



Campaign To End Violence And Abuse Against Retail Workers

Survey Results 2022



Contents

	Page
Message from the General Secretary	1
Introduction	2
2022 Survey Results	4
Triggers for Violence and Abuse in 2022	6
What Workers Want	8
Consequences of Violence	10
Confidence in the System	11
Conclusions	12

Message from the General Secretary



In the aftermath of the pandemic, essential workers in retail have slowly begun to adjust towards the return to a more 'normal' workplace. Changes in rules and guidance and adapting to different waves and variants of the virus are seemingly now a thing of the past.

It is therefore encouraging to see that the record levels of violence and abuse that shop workers experienced throughout the pandemic has seen a significant reduction. Despite this, reported verbal abuse, threats of violence and actual physical assaults are all higher than any year outside of the pandemic. This data continues a worrying trend seen between 2016 and now. In 2016, half of retail workers reported receiving abuse, this has now risen to around three-quarters.

Usdaw is clear that abuse is not part of the job and it is unacceptable that retail workers are being abused, threatened and assaulted on a regular basis.

The Union has been working hard with politicians, police forces, employers and employer associations to tackle this issue.

The Protection of Workers Act came into force in Scotland in August 2021 and hundreds of cases are being investigated by Police Scotland. In England and Wales, retail workers have been given some protection through an amendment to the Police, Crime Sentencing and Courts Bill which makes violence against public facing workers a statutory aggravating factor for sentencing. The amended Bill received Royal Assent on the 28th of April last year and is now officially an act of parliament. However, because of significant backlogs in the courts system, we are not aware of any instances of the provisions yet being utilised. Additionally, there are encouraging pilot projects with some police forces to improve reporting of incidents to the police, and to use the evidence to deal with prolific offenders.

Our survey also shows an encouraging increase in reporting of incidents to employers. There appears to have been an increased effort by employers to make people aware that abuse will not be tolerated. In some stores, it would seem that a number of managers are being more robust in the support of their workers, with the overall confidence of respondents in their employer also gradually increasing.

However, faced with such appallingly high levels of violence and abuse, and with shop workers still lacking overall confidence in the ability of the system to give them the protection they need, much more needs to be done.

The Government must provide the co-ordination needed to turn pilot projects into common practice and to ensure that retail employers, police and the courts work together to make shops safe places for our members to work and for customers to shop.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Introduction

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 Government to protect retail workers.

For several years the problems were being contained. Figures from Government surveys, reports from employers and the Union's own surveys suggested that the problems were, at the very least, not getting worse and in some respects were being reduced. However, in the years before the coronavirus pandemic, there was disturbing evidence of a sharp upturn. The number of workers experiencing verbal abuse increased from just over half to more than two-thirds in that period. The number 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 two triggers accounted for more than half of the reported incidents.

Then in 2020 the world was hit by the coronavirus pandemic and, in addition to dealing with the impact of shop theft and enforcing age-restricted sales requirements, workers in essential shops had to deal with a variety of new pressures. The changes to the shopping experience imposed a new range of responsibilities on front line staff in stores. Despite playing a key role in ensuring our communities could get through the pandemic, over 90% of retail workers faced abuse during the pandemic as part of their job role.

Over the last year, as restrictions have eased, there has been a reduction in the peak of incidents faced by retail workers.

In the wake of restrictions brought about by the pandemic, the overall picture has altered. Gone are the overwhelming Covid-related triggers and challenges. Returning in their place are the more traditional difficulties surrounding age-related sales and shoplifters. Unfortunately, when excluding pandemic-affected years, results from this year's study are the worst on record, with higher levels of violence and abuse reported than ever before.

It is now incredibly concerning that these higher rates of abuse are becoming more of a part of the job for retail workers. The pandemic clearly demonstrated the incredible role that retail workers play in our economy and our society. It is simply unacceptable for these higher rates of abuse, threats and violence to become part of the job.

There are some positives to recognise from the work that the industry has been doing with the Union over recent years. Both levels of reporting and overall confidence in employers have seen an increase when compared to the statistics from our 2019 survey.

However, abuse, threats and violence are not issues that can be resolved by the industry alone. To assist in resolving the issues highlighted in this report, Usdaw continues to call for:

- Nationwide initiatives that support the complete rehabilitation of offenders.
- Investment in community-led policing initiatives, which recognise the invaluable role that retail workers play in our communities and deliver locally-led programmes to guarantee worker safety.
- A properly funded justice system to tackle the backlog and deliver victims of violence and abuse the justice they deserve.



2022 Survey Results

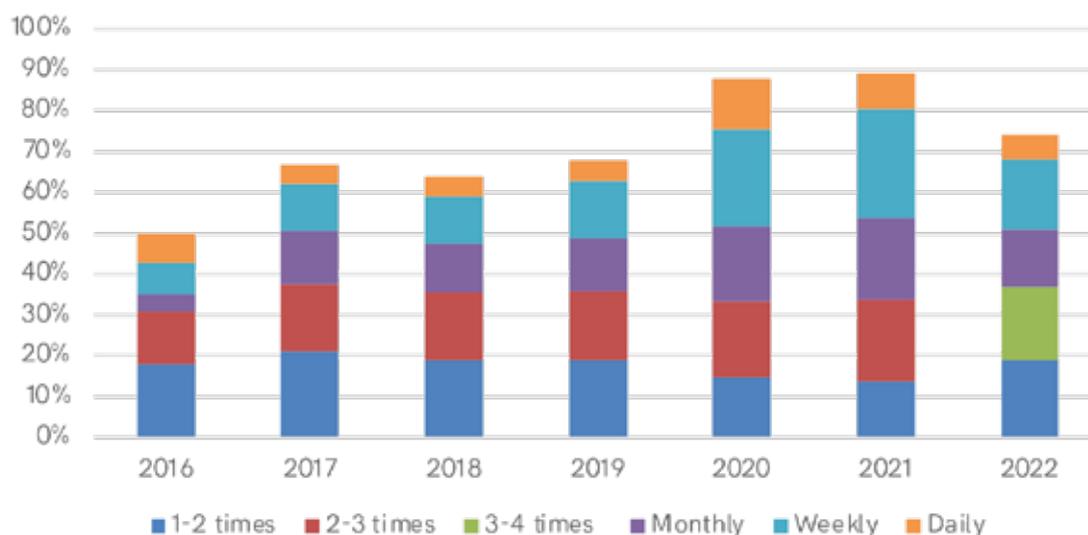
From 2007 to 2022 Usdaw surveyed between 1,500 and 8,000 shop workers each year to gather first-hand accounts on the extent of violence, threats and abuse against shop staff. The distinctive feature of the Usdaw surveys is that most responses are based on face-to-face interviews conducted by Usdaw reps with fellow colleagues in shops*. As such they are not reliant on workers using reporting systems to communicate incidents to their employers or to the police. Their design also gives a unique perspective into the workers' perceptions of the risks that they face and the solutions that are needed to reduce or prevent those risks and dramatically exposes the level of under-reporting of incidents over that period.

This year's survey was conducted without Covid restrictions and has allowed for a return to normality and the resumption of our face-to-face interviews. As a result, along with the removal of restrictions related to the pandemic, these findings are best compared to the 2019 results.

The survey results are based on 7,755 responses received throughout 2022. They show that the high levels of abuse and violence recorded in the 2019 survey have unfortunately been exceeded in this year's survey.

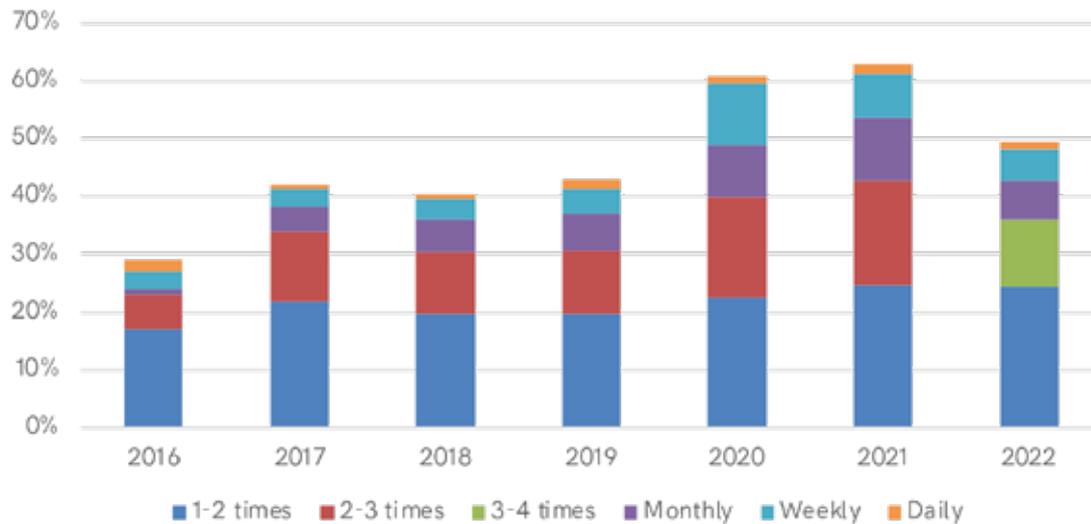
Over 7 out of 10 respondents reported verbal abuse. 49% received threats of violence and nearly 8% were physically assaulted during the year. Comparatively, in 2019 the figures were 67% abused, 42% threatened and 5% physically assaulted.

Verbal Abuse in the last 12 Months

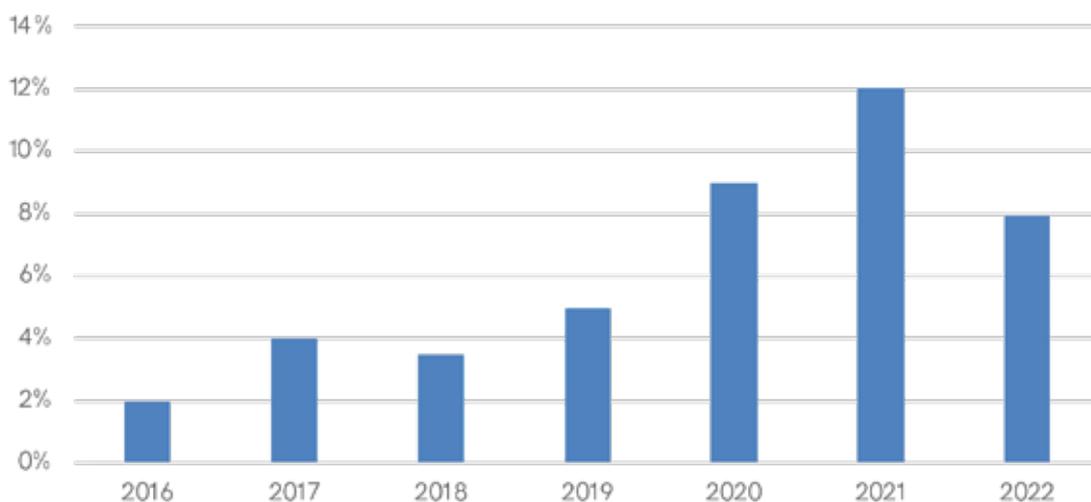


*Excluding Covid-19 affected years 2020 & 2021 - in which the survey was mainly conducted online.

Threats of Violence in the Last 12 Months



Physical Assaults in the Last 12 Months



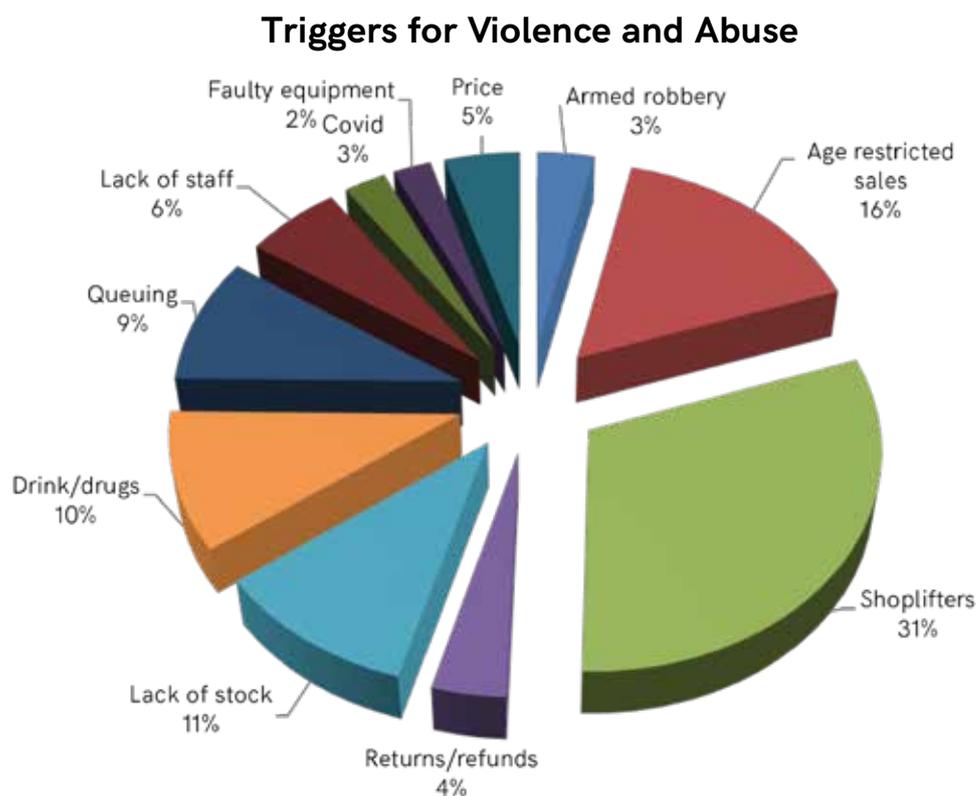
Physical assaults included being spat at or coughed at, being punched or kicked and attacks with weapons, most commonly knives or needles.

An analysis of the results by gender reveal that women were more likely to be the victim of verbal abuse - 79% of women against 72% of men. However, men were significantly more likely to be physically assaulted - 10% of men against 7% of women.

There has been a marked increase in levels of reporting of incidents compared to 2019. Overall, 59% of respondents said that the incident was reported to their employer, 14% higher than the same figures from 2019. When it comes to physical assaults, only 8% of incidents went unreported compared to 18% in 2019.

Triggers for Violence and Abuse in 2022

As in previous years we asked an open question about the main triggers for violence and abuse.



Throughout the pandemic this question became heavily skewed towards Covid-related triggers such as queues outside the store, face coverings and social distancing. These made up a vast majority of triggers and completely swamped what have previously been the more traditional causes for violence. In this post-pandemic survey, we can see that the results have painted a familiar picture in comparison to our pre-pandemic 2019 survey.

This year has seen a somewhat unexpected fall to triggers such as age-restricted sales and drink/drugs, decreasing 13% and 4% comparatively. Alongside overall incidents increasing, it is not clear to what extent the picture is getting better or whether the increase in other triggers is simply diluting the level of incidents related to age-restricted sales and drink/drugs.

With many shops opting to replace traditional style tills with self-scan systems it comes as no surprise to see the new trigger of 'queuing' coming in at 9%. Not only this but calls for a greater number of staff have grown significantly louder. It would be safe to assume that staffing levels have been cut in line with the introduction of a greater number of self-checkouts, creating a disgruntled customer base and increased pressure on retail workers.

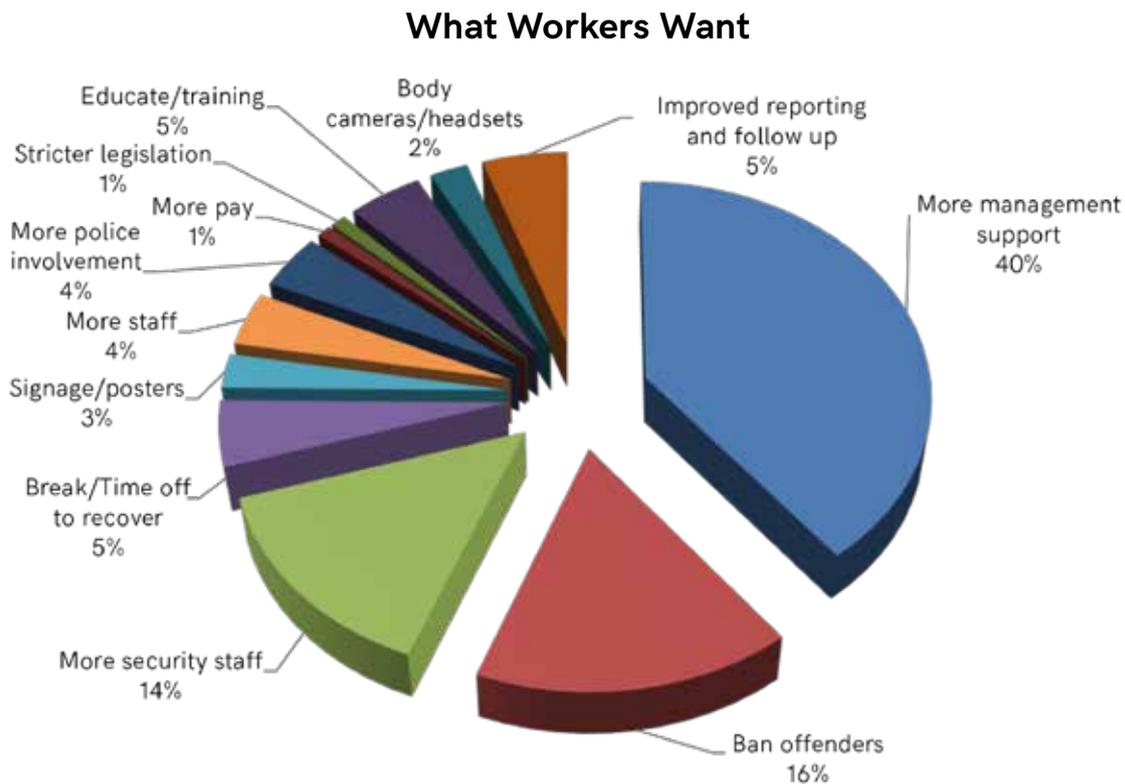
As Covid has gradually faded into the background, a newer cost of living crisis has risen to prominence. This can likely be attributed to the arrival of a new category of 'price', which accounts for 5% of all respondents, and the continual rise in shoplifting. The 31% of responses related to shoplifting in this year's survey is not only higher than 2019 but also more than double that of 2016.

Covid precautions still feature in this year's figures, yet to a much lesser extent, with only 3% of respondents citing these as triggers. This a stark contrast to the overwhelming majority of 85% from our 2020 survey.



What Workers Want

The other standard open-text question we ask concerns what more the employer could do to support their workers.



There are several interesting themes that stand out this year in comparison to previous surveys. The call for banning of offenders is at its lowest point since the introduction of this question in our 2020 survey, 10% lower than last year's results. Bucking the trend once more is the lessening demand for additional security staff, which has seen a 4% decrease from the year prior. These statistics can likely be attributed to the general decrease of abuse and violence in the workplace this year and the ending of additional, security-type roles being performed by retail workers when compared to the previous two pandemic-affected years.

There is a significant increase this year in the request for more management support - up to 40% from 26% last year. Progress that was seemingly made last year appears to have taken a backwards step.

Recurring complaints suggest that managers are too slow to respond when help is called for in dealing with an abusive customer or that managers spend too much time hiding in their office and are not visible enough on the shop floor to deal with incidents promptly. Others indicate a demand for managers to back their staff and not to automatically side with the customer when intervention is necessary.

The call for additional education and training when attempting to deal with such challenging scenarios is only getting louder. This is reflected by the statistics, which have more than doubled compared to last year.



Consequences of Violence

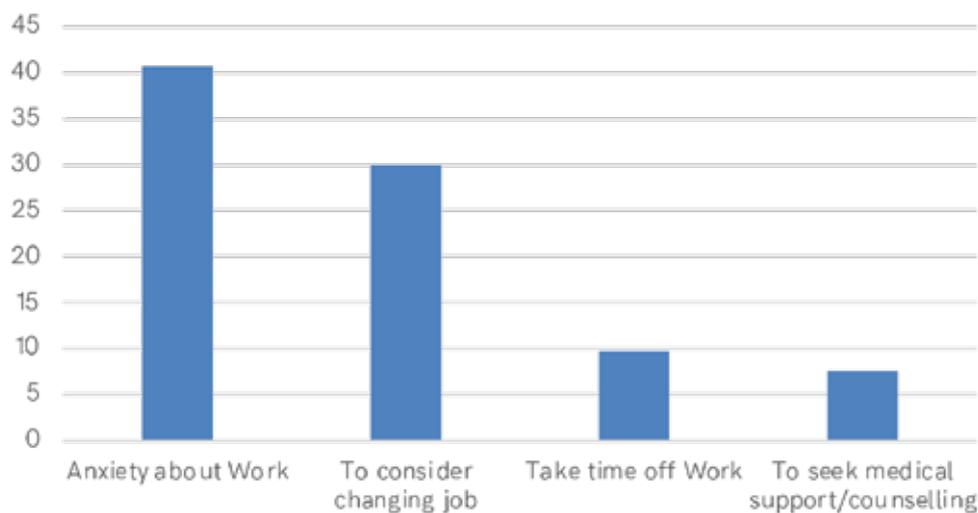
This year, respondents were asked a specific question on the impact that incidents of threats, abuse and violence are having on them. Respondents were able to select more than one option, as a result the totals could add up to over 100%.

This question highlighted the significant impact that the issue is having on the retail workforce. From those that responded, just over 4 in 10 have experienced some form of anxiety about work. Furthermore, nearly one third of those surveyed feel that the violence and abuse they've experienced at work has forced them to consider a change of job. At a time of significant labour shortage, and incredibly high levels of staff turnover across the retail industry, it is clear that violence and abuse are not only human issues, but also an economic issue. If the problems retail workers are facing are not resolved, more workers will leave the industry and retail will become a less attractive career choice.

It is also startling that one in ten retail workers have taken time off work as a result of threats, abuse and violence. This not only highlights the human impact of the issue but also the cost to retailers and the broader economy. It is clear that tackling this issue should not be seen solely as a workers' rights issue, but also as a key objective in driving forward the UK's retail sector.

Overall, the results are disappointing. The statistics are a sad reflection of the struggles that many shop workers must experience on a regular basis. It displays the necessity for employers to provide greater support for as long as required after an incident has occurred, and not just in the immediate aftermath.

The Impact of Threats and Abuse



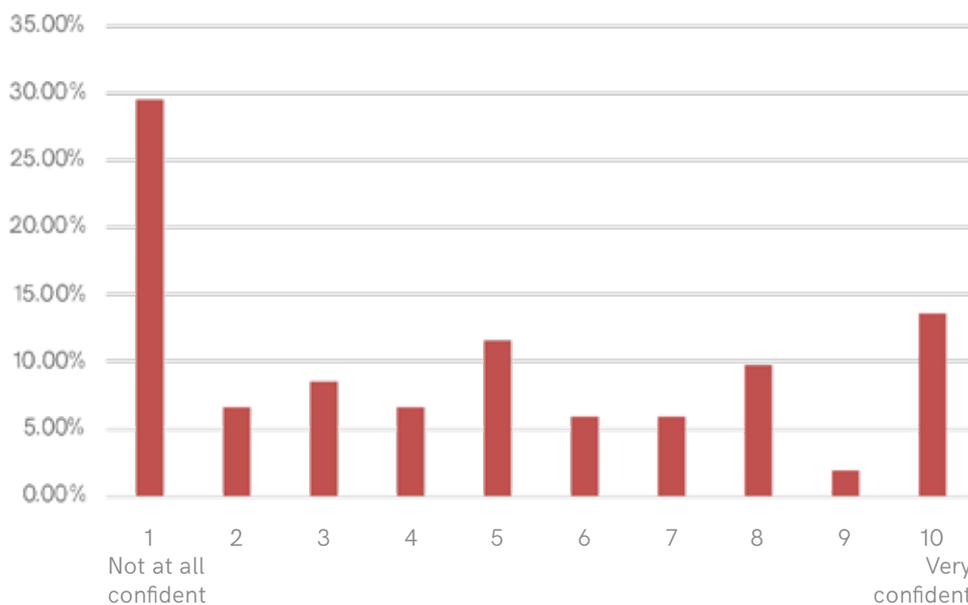
Confidence in the System

We asked respondents to give a score on a scale from 1 to 10 to indicate how confident they were that reporting violence and abuse will make a difference. The response to this question has seen an improvement on last year - 51% scoring 4 or less compared to 61% from last year - but is still overwhelmingly negative.

Nearly a third of all respondents reported their staggering lack of confidence in their employer by scoring them a 1 - not at all confident. This figure is more than double that of those that scored 10 - very confident.

Despite the most common result of 1 displaying a negative tone, the 2nd, 3rd and 4th most common scores were 10, 5 and 8. This provides a glimmer of hope and an indication of progress being made. It suggests that certain employers, who instil very little employee confidence, are massively skewing the results for others.

Confidence in Employer



Conclusions

With our main point of comparison being the most recently conducted face-to-face survey of 2019, it is disturbing to see that levels of physical and verbal abuse and violence continue to increase, eclipsing the highest levels recorded from any pre-pandemic study.

It is also a serious matter of concern that, despite the general reduction of pressures relating to the coronavirus pandemic, the more traditional triggers of violence and abuse – shop theft and age-restricted products – are re-establishing themselves as major triggers for violence.

On a more encouraging note, it is good to see a significant increase in reporting of incidents to employers. It is unclear how much this increase in reporting has been driven by the extra focus on reporting of pandemic-related incidents such as spitting and coughing at staff, or aggression in response to Covid-19 precautions at stores, but it is a welcome trend that appears to have been carried over into post-andemic procedures.

Despite rates of reporting being up, overall confidence of the effect of such reporting leaves plenty of room for improvement. Employers must do more to inspire confidence in reporting, ensuring effective investigations are conducted and all reports are taken seriously. The procedural reporting of issues needs to be made simpler and easier, with confusing policies being quoted as a deterrent for reporting by many of our respondents.

It is important that feedback is provided to workers who do report so that they know what outcomes have resultantly occurred. There also needs to be an extended emphasis towards ongoing support to workers, especially when showing signs of prolonged struggle.

The passing of the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age Restricted Goods) Act by the Scottish Parliament was a very welcome development. The Act came into force in August 2021 and has seen police support in tackling the issue.

Despite this, retail workers continued to come under increased pressure as a result of stock shortages related to issues following Brexit. Furthermore, the Westminster Government's plans around removing EU-derived legislation will bring about significant changes to the sector, including the impact on consumer rights law. It is clear that the Government must prioritise the issues retail workers face, and the same issues that are holding back the retail sector, rather than making unnecessary changes to the rights of consumers and workers.

This year violence and abuse has soared to record levels, outside of a global pandemic. However, there are encouraging signs that the hard work that employers have been doing in co-operation with the Union is beginning to make an impact. Work on the underlying issues of dealing with prolific shoplifters, anti-social behaviour in and around shops and managing the process of sales of under-age products must continue and needs to be better co-ordinated and communicated.

Despite the best efforts of all involved, shopworkers still lack confidence that their employers and the police will provide them with the protection and support that they need. Until there is evidence that shopworkers do feel safe and respected for the essential service they provide, Usdaw will continue its campaigning on this issue. We will also continue monitoring the levels of abuse our members suffer, examining the effectiveness of the new legislation and encouraging our members to report the incidents they experience.





For further information or to join Usdaw
call our Helpline on **0800 030 8030**
or visit **www.usdaw.org.uk/fff**

FFF Survey Results March 2023
Stock photography, posed by models



www.usdaw.org.uk

#FreedomFromFear

Udaw Union

