

Abuse against shop workers has increased during the pandemic – it is time to take action to protect them



[Emmeline Taylor](#) reports how attacks against shop workers have increased during the COVID-19 crisis, exacerbating an already problematic situation. Such incidents are often dismissed as 'business crimes' and therefore somehow victimless, rendering a change in the law necessary.

[Respect for Shop Workers Week](#) was established by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (Usdaw) as part of their Freedom from Fear campaign in 2002, to highlight the issue of growing abuse and assaults against shop workers. Last year, a report, [It's Not part of the Job](#) highlighted not only the alarming rates at which shop workers were suffering physical assaults, but also the devastating consequences. The reports of violence revealed instances where employees suffered broken bones, were stabbed with knives, lacerated with smashed bottles, lost sight due to eye injuries and been punched. Yet the impact of violence and verbal abuse stem far beyond physical symptoms; such encounters can leave long-lasting mental health issues including anxiety and, in the most severe cases, post-traumatic stress disorder.

Shop workers and the pandemic

In March 2020, the British Retail Consortium released its findings from its annual retail crime survey. It revealed incidents of violence and abuse against shop workers had risen [to 424 per day](#) in the period from 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019, up 9% from the previous year. In the same month, the Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) reported findings from their survey which estimated [50,000 incidents of violence against shop workers](#), a quarter of which resulted in injury. In addition, they estimated that 83% of people who worked in the convenience sector had been subjected to verbal abuse over the past year. Both reports found a concerning increase in the use of weapons in attacks on shop workers. The ACS survey found almost 10,000 of the reported attacks in convenience stores involved some sort of weapon; 43% involving a knife and 5% involving a firearm. Attacks with axes, hammers and syringes were also reported.

These already alarming figures were released just prior to the severity of the impact of COVID-19 becoming apparent, and before lockdown restrictions were put in place in March 2020. Sadly, the situation was about to get a lot worse. Despite being recognised as essential 'key workers' during the COVID-19 crisis, shop workers have actually seen the levels of violence and verbal abuse directed at them soar during the pandemic. As customers have become agitated by restrictions, queues, and limits on stock, some have directed their frustrations at public-facing employees working hard to serve their communities.

Usdaw reported that abusive incidents toward shop workers [had doubled since the outbreak of COVID-19](#). Respondents to their survey reported being spat at, coughed at, and sneezed at when asking customers to practise social distancing. Some stated that they had been pushed and verbally abused when trying to enforce buying limits on in-demand products. On average, retail staff were being verbally abused, threatened or assaulted every week during the crisis, compared with once a fortnight for 2019.

Almost two-thirds (62%) of the 4,928 workers surveyed said they had experienced verbal abuse since 14 March, while almost a third had been threatened by a customer and 4% had been assaulted. When averaged across all three million workers in the sector, it amounts to a staggering 3,500+ assaults every day. While not all shop workers suffer to this extent, some actually experience much worse with [1 in 6 reporting being abused on every shift](#).

Retail workers are one of the most vulnerable sectors in the city in terms of violence and yet they are being neglected and ignored. It's always just classed as a 'business crime' but we need to recognise the human collateral. ([Police Officer](#))

Tackling violence against shop workers

Industry campaigns such as Usdaw's and the Co-op's [Safer Colleagues, Safer Communities](#) campaign have resulted in some initial positive steps by government and it looked as though much needed action would be taken to protect those serving their community in shops across the country. In February 2020, the Prime Minister pledged in Parliament that 'We should not tolerate crimes of violence against shop workers', and in March 2020, Alex Norris MP introduced the [Assaults on Retail Workers \(Offences\) Bill 2019-21](#) to make certain offences, including malicious wounding, grievous or actual bodily harm and common assault, aggravated when perpetrated against a retail worker in the course of their employment. It is due to have its second reading in January 2021 having already been postponed twice.

It is time to take action to protect such vital key workers and ensure that they can do their job without being fearful of abuse or physical assault. Such incidents are all too often dismissed as 'business crimes' and therefore somehow victimless; but let's not forget that behind each and every statistic is a person who has directly experienced violence or verbal abuse while simply doing their job.

About the Author



[Emmeline Taylor](#) is a Reader in Criminology at City, University of London.

Photo by www.naipo.de on [Unsplash](#).