrate the level of under-reporting of incidents.

Between 2017 and 2019, there was an alarming increase in the level of incidents and abuse towards retail workers. The number of workers experiencing verbal abuse increased from just over half, to more than two-thirds during 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 all incidents.

In early 2020 the coronavirus pandemic hit the country. Non-essential shops were required to close while supermarkets and convenience stores remained open. Key workers across essential retail provided a vital service to the public, allowing them to shop for food and other domestic essentials. However, the need to introduce safety measures to protect customers and staff from the virus meant that working in shops and being a customer became a very different experience.

As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic it became 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 retail workers. Instead we were able to rely on an online survey which was conducted in the period from August to December 2020 and which generated 2,700 replies.

This report analyses the results of that survey in the context of all the changes that have been taking place over the last year. As a result of the major change in the sampling method, the results from previous surveys may not directly correlate. However, where it is appropriate to highlight the change in levels of violence and abuse from the background pre-pandemic figures, we have referred to data from 2016 to 2019.





Early Warning

Right from the start of the pandemic, it was clear that one of the impacts of the changes in the retail sector was a shocking increase in the levels of abuse that retail workers were experiencing.

In March and April, Usdaw conducted a survey of members to assess the impact of coronavirus on essential workers in the food supply chain (www.usdaw.org.uk/CoronavirusReport). Over 7,000 members took part in the survey, including 5,000 who worked in shops.

Of the 5,000 retail workers in the survey, 3,069 reported they had been verbally abused. One in six said this was happening on a daily basis in their stores and 196 said they had been physically attacked.

The changes to the shopping experience included a new range of responsibilities on frontline staff in stores. Enforcement of social distancing rules meant restricting the numbers in store at any one time, this resulted in queues of shoppers outside the store needing to be managed. Inside the store, reminding customers of the need to keep two metres apart and controlling queues at checkouts, were also potential sources of conflict. Particularly in the first few months, panic buying and stockpiling of essentials put pressure on supplies with empty shelves and restrictions on the amount of key products individual customers were allowed.

Customers were asked to shop on their own where possible. From the middle of the year there was also a legal requirement to wear face coverings in stores. The picture was confused, as rules were often slightly different in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and under the tier system. Relaxation of the two metre rule for social distancing, the introduction of '1.5 metres plus' and relaxation on queues and the number of customers allowed in stores by some retailers added to the uncertainty.

While the vast majority of the shopping public were doing their best to comply with the new rules, fear of the risk of infection was sometimes a source of friction between customers in stores. Staff were being forced to intervene when arguments started. In addition there was a significant minority who did not accept the rules and were responding with aggression when shop staff reminded them of their responsibilities. These problems were overtaking shoplifters and age-restricted sales as the main triggers for violence.

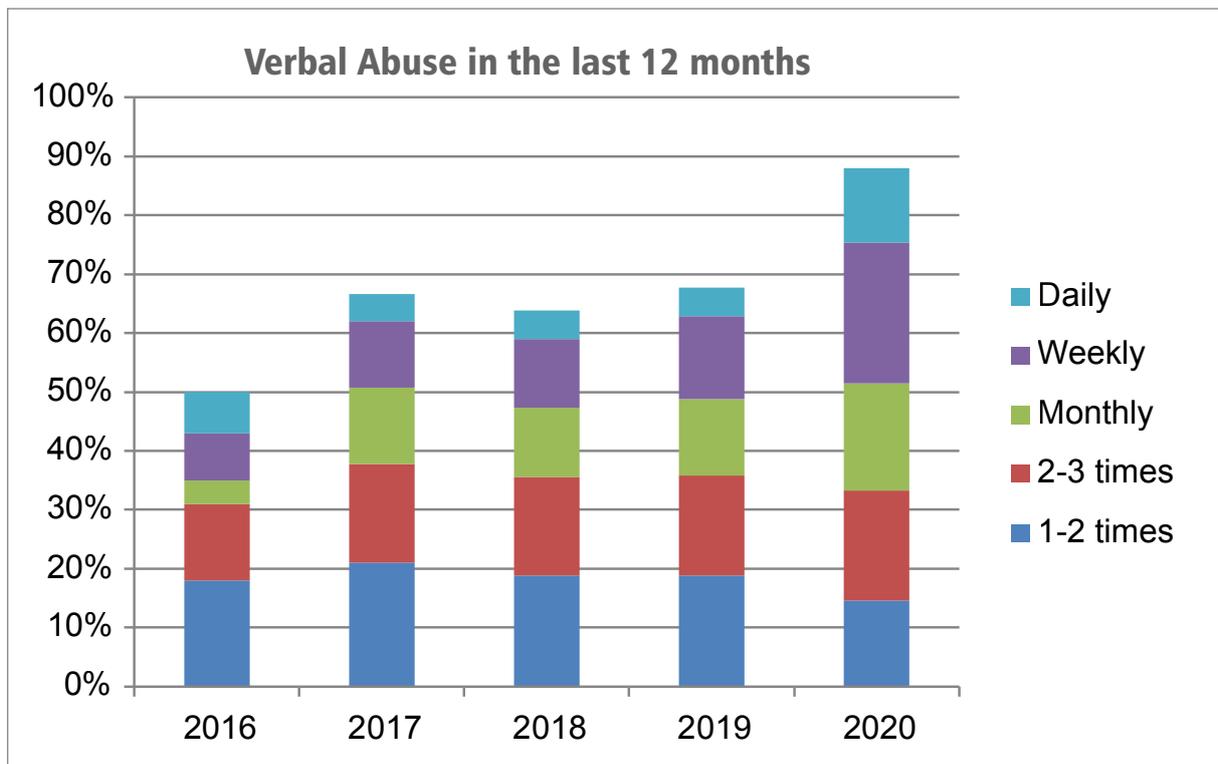


2020 Survey Results

The initial picture from that early survey was sadly confirmed in the more detailed survey on violence and abuse carried out in the August to December period.

Almost 9 out of 10 workers said that they had been verbally abused in the last 12 months. 60% reported threats of verbal violence and 9% said they had been physically attacked.

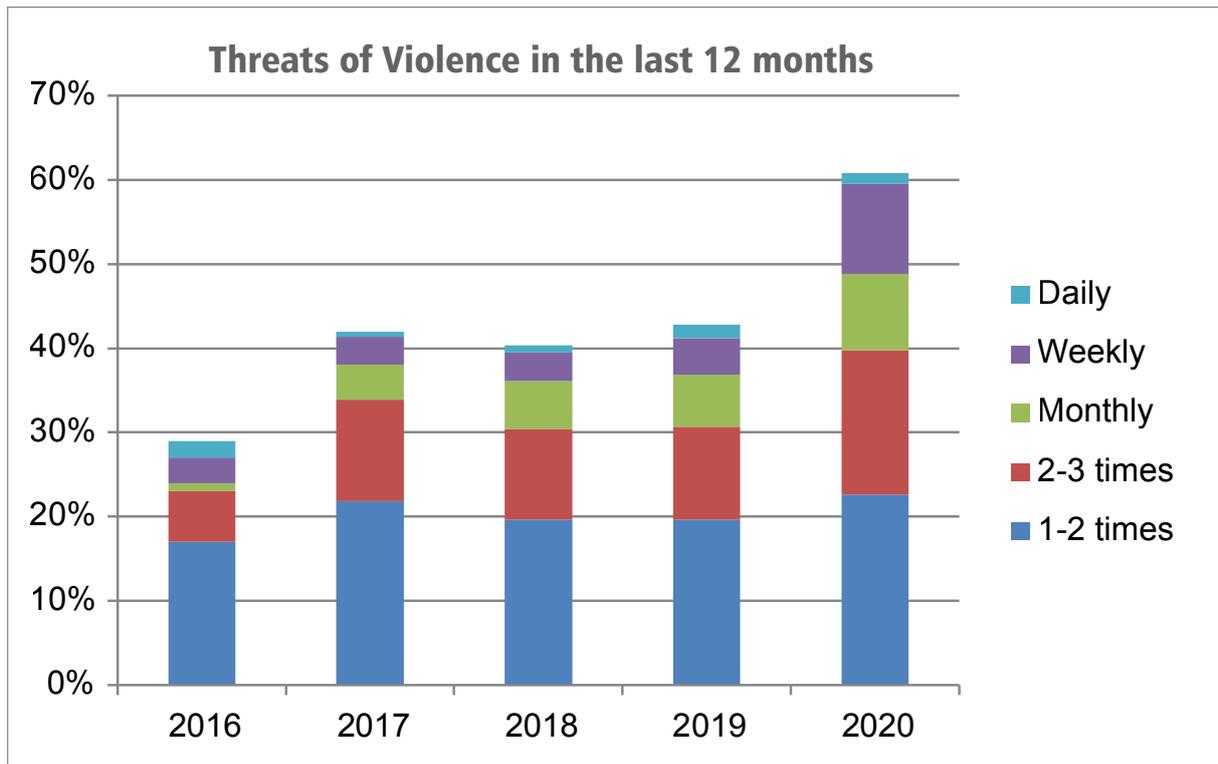
Although direct comparisons are difficult because of the different survey methodology used, these figures suggest a marked increase from the years preceding the Coronavirus emergency – bearing in mind that we had already reported a significant increase in abuse and assaults for the years from 2017 onward.



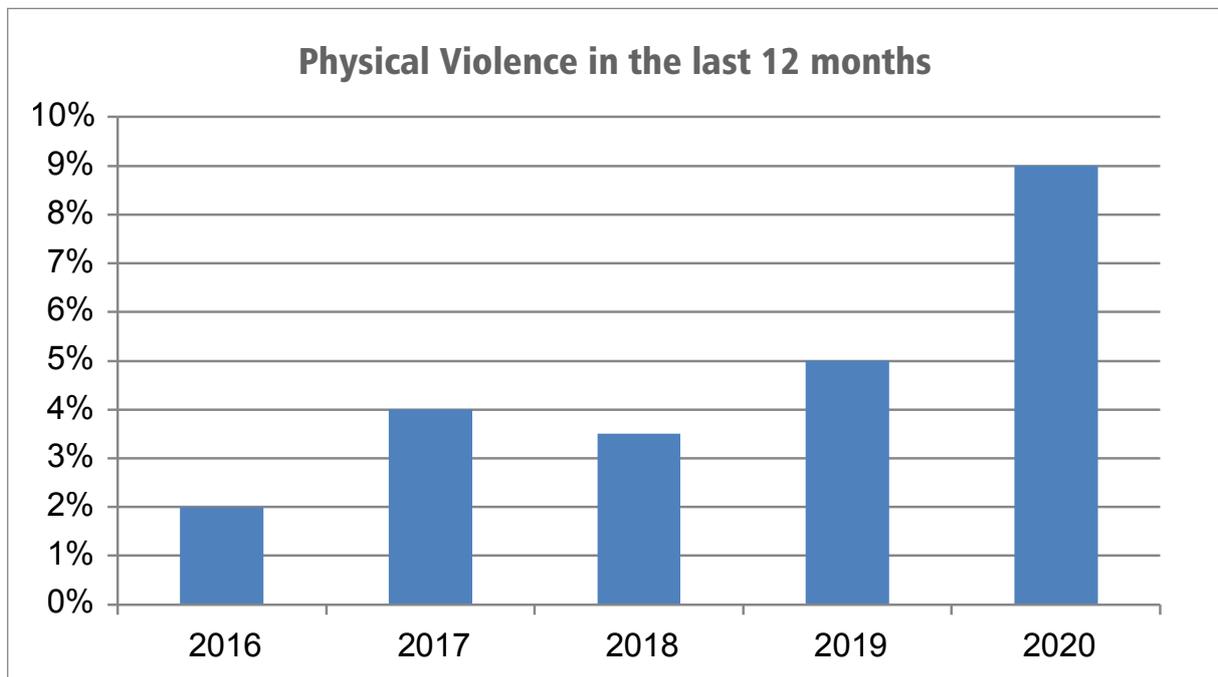
Note that the proportion of members reporting abuse on a daily or weekly basis is significantly higher.



There was a similar increase in reports of threats of violence.

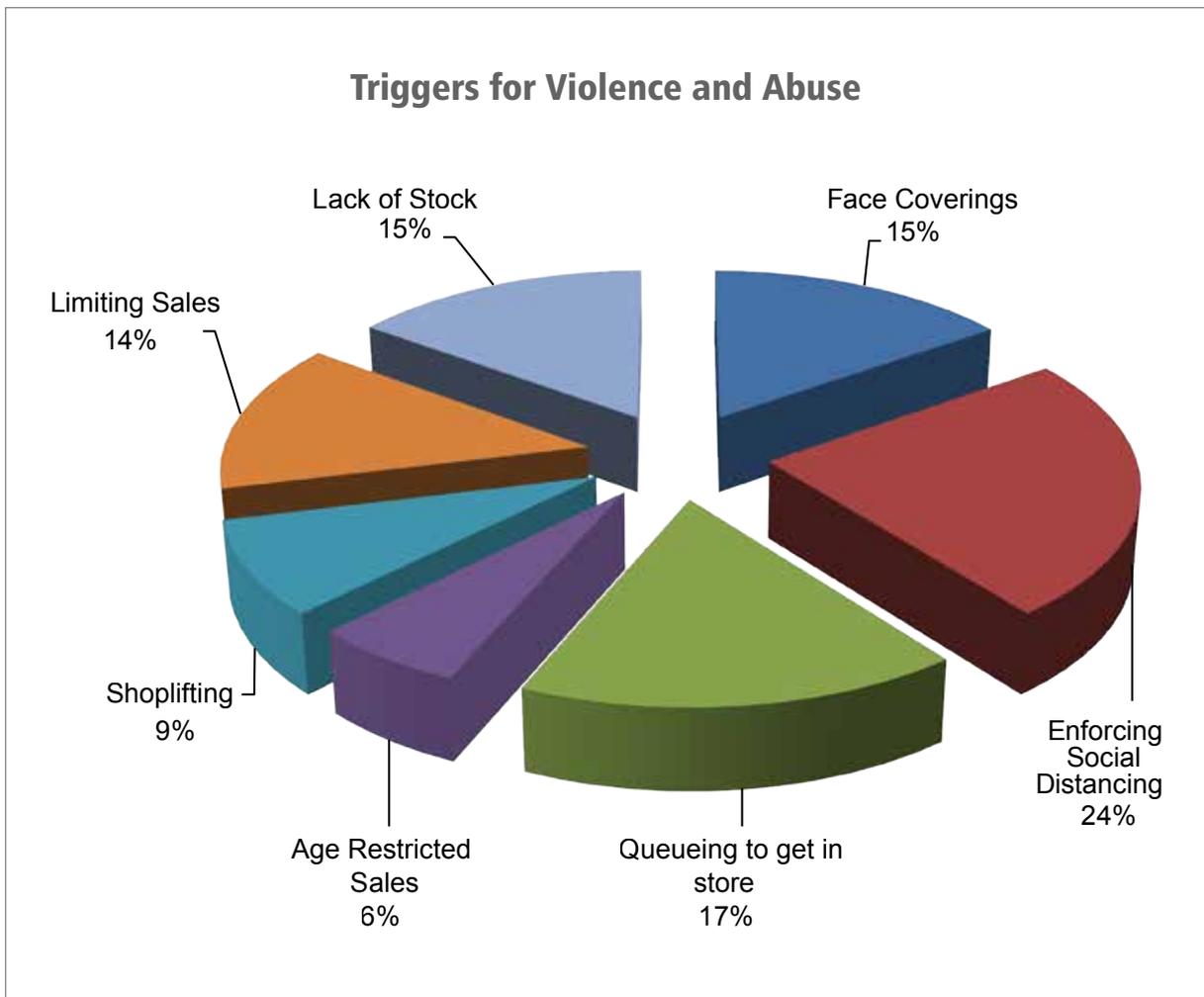


Plus reports of actual physical assault were also far more common.



Triggers for Violence and Abuse in 2020

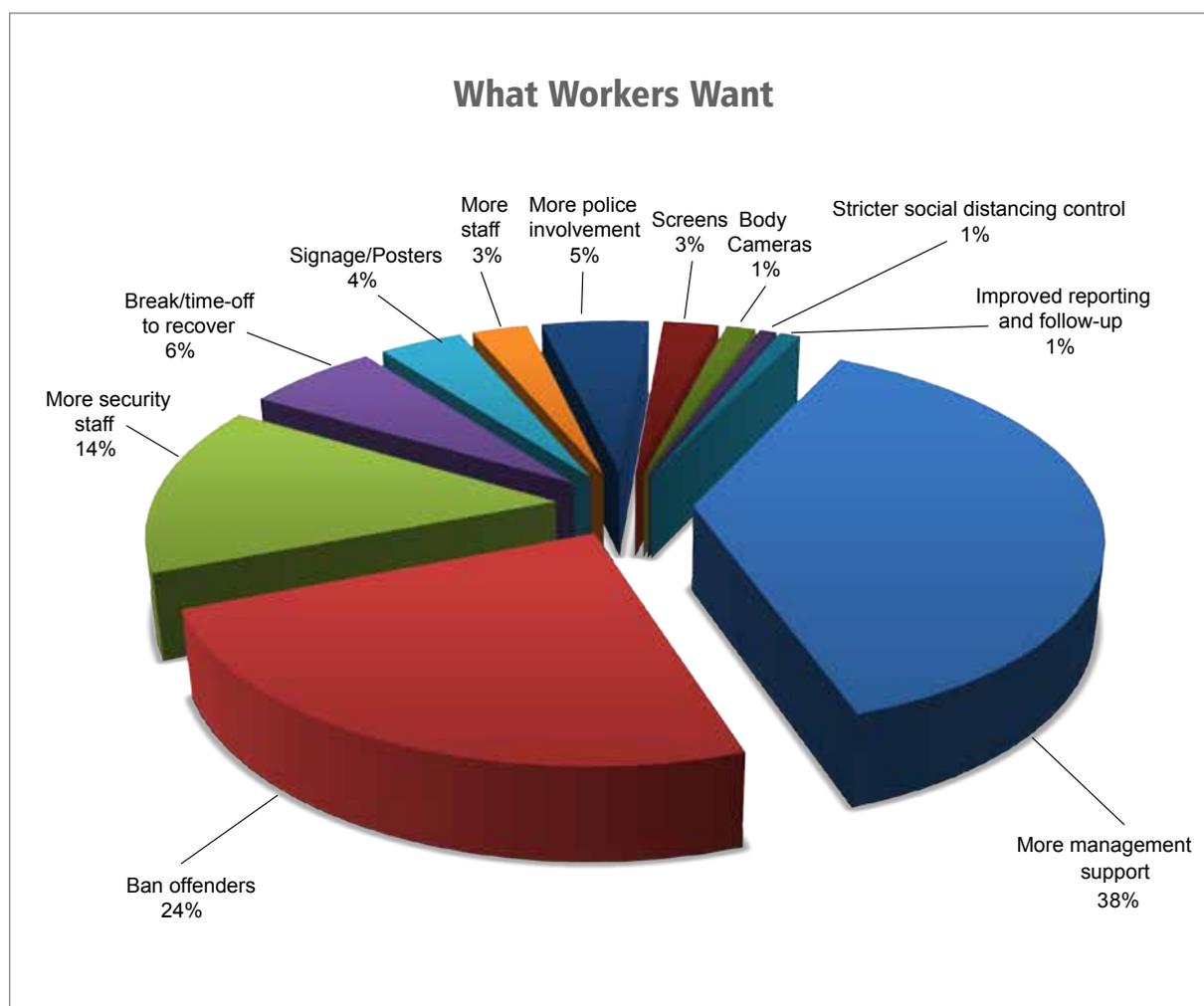
A more detailed question on the triggers for violence and abuse confirmed that the safety measures required as a result of the pandemic have overtaken the most common triggers in previous years. In 2019, 30% of incidents involved shoplifters and 29% involved age-related sales. These triggers still featured in the 2020 survey but were overwhelmed by issues around the Coronavirus pandemic.



There is no surprise then that overall 79% of respondents said they thought that violence and abuse had become worse or much worse since the start of the pandemic.

What Workers Want

We also asked a free-text question on what else workers would like to see their employer do to improve things. Analysis of the answers reveals a very similar pattern to previous years.



As in previous years, the main call was for management to give more support and back staff up. The demand for a zero tolerance approach, with offenders being refused service and banned from the store, was higher than last year. More uniformed security guarding also continues to be a popular demand. This year we saw suggestions for wider use of body-worn cameras for the first time. There were also calls for improvements to Covid security – notably better plastic screens to provide more effective barriers at counters and checkouts but also calls for stricter social distancing measures, such as further reduction of numbers allowed in store and stricter enforcement of the two metre physical distancing rule.

Conclusion

The 2020 survey results show all too clearly that the Covid crisis has had a serious effect on the levels of violence and abuse experienced by retail workers. It is truly shocking that a significant number of staff have been exposed to verbal abuse on a daily basis throughout the pandemic – especially as much of that abuse is linked to their efforts to remind people of the need to protect themselves and others from the risk of infection. It is also disturbing to see that levels of physical assault have almost doubled.

The current lack of adequate provisions to protect retail workers means that too often criminals who assault staff avoid prosecution. In 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 a new law with 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. Such a law has recently been passed in Scotland and it is important to ensure that workers right across the UK have the same level of protection.

The Union welcomes the support from employers in the industry for the new law and will continue to work with the employers and their trade associations to persuade the Westminster Government that such a law is more essential than ever in the current climate.

Our results also show that more does need to be done by employers to make sure that the policies and safety measures they have introduced to control Covid-19 risks in stores are being implemented effectively in all stores and that the workers who are expected to implement those measures get the support and back-up they need from local management if they are exposed to violence or abuse as a result.

While the need for new safety measures to protect the public against transmission of the Covid virus has introduced new triggers for violence and abuse, the underlying causes of violence have not gone away. Shop theft and the need to ask for proof of age when selling age-restricted products still cause serious levels of violence and abuse. There is still a problem with under-reporting of incidents both from worker to their employer and from the retail employer to the police.

Workers need to understand the importance of reporting so that the problems can be recognised and dealt with. Employers need to work closely with their staff and with Usdaw Health and Safety Reps to make sure that reporting systems are easy to use and provide effective feedback so workers can see what happens when they do report. Employers also need to work more closely with the police and with local authorities to share intelligence on the perpetrators of abuse and violence and to make sure that effective enforcement action is taken.

Usdaw 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.

The pandemic has greatly increased the pressure on retail workers and left them more exposed to violence and abuse. However, it has also brought home to many the fact that retail workers are key workers who provide an essential service to the community. That public support is more necessary than ever to ensure that they get the protection they deserve.





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