

Violence against Staff in the retail sector:

The triggers and how
to help prevent it



Reducing crime through partnership and prevention

Introduction

This document aims to provide information to retailers to help them identify the key drivers of violence against staff in the retail environment and provide guidance on how to prevent or mitigate the associated threat of violence and abuse of staff. We recognise that violence and abuse can take place in many forms and in a wide range of businesses, small or large. This guidance can be used by employers to help support their staff, but also by employees themselves.

Violence against shop workers is a prominent concern within the retail community. This is a long-standing issue, but retailers have highlighted that the number of incidents, and their severity, have increased significantly in recent years. Despite record spending by retailers, who invested £1.2 billion on crime prevention measures in the last year, recent surveys have highlighted the following:

- The British Retail Consortium (BRC) 2020 Crime Survey showed that every day, over 400 retail workers faced a torrent of violence and abuse in the workplace.
- The Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) 2020 Crime Report found that there were over 50,000 violent incidents in local shops.
- The Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) work highlights that, on average, a shop worker is abused, threatened, or assaulted 21 times a year.

Violence and abuse against staff should never be tolerated.

We recognise that reducing incidents of this nature is a priority for businesses, and the police will work with you and our partners to tackle the issue. Kit Malthouse MP, Minister of State for Crime and Policing (Home Office) said,

“Shop workers are the beating hearts of our communities and violence or abuse against them is utterly unacceptable”.

The nature of incidents within each business will vary, and may also vary depending on the location of your branches, but common themes exist. We recommend that businesses adapt this guidance and produce an individual risk assessment and plan of action required to best protect yourself and your colleagues. Retailers may already have their own policies and guidance in place. This guidance can be used when reviewing those or as a supplementary tool.

Violence Triggers

Violence and abuse against shop workers ranges from verbal abuse and intimidation, to threats and physical violence. Whilst this can be unpredictable, the three main drivers/trigger points have been identified as:

Challenging a customer who is committing a shoplifting offence.



Challenging a customer for ID when selling age restricted products.



Customers who are intoxicated by drink/drugs.



In addition to these drivers, enforcement of queueing and social distancing rules have also been cited as a trigger initiating abuse directed at the shop workers.



All of these trigger points involve an interaction between a perpetrator and a member of staff. Staff should be advised that an interaction with a customer in one of these scenarios therefore has the potential to escalate into a violent or abusive incident and extra caution is required. Simply being aware of this and taking a cautious approach can make a difference.

Specific advice to help prevent or mitigate violence and abuse in each of these scenarios is provided later in this document but the following can be applied to all three situations.

Plan

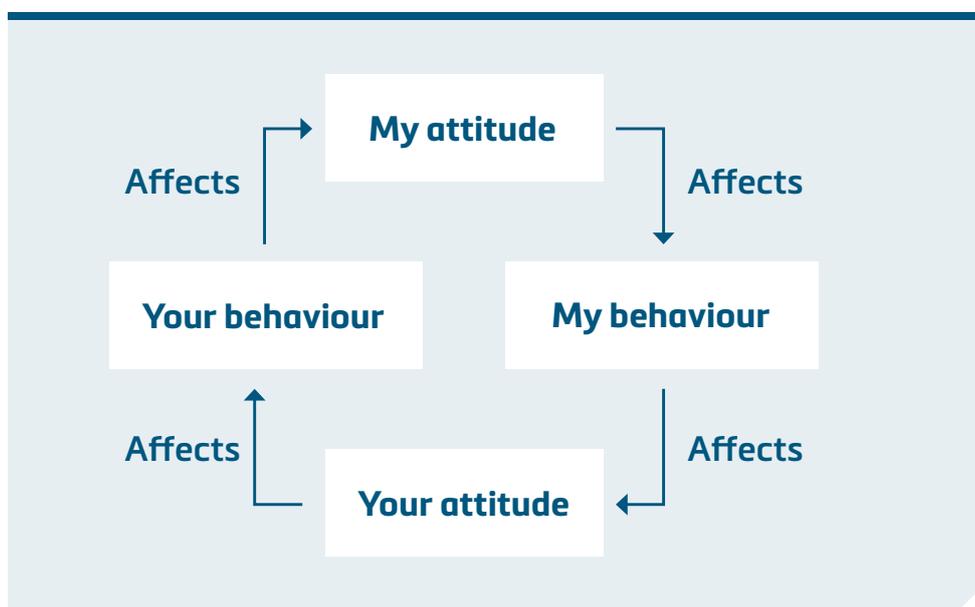
Be prepared for what might happen. Use role plays and staff training to talk through scenarios and makes sure that staff know their roles and responsibilities should an incident happen. Experience has shown that training in the ability to recognise the signs of conflict and how to defuse potentially dangerous situations is a key tool in reducing the risk of violence. Consider organising conflict management training.

Early Recognition

In addition to knowing about the type of incidents which often lead to violence, staff should be aware that there are physiological changes that can indicate an incident is about to escalate into conflict. These early warning signs might be recognised in the offender's behaviour [e.g. fists clenched, tensed muscles, lowering and spreading the body for stability, redness of the face, lowered brow etc.] or your own [e.g. heart beat quickens, fast and shallow breathing, dryness in the mouth etc.]. Take notice of these changes and act on them.

Control your behaviour

Your actions and behaviour will influence the offender's actions and behaviour – see diagram below.. Using positive/assertive behaviours and actions will help reduce the conflict: open body language, controlled breathing, controlled tone of voice, thought prior to speech.



The Betari box is a model that shows how your attitudes affect the way other people respond to you, and therefore, how if you change your attitudes towards others, you can cause them to change their behaviour towards you.

Think safety

Consider your own personal safety, and that of your colleagues, and where possible, seek support from a colleague or manager before intervening. Work with a colleague to provide 'contact and cover' – your colleague covers at a reasonable distance to support/step in if the situation escalates. Try and make the intervention in a safe place too, where the offender can't access anything that could harm you. Always try and have options for an escape route too. Unless you are physically restraining an offender, try and keep your distance so they cannot reach you.

Post Incident

It is important to support all colleagues who have been involved in an incident. Think about the victim, but also witnesses too who may also be affected by what they have seen. Incidents may also have an impact on colleagues who are not directly involved, e.g. if they subsequently feel threatened / or worried about what might happen to them. Be aware that ongoing support may be required even if staff appear ok immediately after the incident. Apparently minor, but repeated incidents, can have a significant impact, and incidents which may seem minor to the employer may have a greater impact on the employee than they would think. Reflect on what has happened – what worked well, what didn't and what lessons can be learned? Update training, policies and procedures where needed.

Use of 'Shopkind' communications

The 'Shopkind' communications assets are available for use by all retailers, free of charge. The aim of 'Shopkind' is to give a positive message to customers reminding them to treat staff with kindness, and for employers to show employees that abuse is not tolerated within the shop. The assets are downloadable and can be used in a range of formats, including posters, shelf sliders and badges for use in store, posters for staff rooms, and social media assets.



Challenging Shoplifting

Preventing shoplifters from targeting your store will help to prevent violence against staff. Investment in crime prevention is an investment in staff safety, productivity and well-being. The following advice provides a brief summary of activity that can help you prevent shoplifting. Further information can be obtained online at www.nbcc.police.uk or from your local police team.

Research

Understand the crime risk in your premises and local area. Use your stock loss and reported crime data to plan your prevention measures. Crime statistics for your local area can also be found online at www.police.uk

Store design

Your store layout and product positioning within it can have an impact. We understand that marketing departments have significant influence here but if it leads to shoplifting and violent incidents discuss this with them. Reduce congestion at entry points and keep open sightlines so staff can see what is happening. Where this is not possible consider CCTV, mirrors and elevated cash till areas. CCTV should cover entrances and exits, capturing good quality facial images of people entering and leaving the store as well as your high valued and targeted stock. Consider using signs explaining that shoplifting will not be tolerated and any offenders will be prosecuted.

Target harden

Make it harder for an offender to steal the items your research has identified as the most likely to be stolen. A range of options are available – consider locked display cases, security tagging and dummy products etc.

Customer engagement

Create the right atmosphere. Instruct your staff to ‘meet and greet’ customers when they enter the store and engage with them once they are inside. Aside from demonstrating excellent customer service, this tactic can deter shoplifters. You need to ‘own the shop floor’ – encourage both staff and security to monitor the most vulnerable and targeted areas in the store.

Partnership

You can’t tackle crime alone. Strong partnership relationships with your local police and other businesses will help reduce crime. If available, consider joining a local retail crime initiative e.g. Shopwatch, Business Improvement District, Business Crime Reduction Partnership etc. and joining their retail radio link and any local CCTV partnership that exist.

Intervene

If you witness suspicious behaviour or an offence only intervene when it is safe to do so. Whilst stock can be replaced, you and your colleagues cannot. Ensure the area in which you will challenge shoplifters, as well as detaining them, is covered by CCTV or use body-worn video cameras.

Offenders under the Influence of Alcohol or Drugs

The 'meet and greet' advice mentioned above is equally applicable here. It is far better to prevent a customer under the influence of alcohol or drugs from entering your store rather than trying to remove them afterwards. However, if you notice someone in your premises who is displaying signs of being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, early intervention and good communication are key. Be mindful that the signs and symptoms associated with this type of behaviour could be confused with somebody suffering from a medical condition – could this be a medical emergency instead? Call 999 and request an ambulance if needed. Keeping in mind the safety of yourself and others, approach the individual and assess the situation.

Be clear, ask them to leave immediately and inform them that the police will be called if they refuse. Set a clear boundary with the individual from the outset of the incident. If their behaviour escalates, maintain the safety of yourself and your team and retreat to a place of safety and ensure emergency services are called.

Retailers are legally obligated to refuse an alcohol sale to someone who is intoxicated. If you have to refuse to serve a customer who you think/believe is under the influence of alcohol, stay calm and polite. For example, "Sorry we cannot serve you today" – do not say that you think they are drunk.

Consider excluding persistent offenders from your premises by issuing banning notices. This can be done in conjunction with a BID/BCRP or the local police if the individual has been committing offences on your premises. Keep a record of incidents so that they can be used to support any civil injunction, Community Protection Notice (CPN) or Criminal Behaviour Order (CBO) applications.

You could also consider working with local charities or agencies to explore the root cause and refer persistent offenders to these organisations.

Prominent events, festivals, sporting fixtures and mass protests in the vicinity of your store can increase the chances that you will be dealing with customers under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs. Ensure you are aware of events that might impact your business and plan accordingly.

Age restricted sales

There are a large number of age restricted products in the UK. If you sell them, there will come a time when you or a member of your staff will have to challenge a customer to provide proof that they are old enough for you to process the sale. This 'challenge' should not be confrontational, but use positive/assertive language.

There are a number of simple steps that can help minimise the risk of an age restricted sale becoming violent. Start by displaying clear signage explaining the store age restricted sale policy. Signs should be positioned next to the age restricted products and at the point of sale. This way your staff can refer the customer to this material as they ask for proof of age. Using 'age restricted product' stickers on individual items if your stock is not already marked can also help. Consider displaying/storing products in areas which can lead to increased interaction with customers. When customers require assistance, it provides time for staff to assess the customer's behaviour and assess their age.

To conduct an effective age restricted sale your staff should follow the **Assess – Challenge – Check** process. Each stage of the process should be regarded as a separate element.



Assess the persons age – do they look under 25 years old. If they do, follow Challenge 25 and...



Challenge – ask the person for their ID to prove they are 18 years old or over. If they don't have ID refuse the sale



Check – when they provide the ID to you check it carefully, make sure the ID matches the person and that the date of birth makes them 18 years old, or older

Trading Standards and the Police recommend **Challenge 25** because it provides the seller a larger margin of error which will ensure they do not sell to underage customers. You should insist your staff use this rule to help overcome the difficulty of assessing age – and to allow for the fact that many staff will still cut corners and not ask everyone they think is under 25.

Don't underestimate how hard some employees will find it to challenge effectively – especially if they are not confident or fear a bad reaction. Practice with them and monitor how they do it and consider additional training with trading standards or other organisations.

There are multiple factors that can affect your ability to assess someone's age and make it more difficult to assess someone's age, including:

- If the person's gender or ethnicity is different from your own.
- If there is a large age difference between yourself and the customer
- The way someone dresses and accessorises can alter how they look. They may have confident body language, portraying the fact that they assume to be sold the product.

If you regularly have to assess the age of customers then the experience you gain may help in estimating someone's age, but there is still the risk of getting it wrong. Do not take risks with this important step.

Never ask a customer's age – the answer cannot be relied upon, and it can lead to conflict. Instead, staff should only ever ask for the customer's ID. It is important that staff are supported and know that they can still ask for age ID even if there is a long queue and they are very busy. If you think a customer is under age and they don't have suitable ID don't process the sale. Only accept official forms of ID bearing the customer's photograph and date of birth. If a customer has ID take it off them and examine it closely to make sure the ID matches the person in front of you and the required age. If the situation looks like it may escalate deflect the age restricted sale process to 'the law' or 'company policy', or delay the sale e.g. by seeking further

authorisation from a manager. Ultimately you may have to deny the sale, either because the customer cannot provide ID to verify their age, or because their behaviour has escalated. Be prepared for this and practice how you would deal with this situation.

More information on the Assess-Challenge-Check process can be found online at:

www.nbcc.police.uk/knifeguidance

Although this is aimed at the sale of knives, the guidance can be applied to any age restricted product.

Reporting Violence and Abuse

All crimes and instances of anti-social behaviour should be reported to the Police, particularly crimes involving violence, the threat of violence or abuse.

It is important to provide the police operator a clear and concise account of what has happened. Be specific about the level of violence, any injuries sustained, whether any weapons were used and whether the suspect is still on scene.

Secure evidence of the violence or abuse and not just the incident that led to it.

For example, CCTV or body-worn camera footage of any assault and injuries, and statements from staff who have witnessed the offence. Business Impact Statements specifically focussing on violence against staff can also strengthen the sentencing of those who commit violence or abuse against staff. Where possible, provide this evidence and the Business Impact Statement to the police officers at the time of their attendance.

If the suspect is not detained, and footage of them is not captured on CCTV but you or a colleague know who they are, please make this clear to the police and provide evidence of this in a statement.

In an Emergency call 999 if:

- A serious offence is in progress or just happened
- Someone is in immediate danger of harm
- You need help right away
- Property is in danger of being damaged
- There is the likelihood of a serious disturbance to the public peace.

In a Non-Emergency call 101

The following factors should always be reported when speaking to the police as it will help them decide the most appropriate policing response:

- If violence is used or has been threatened
- If the offender is still at the scene or in the immediate area
- If somebody has been hurt, or you think that someone is vulnerable and at risk of harm and needs protecting, such as children or the elderly
- Where drink, mental health issues or drugs are involved or suspected
- If young people or foreign nationals are involved or if there are language difficulties
- If there is a possibility that there may be evidence that the police will want to know about such as fingerprints or blood
- If suspected stolen property has been recovered or found

If a person has been detained, the police may also request their name and address. This allows checks to be made to find out if the person is wanted or a prolific offender. Where the name and address cannot be verified, inform the police. Also let the police know the following:

- If there are any witnesses to the incident and their details if they are willing for them to be passed to the Police
- If the offender is known

Reporting a crime online:

www.police.uk – add your post code and this will direct you to the right force

Other reporting avenues for non-emergency situations:

Crimestoppers either by phone on [0800 555 111](tel:0800555111) or www.Crimestoppers-UK.org

Guidance for employers on promoting safety in the workplace:

Suzy's Charter for Workplace Safety: see

www.suzylamplugh.org/suzys-charter-for-workplace-safety for more information



Shopworkers =
Keyworkers
#ShopKind

The **National Business Crime Centre (NBCC)** was set up to help businesses tackle crime through partnership working and sharing best practice. Further guidance on a range of topics can be found on our website at www.nbcc.police.uk