



# Store wars

Belinda Liversedge

By the time Christmas comes more than 50% of shopworkers will have suffered some form of physical or verbal abuse from customers – but they're not all talking about it. Just how pervasive is the issue and what can be done to ensure their safety?

**There are five main pieces of health and safety law relevant to protecting staff from violence in the retail workplace.**

Employers have a legal duty to protect the health, safety and welfare of employees as far as is reasonably

practicable under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. Other laws; RIDDOR, the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations 1996 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999, show violence prevention in the retail

industry is as much a health and safety concern as for any other sector. As the British Retail Consortium (BRC) advises in *Tackling Violence Against Staff: best practice guidelines*: "Tackling the risk of violence in the workplace is the same as dealing with other hazards, such as slips, trips and lifting heavy loads. By law employers are required to carry out a risk assessment." Together HSE and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw) provide helpful guidance in putting together an effective violence management plan, including self-assessment forms with checklists of what needs to be done at every stage in combating customer aggression.

#### **Culture of respect**

The BRC advises the first step in a retail safety management plan is to draw up a statement of intent that emphasises violence against staff will not be tolerated. This should extend to a clear incident communications plan backing up the policy; it should "inform employees of what will result from their reporting of incidents".

Behind both steps is the basic premise that violence at work is unacceptable and this, in itself, is considered a powerful deterrent.



Photograph: iStock/hxdbzxy

Usdaw's recent Respect for Shopworkers Week saw shopkeepers host events and speak to customers to grow awareness of abuse ahead of the festive season when verbal insults can increase dramatically, say the union. In practice, embedding a culture of respect into the workplace and post-incident communication plans are inconsistently practised.

Doug Russell, health and safety officer at Usdaw, talks about his experience surveying shopworkers on the issue: "You could go into two stores the same size; in one, staff would be quite happy and in the other, there'd be a lot of discontent and it is all down to the management attitude – when they took control of the situation and backed staff up when customers were unpleasant, the confidence was there. But if not, there was a lot of uncertainty and health consequences as well for the victims." He adds that not following company policy on procedures after incidents was often confusing and upsetting for the victim: "They don't think what the impact will be on the individual".

Justine [not her real name], a café worker at a famous high street retailer, agrees. She says that after being

verbally abused by a customer for not giving her enough food, even though it was the regulated amount, she reported the problem to her manager as per procedure. But "after the customer was vile to me my manager gave her a refund, an afternoon tea for two and a piece of cake. I felt it was encouraging the customer to be mean to get free items and not actually take care of the staff."



**They don't want news on the brand about abusive customers. It's more a case of 'pretend it doesn't happen'**



#### **Reporting post incident**

Underreporting attacks, whatever the nature, is a persistent problem. The interim results of the survey of Freedom From Fear's campaign 2015 (Usdaw) surveying 2,536 shopkeepers (full results of 5,000 workers is out at the year end) shows that nearly a quarter of shopkeepers did not report violent attacks (22%), higher than 2014 (17%). Comparison between Usdaw and BRC's

research is also revealing, with BRC's 2014 survey of retailers representing 1.6m employers recording only 32 instances of abuse per 1,000 staff, whereas on a single day in the same year there were 241 assaults according to Usdaw. "When we do our survey it's done face to face but BRC's figures are based on instances of violence and abuse that get reported by whatever procedure they have in place," says Doug. He explains: "systems often rely on the store manager to report the incident", and "for various reasons" it isn't happening in the vast majority.

Justine describes how, after a customer threw hot coffee over a colleague, the worker was back on the shop floor straight afterwards and she was not sure it was reported. "We're encouraged to not make a fuss. It's about keeping the brand image. They don't want news on the brand about abusive customers, it's more a case of 'pretend it doesn't happen'."

On the other end of the scale there's some very good work done. The Co-operative supermarket's 'Talk' tool is a mechanism to encourage feedback and support. Project manager Hannah Glasgow says: "There's been a marked improvement through training materials



Sales can trigger a surge of incidents. Photograph: Powhusku

such as this on how colleagues tell us they feel in terms of their safety and security in stores.” Reporting incidents is of other practical use in combating aggression, because it gives valuable information on the extent of the risks. All available guidance say stores can put extra resources into dealing with specific problems, or repeated cases can support evidence gathering for police investigations against offenders.

#### **Serious forms of attack**

Being sworn at or spat at are unpleasant incidents, but shops also have to plan for more severe forms of attack. A total of 9% of all shopkeepers have been a victim of physical violence at some time in their careers say Usdaw’s interim results.

Doug says it’s taken years to convince employers that combating physical attack is a health and safety concern. “Traditionally, it’s been seen

as a security issue, linked to loss prevention, making sure people didn’t steal the stock, but the research that we and others did revealed health consequences for workers if they didn’t get it right.” In fact, BRC’s data shows that violent incidents decreased in the period 2004-2012 because of investment into staff safety and CCTV.

Crime prevention and health and safety teams often work together to prevent attack, and although health and safety prosecutions against shops are rare, they happen and illustrate health and safety’s role. Martin McColls newsagents were fined £150,000 plus costs for breaches of health and safety law after staff were attacked, concussed and traumatised over a series of robberies in stores in the Wirral in November last year. The six separate incidents recorded over just a nine-month period involved staff being attacked in high risk activities including

carrying cash takings to a car and lone working at night. The court found there were “systemic failings across the whole company”, not just in the branches concerned, which included unsuitable risk assessments for banking shop takings and no control measures in place for the risks concerned.



**Fronting up to people and chasing shoplifters down the road is not part of the job**



Prioritising staff safety is vital and yields results explains Phil Willsmer, risk operations director at the Co-op: “When it comes to violence against colleagues there’s definitely a link between the levels of incidents and a robust health and safety management system. We



have to be very careful that fronting up to people and chasing shoplifters down the road [is not part of the job]. There's no asset in our organisation that is worth getting a colleague injured for, be that stock or anything. There's nothing to say go and get yourself hurt – that's part of the training, it always has been."

In addition, the group prevents violent attacks across its 4,900 stores through a proactive risk management approach, designing layouts that deter likelihood of abuse and providing all colleagues with conflict training, such as how to diffuse volatile situations or intercepting aggression before it escalates.

### Unpredictability of violence

Regardless of prevention and control measures to tackle customer aggression, it's a stark fact that abuse levels are high. A total of 52% of all shopkeepers have been verbally or physically attacked at some point in their careers, say Usdaw. Latest results have also crept up after an all-time low in 2012; 32 incidents per 1,000 workers in BRC's 2014 survey, compared with 11.6 incidents in 2012.

Levels have see-sawed each year of BRC's research since 2004, rising for example by 83% in one year, 2011. Violence emerges as a volatile threat, largely down to unpredictable human behaviour or seasonal spikes such as Black Friday and Pre-Christmas sales when high levels of abuse in stores is reported.

Managing the fallout of this pervasive issue is just as important therefore as preventing violence in the first place. HSE guidance advises: "talk to victims about their experiences as soon as they feel ready after the event. Individuals will react differently and may need different amounts of time to recover. If they continue to feel seriously distressed they may need specialist support."

Many large retailers will run Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) which can include confidential telephone counselling services for workers with any personal issues. However, Bill Fox, chairman of violence reduction specialists Maybo, stresses EAPs are useful only as part of a strategy and culture of support: "Colleagues are often key to facilitating the victim accessing help through an EAP; as victims find it hard to ask for help."

As well as advising on peer support, Maybo provides manager specific training. "How they handle the incident in the aftermath; providing immediate support at work and when going home, and when absent and/or returning to work, is crucial. Emotive circumstances are a test of leadership and their responses won't be forgotten by staff – for better or worse."



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Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests support varies. Alejandro Zapata, a student who worked for two years in sports and clothes shops, comments: "There was no safety or awareness training for dealing with unpleasant customers and certainly no support or reassurance available after incidents."

The main and the only objective was to achieve the weekly sales target."

Justine, from the coffee shop, was given an EAP number when she joined: "But after that point, you don't see anything of it." Sustaining and refreshing staff communication for pre and post incident is one of the chief ways to build a supportive culture. "Training should be about guarding against complacency and provide an improved staff capability in how to handle situations," says Bill.

Combating rage on the high street involves a dedicated and sensitive approach. It also relies on improving public awareness. Respect for Shopworkers Week is a key campaign for Usdaw, because it works to weed out aggression at its roots. However, without support from employers, the impact is muted. Finally, if the problem of underreporting is to be tackled at all, then figures for retail workplace violence may have to go up in the short term but these will hopefully belie improvements made in the long term.

### HSE guidance Preventing violence to retail staff at:

[tinyurl.com/pvhpqys](http://tinyurl.com/pvhpqys)

### BRC best practice guidelines:

<http://tinyurl.com/q7jcw2>



Usdaw reps talking to East Kilbride shoppers for Respect for Shopworkers Week. Photograph: Usdaw and peterwillsp photography.co.uk