

Retail Violence: Attacked and abused at work

Every year, 155,000 shop workers are violently attacked or verbally abused in the UK. Jamie Long reports on who should be protecting shop workers, as a parliamentary review into the issue is delayed.

MAY 2020

REPORT BY JAMIE LONG

WITH SHARING SUPPORT FROM THE CO-OP

The British Retail Consortium (BRC), the trade association for all UK retailers, released their latest Retail Crime Survey in March. The report has shown that there were 424 incidents of violence and abuse against shop workers every day of the year, for the period 2018/19. This is an increase of 9% from the previous years' figures.

There are various triggers which have been identified by the BRC. These triggers can often lead to shop workers having to endure threatening or violent behaviour directly from the customers they serve every day. These triggers include enforcing age-restricted sales, such as asking for ID for alcohol and tobacco, dealing with intoxicated persons and encountering theft. Furthermore, when surveyed, shop owners and retail workers explained that they are seeing an increase in the number of weapons, particularly knives, being used during incidents in store. But, how can shop workers be better protected and who has the responsibility to ensure that they are safe whilst serving the public?

To view an online version of this report, along with video interviews with organisation representatives and experts, visit: tiny.cc/attackedatwork.

CONTENTS

The victim	3
Why does it happen?	5
The cost for businesses.....	8
Changing the law - parliamentary review delayed	9
Is there confidence in the police?	11
The current law	14
What is behind the violence?.....	15
The impact of Coronavirus	17
Working together for a better future	18

Violent and abusive incidents can have a significant and long-lasting impact on shop workers who experience them; this includes pre-meditated attacks.

'Mary', whose name we have changed, worked in a Co-Op store in Sittingbourne, Kent, in 2007 when a group of men came in to raid the shop. Mary was 16 when the incident happened at around 9:30 in the evening and, thirteen years on, the incident still has an impact on her life. Mary asked us to change her name because she still suffers from severe anxiety caused by the events.

"We were winding down to close up for the night, when a group of men with masks and hammers entered the store shouting 'this is a robbery'. Straight away I pushed the panic button which immediately sends a signal to the police. "They made us open the tills and my supervisor was made to open the safe. There was also an elderly gentleman in the store who they pushed over; he just laid on the floor, not moving."

"I almost wet myself because I was very, very scared. Absolutely petrified. The other supervisor that was in there at the time was distraught as well. I didn't sleep at all that night and I didn't go to work for a long time. Even after that I didn't go out alone for a long time. Even now I avoid it. Walking down the street, I'm always looking over my shoulder. I don't go out at night alone unless I have to."

- Image of a seperate incident at a Co-Op store



Mary explained that her direct management at the Co-Op were "fantastic" at the time, giving her as much time off as she needed. However, she quit her role shortly after the incident because she no longer felt safe working in the same environment. You can read more about the work the Co-Op is doing later in the report, under the section 'Working together for a better future.'

The offenders were caught by police and handed a three month sentence for stealing £300 worth of cash and goods. However, Mary says that this isn't enough:

"I don't feel that a prison sentence helps because they just come out and do it again. I'd love to speak to them and tell them how it has impacted my life. They got away with £300, which probably just bought them their clothes for their next robbery. But, even thirteen years later, I'm constantly looking over my shoulder. 24/7 I hear a noise and turn around; I don't walk alone and I worry whenever I hear a noise in the house at night."

Mary isn't alone in experiencing incidents like this. A reminder that 424 violent and abusive incidents against shop workers are reported every day. Furthermore, it is reported that only 17% of actual incidents are actually reported, mainly due to a lack of confidence in the police. To understand why, it's important to look at the contributing factors, along with who is responsible and how the issue can be solved.

There are various reasons why a customer may turn to violence or abuse against a shop worker. James Martin, Crime and Security Adviser at The British Retail Consortium (BRC), identified three major triggers, for example:

- **Attempted Theft:** People attempting to steal goods from a store who turn violent when stopped or challenged.
- **Age identification:** Legally asking for proof of age when a customer is attempting to buy age restricted items, such as alcohol or tobacco.

"That is something that parliament makes our colleagues do. There is no way they can't do that. They can't not check them for ID, otherwise they could be sent to prison themselves, which feels pretty absurd when parliament isn't giving them the protection they need."

James Martin. British Retail Consortium



- **Customers under the influence:** Customers having too much to drink, or taking drugs, can sometimes lead to aggressive behaviour in stores.



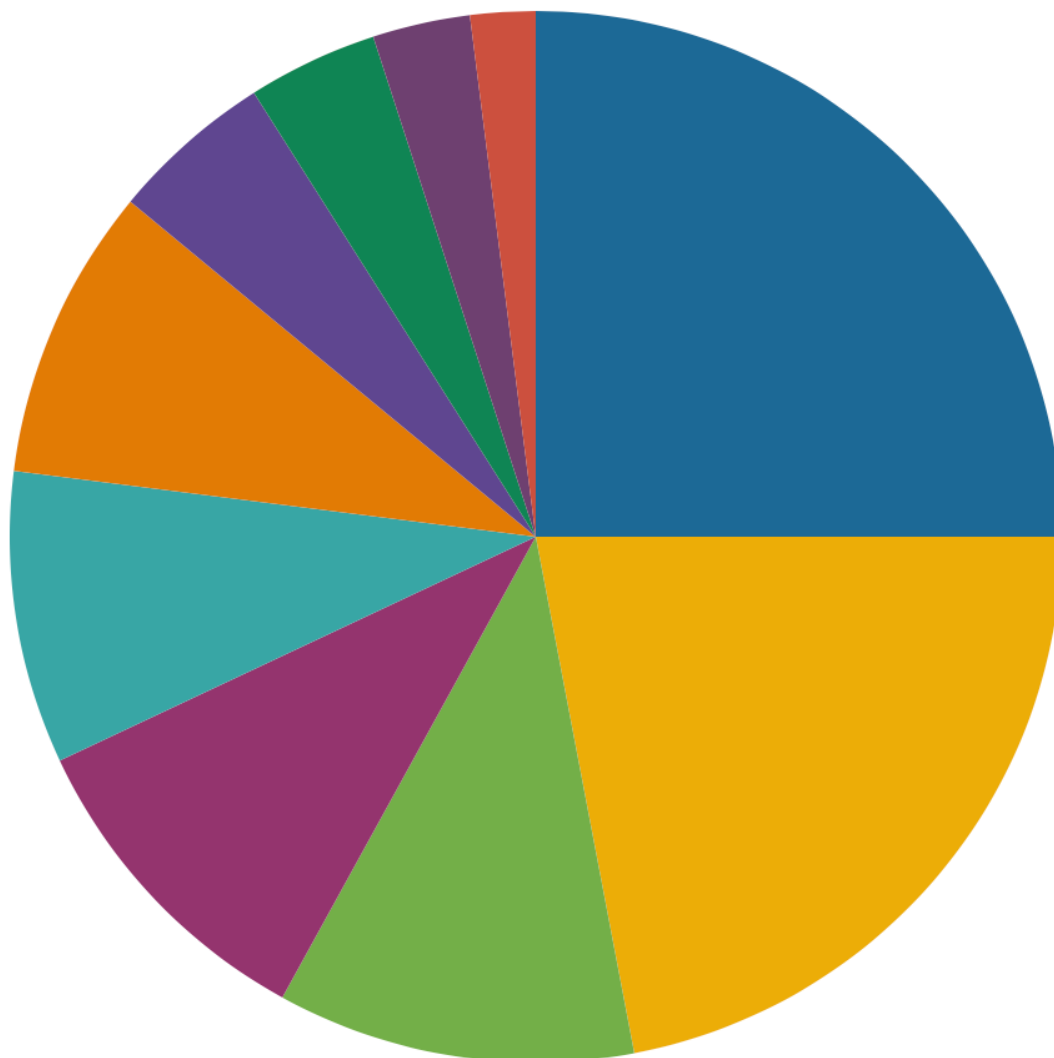
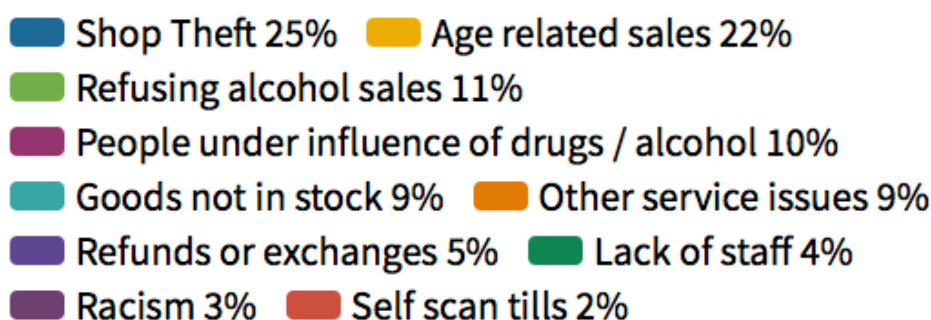
Frank Woods, Sector Lead for Retail at NFU Mutual, further splits abusive behaviour up into three key categories:

- **Low level abusive behaviour:** This could include possible threatening language, but usually in response when a customer feels aggrieved by something in store.
- **Violence or threats of violence:** Usually associated as a progression from low level abusive behaviour.
- **Pre-meditated physical violence:** Normally criminal behaviour related to the stealing of goods.

The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw) also identified various other triggers which their members reported to them. Take a look at the pie chart below to see what the triggers are, and how much of an issue they are compared to others.

Triggers for violence and abuse against shop workers

(Figures are a percentage)



But, why do people actually turn to acts of violence against shop workers and what is the mentality behind the behaviour? Adrian Beck, Professor in Criminology, explains that it is hard to generalise across all forms of perpetrators. He also adds that there are lots of different reasons and factors.

"People obviously commit crime for lots of different reasons. Typically for financial gain, but it could also be for revenge. Otherwise, it could be for pleasure, it could be due to anger or it could be because they're under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or indeed it could be frustration.

So, when you look at the world of retail, you find that most incidents of violence tend to be related to instances of theft, where members of staff will probably be intervening while the perpetrator is trying to get something out of a retail store without paying for it."

According to the British Retail Consortium (BRC), a record £1.2 billion was spent on total crime prevention across the retail industry in the year 2018/19.

During challenging trading periods businesses, both big and small, must ensure that they're protecting their business, their stock and their staff. However, the cost of doing so is an issue which is likely to arise amongst retailers. The question of how much retailers should be spending on their own crime prevention is an interesting point for business owners too.

Frank Woods, the Sector Lead for Retail at NFU Mutual, explains the potential issues which business owners face from violent and abusive incidents, and how much they should be spending on protecting themselves and their staff:



"The word reputation is just as important in retail as any other. Customers will choose where they shop based on a business's reputation. From a retail business point of view, having a reputation for having a shop where there is often trouble will deter both potential staff and also customers.

"It needs to be seen as an investment in protecting their reputation. This doesn't necessarily mean that they have to spend a lot

of money; a retailer will already have processes including cashing up and storing cash safely, along with the visibility and layout of the shop which optimises the safety and security of the staff. It doesn't really cost any more money but it can quickly change their position."

The BRC sees violence and abuse against shop workers as one of their key priorities. They are currently working to build better links between police forces, along with the home office on a response to the issue. They are also looking at better de-escalation training for individuals to reduce the likelihood of violence or abuse in stores.

A 'Violence and abuse toward shop staff' Call for Evidence was issued by the Government on April 5 2019. This consultation aimed to reach out to organisations and individuals to help the Government understand the problem in England and Wales.

They particularly encouraged responses from retailers, trade associations and unions to share their views. The consultation ended on June 28 2019 and, as per the Government's guidelines, the response was due in Autumn 2019.

To this date of publication (May 11 2020), the Call for Evidence response has not been released. A source explained that all Government announcements that aren't related to COVID-19 are currently on hold. Therefore, announcing their response to the Call for Evidence has been postponed. It will be published in due course but, at the moment, there is no indication when this will happen. The Home Office would not provide any further explanation.

Whilst the Call for Evidence response is long overdue, individuals, retailers and organisations have continued to voice their opinion on what they feel needs to be done. Some agree that the Government should take more responsibility, in a range of ways, whilst others believe retailers should pay closer attention to the safety of their staff. Read some of the views below:

"I think the real shift, the real structure, or the real revolutionary change needs to come from how the wider criminal justice system deals with the kind of issues and patterns, which the largest single private employer in the UK is reporting, day in, day out.

James Martin. British Retail Consortium





"Ministers are clearly concerned, but the fact you've revealed that numbers continue to go up, that the latest British Retail Crime Survey shows an increase in the number of offences recorded, is a concern. I think that shows that there is, undoubtedly, a need for the Government to step up the pace a bit on this.

I think, first of all, it is very important to make sure that they're working with retailers to ensure that they're offering the best possible protection to their staff; that they're talking to retailers about the kind of security measures that they need to take; that they're working

with retailers to make sure that staff are trained to look after themselves and to keep themselves safe and not to feel obliged or under any pressure to be in dangerous situations. Staff need to be absolutely confident that their employers will stand behind them when they walk away from a confrontation or a dangerous situation, as they should.

It is also important that the Government works more closely with the trade unions, especially Usdaw for example, who represent very many shop workers across the country and have good ideas about what more is needed to be done to improve protections for shop workers.

And, we need the police and the criminal justice authorities to have the resources that they need to follow up reports, to make sure that serious cases are prosecuted, come to court and that we have a robust sentencing framework so that people are absolutely clear that violence and abuse will not be tolerated."

- Kate Green. Labour MP for Stretford and Urmston

In a recent Westminster hall debate on February 11 2020, Mike Amesbury, the former Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions, said that community policing is vital to reduce the level of violence and abuse against shop workers. However, a lack of action by police means that few crimes are reported.

A Freedom of Information request has shown why there may be a lack of confidence in the police. I asked Devon and Cornwall Police to provide the number of offences recorded, between November 2018 and December 2019, where 'Retail Staff' was recorded as the occupation of the victim.

A total of **564 offences** were recorded over the period, where the victim was described as 'Retail Staff'. These offences included 168 'common assaults' and 140 incidents where the offender used 'threatening / abusive / insulting words / behaviour to cause harassment / alarm / distress'.

Out of the total number of offences recorded, **321 resulted in an arrest**.



● Offences which led to arrest, out of a total of 564 recorded offences

However, out of the total 564 total offences recorded, **only 47 lead to a conviction**. That means only 8.33% of offences recorded by the force actually led to a conviction.



● Offences which led to conviction, out of a total of 564 recorded offences

Furthermore, the Co-Op group sent a Freedom of Information request to every police force in the UK, asking how often they have received a call about an incident in a Co-Op store and how often the incident was attended.

Paul Gerrard, Campaigns and Public Affairs Director at the Co-Op, said:

"Not every police constabulary could provide this information because they don't record it, which is telling in itself. Those that could, told us that 2/3 of all incidents reported across the UK, the police never attended. That tells you something about the police response to the most serious incidents in store and whether they have the right resources to properly protect shop workers".

- Paul Gerrard. The Co-Op.



Stuart Reddish, President of the National Federation of Independent Retailers (NFRN) which represents and provides help to over 15,000 independent retailers, also agrees that shop workers aren't fully reporting incidents. He explains, however, that they aren't afraid of doing so:

"They are not afraid to report the incident, they just know that the outcome of that will be non-existent in most of the cases. They don't treat retail crime, at this particular time, as a priority. There is always something else that comes up which is classed as more important."

- Stuart Reddish, NFRN



Matthew Scott is Kent's Police and Crime Commissioner. He explains that people shouldn't feel under supported by his police force. Matthew Scott's 2020 policing budget was also approved in February, which he says means there will be more police officers on the horizon. He does however, admit that there is more that could be done.



"Kent Police policy is that they will investigate every crime which has the opportunity of a lead. So, if you're a victim of assault or theft, I would very much advise that they report it. We have made it easier to report.

I think there is still some more that can be done. The Chief Constable has put in place town centre policing teams, crime prevention PSCO's, local and community policing teams have expanded.

There is a much better response here now than there was four years ago. There is always more that we can do, in order to prevent crime from happening in the first place, give victims more confidence and bring people to justice. I'll be working with the force on the priorities over the coming year; I'll make sure that businesses are given their voice within the criminal justice system, as well as residents more generally. I want the message to go back positively to businesses that I'm on their side."

It has been identified that attempting to stop a shop-lifter is one of the key triggers of abusive or violent behaviour against shop workers.

Guidance on the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 recognises that shop theft 'imposes significant costs on communities, businesses and the economy: over 80,000 cases of theft from a shop come before the courts each year'.

Section 176 of the Act makes theft from a shop, of goods worth £200 or less, a summary-only offence. A summary-only offence means that, if an offender is taken to court, they will sit in front of a Magistrate with sentencing powers up to a maximum of 6 months imprisonment.

However, some retailers, organisations and individuals do not feel that this is a deterrent to potential offenders. Stuart Reddish, the President of the National Federation of Independent Retailers (NFRN), says that the £200 theft guideline is well known to offenders and has a significant impact for business owners:

"It's a massive issue. It's more of an issue, the fact that it keeps getting publicised, because the people who are committing those crimes, unfortunately know that is the case now.

We even have police forces up and down the country commenting on it, saying that they are not going to take any action for that £200 rule.

£200, for an independent member of ours, is devastating."

- Stuart Reddish, NFRN



Matthew Scott, Kent's Police and Crime Commissioner, was keen to point out, however, that his force do not put limits on crime.

Whilst there are a range of contributing factors that may lead to violent or abusive behaviour towards retail workers, including the theft threshold, the majority of retailers, individuals and organisations believe that there is much more beneath the surface.

A research report was recently carried out by Dr Emmeline Taylor, Criminologist at City University of London, and funded by the Co-Op. It details some of these underlying issues, including the use of illegal drugs:

"The Home Office estimates between a third and a half of all acquisitive crime is committed by offenders who use heroin, cocaine or crack cocaine. This covers crimes such as theft, burglary and shoplifting. As outlined, encountering a shoplifter is the main trigger for violence and abuse towards shop staff."

The report also identifies several ways in which drugs relate to retail crime:

- *"Substance abusers steal goods to sell and use the money generated to buy drugs. If they are apprehended, they might become verbally abusive or violent. There appears to be a trend of threatening employees with a 'dirty needle' that is claimed to be infected with HIV or hepatitis".*
- *"Individuals under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol become more aggressive and commit offences while in a heightened state of emotion or experiencing psychosis".*
- *"Offenders commit robberies in order to get money to buy drugs. The ACS Crime Report 2018 estimates that 32% of robberies are motivated by drug or alcohol addiction. Additionally, some armed robbers report taking drugs immediately before a hold-up in order to give them more confidence to commit the robbery".*

Furthermore, the Co-Op has also seen a rise in weapons, such as knives and hammers, being used by criminals during incidents in store.

"In the first 60 days of 2020, every single day in Co-Op stores, 98 colleagues are abused. Verbally abused.

Eight colleagues, every day, are attacked. And, of those colleagues that are attacked, five are attacked with a weapon. That's every day in the Co-Op.

If I compare that to last year, in the year ending 2019, the similar numbers were: 65, every day, verbally abused and six attacked. So, 2020 is showing a continued rise."



- Paul Gerrard. The Co-Op



The Coronavirus crisis has, naturally, raised tensions amongst shoppers who began panic buying at the beginning of the pandemic.

Customers may have found themselves queuing for longer than usual and may have also struggled to get their hands on the items which they often buy. Unfortunately, shop owners have reported higher levels of abuse against their staff.

Anita Nye was attacked at work in the shop which she co-runs. Anita was told "I hope you die of f***ing Coronavirus" whilst attempting to stop a customer from buying a second carton of milk, in line with the business restrictions on purchasing during the Coronavirus crisis.



"He pushed past everyone, threw some money onto the counter and said he was taking the milk. I wasn't going to allow it.

When he pushed me the first time, his precise words were '**I'm gonna f**k you up**'.

That's when he pushed me the second time, which was the more violent push. By then, some other staff members had

come who were trying to help as well. As he walked out the door, his parting words were: '**I hope you die of f***ing Coronavirus**'

If it is a male that kicks off, I usually deal with it because it's often less confrontational. Whereas, if a man confronts a man it almost instantly becomes aggressive. So, I was shocked when it happened. Never once have I felt threatened, but for a split second I didn't know what to do. We don't need this at the moment. We are under enough pressure; we don't need people like this coming in and making it worse."

Collaboration is a key theme identified by experts to help reduce the number of incidents. The Co-op is working on their own 'Safer Colleagues, Safer Communities' crime campaign surrounding violence and abuse against shop workers. They are working with their colleagues and other organisations to put pressure on the government.

The Co-Op Food is the sixth biggest food retailer in the country. Although they are an £11 billion a year business, they feature almost exclusively in small format stores in local areas.

Paul Gerrard, Campaigns and Public Affairs Director at the Co-op, says their location means that they are more vulnerable to violence and theft. Paul also highlighted the importance of the campaign, which has been on-going for 18 months:



"We have deployed all of the assets we have, as a business, into making sure our colleagues are safe both in the short and the long term. Part of the responsibility to keep our colleagues safe is ours. Over the past three and next three years, we will spend around £140million - over that six year period. This money will be spent on measures to protect colleagues in stores. That works out at around £8,000 per store, per year."

Due to the scale and importance of the campaign, Paul also believes that it has given colleagues a voice:

"We are very visible, much more than anybody else. It matters to our colleagues and it matters to our Co-Op. This campaign was not decided by the Chief Executive, nor is it made by the board. It is the organisation that decides to campaign on the issue; our national members counsel, who are 100 members elected by the membership to represent them. It is important to our members who own us and this gives us a real compelling voice."

RETAIL VIOLENCE: ATTACKED AND ABUSED AT WORK

To view the full version of this project, including video interviews from organisation representatives, experts, retailers and individuals, please visit: tiny.cc/attackedatwork

Report by: Jamie Long

Find me on Twitter: [@JournoJamie1](https://twitter.com/JournoJamie1)

To republish any part of this project, please email me: jamielong1999@icloud.com

Picture credits: NFU Mutual, British Retail Consortium, Co-Op Food, UK Parliament, NFRN. Links to reports mentioned throughout can be found via the online edition using the web address above.

With thanks to:

The Co-Op

The NFRN

The British Retail Consortium

NFU Mutual

Kent PCC, Matthew Scott

Kate Green MP

Anita Nye

Adrian Beck