



# Campaign To End Violence And Abuse Against Retail Workers

Survey Results 2023



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# Message from the General Secretary

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In 2016, half of retail workers reported abuse from customers. Shockingly, this has now risen to 70%. 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 continues to work 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 thousands of cases have been 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. 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, although they do not have the recording provisions, making it impossible to track cases.

Udaw is pushing for an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill and has expressed dismay at the Government's continued opposition to the introduction of a new protection of shopworkers law, like the existing Scottish legislation. Especially when retailers have given their backing to a standalone offence, and they have also been exposing the issue by reporting it in the media to help improve public awareness.

The cost of living crisis and organised crime have also been a driver for the increase in incidents, and this may have contributed to the sharp rise seen in physical violence reported in our survey in the last twelve months.

However, faced with such appallingly high levels of violence and abuse, and with shopworkers still lacking confidence in the ability of the system to give them the protection they need, much more needs to be done. The Government has failed to produce an effective strategy to reduce retail crime.

Udaw supports, as do major retailers, Labour's strategy to tackle an epidemic of retail crime, by providing a standalone offence for assaulting a shopworker, alongside their 'community policing guarantee', increasing uniformed officers by 13,000 and putting an end to the £200 threshold for police to investigate an incident. Labour will give workers freedom from fear.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Paddy Lillis**  
**General Secretary**

# Introduction

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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 governments to protect retail workers.

For several years the problems were being contained. Official statistics, 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.

Then in 2020 the world was hit by the coronavirus pandemic and 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 frontline 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.

Since then, as society returned to normal, and the triggers driving incidents during the pandemic abated, there has been a shoplifting epidemic driven by the cost of living crisis and organised crime. These have contributed to shockingly high levels of abuse, threats and violence. Unfortunately, when excluding pandemic-affected years, results from this year's study are arguably the worst on record, with a higher levels of physical violence reported than ever before.

It is simply unacceptable for these higher rates of abuse, threats and violence to become part of the job. 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:

- A protection of shopworkers law.
- Increased neighbourhood policing in line with Labour's commitment to provide an additional 13,000 police to patrol in town centres.
- An end to the £200 threshold for police investigating and prosecuting shop theft.
- Nationwide initiatives that support the complete rehabilitation of offenders.
- A properly funded justice system to tackle the backlog and deliver victims of violence and abuse the justice they deserve.

# 2023 Survey Results

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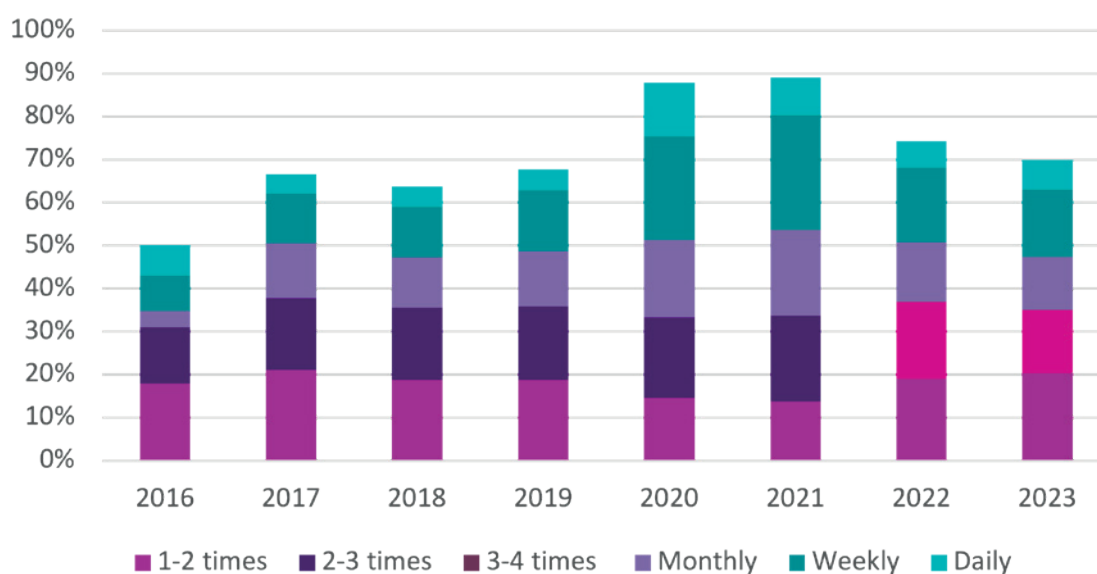
From 2007 to 2023 Usdaw surveyed between 1,500 and 8,000 shopworkers each year to gather first-hand accounts on the extent of violence, threats and abuse against shop staff. The distinctive feature of the Usdaw surveys is that most responses are based on face-to-face interviews conducted by Usdaw reps 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 the second consecutive year of returning to our face-to-face interviews. As a result, these findings are best compared to the 2022 survey results.

The survey results are based on 5,884 responses received throughout 2023. They show that the high levels of abuse and violence recorded in the 2022 survey have, in some ways, unfortunately been exceeded in this year's survey.

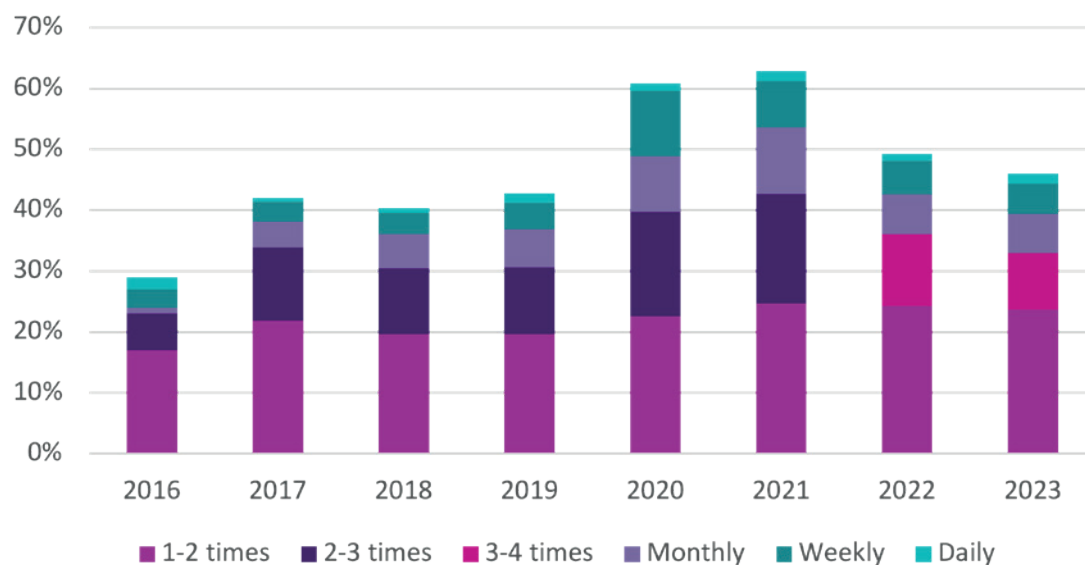
7 out of 10 respondents reported verbal abuse. 46% received threats of violence and 18% were physically assaulted during the year. Comparatively, in 2022 the figures were 74% abused, 49% threatened and nearly 8% physically assaulted.

## Verbal Abuse in the Last 12 Months

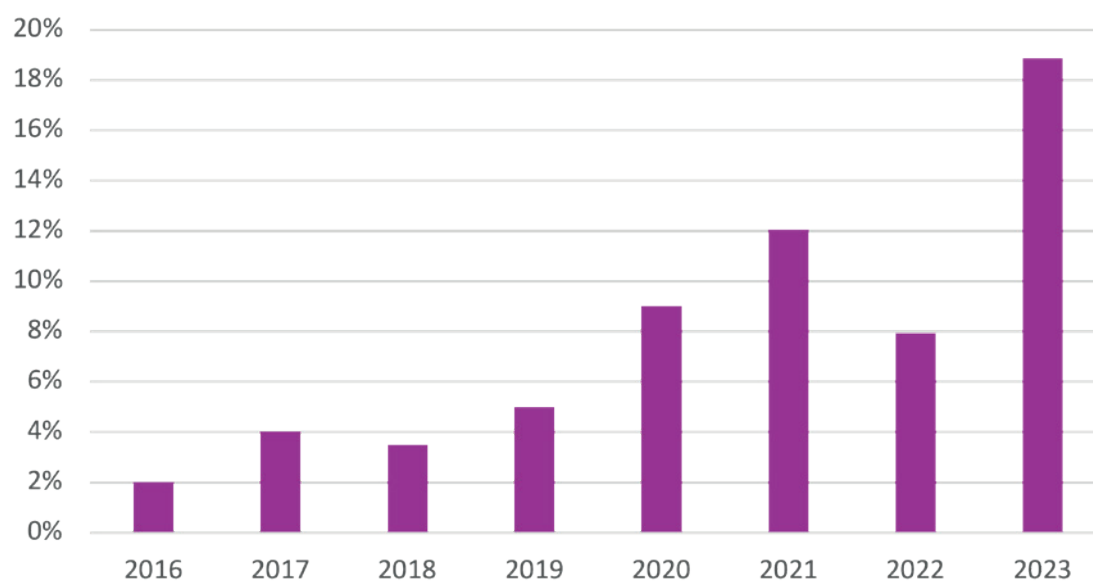


*\*Except Covid-19 affected years - in which the survey was mainly conducted online.*

## 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.*

There has been a reasonable decrease in levels of reporting of incidents compared to 2022. Overall, 53% of respondents said that the incident was reported to their employer, 6% lower than the same figures from 2022.

# Triggers for Violence and Abuse in 2023

Respondents were asked to answer this question by selecting triggers within the subheadings of shoplifting, enforcement, frustration, and harassment. The chart below shows the total for each subheading and the breakdown within each individual category.



**Shoplifting** increased significantly during 2023, with the police and employers both recording higher levels of incidents and this is reflected in it being a major flashpoint. Thieving to feed an addiction and the cost of living crisis are the main causes.

**Enforcement** of the law remains a considerable issue for our members, particularly alcohol sales and other age-restricted products. A key argument for a protection of shopworkers law is that legislators should offer suitable protection for those who are enforcing the laws they pass.

**Frustration** of customers too often ends up with an attack on a shopworker. It should be noted that short-staffing is an element of nearly three-quarters of incidents, whether that is generally around the store or specifically at self-service checkouts.

**Harassment** is relatively low among the whole sample, but the survey found that racial harassment among non-white workers is 54% and 41% of all women suffered sexism, which rises to 56% of under 27s.

# What Workers Want

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In an open-text question we ask 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. Contrastingly, the demand for additional security staff has seen a significant jump, with a 7% increase from last year's survey. These statistics may be attributed to respondents noticing the sharp rise in shoplifting and the need for more protection.

The requests for more management support have remained similar to last year's results - at 40%. This figure is still far too high and there is still much progress to be made in this area.

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.

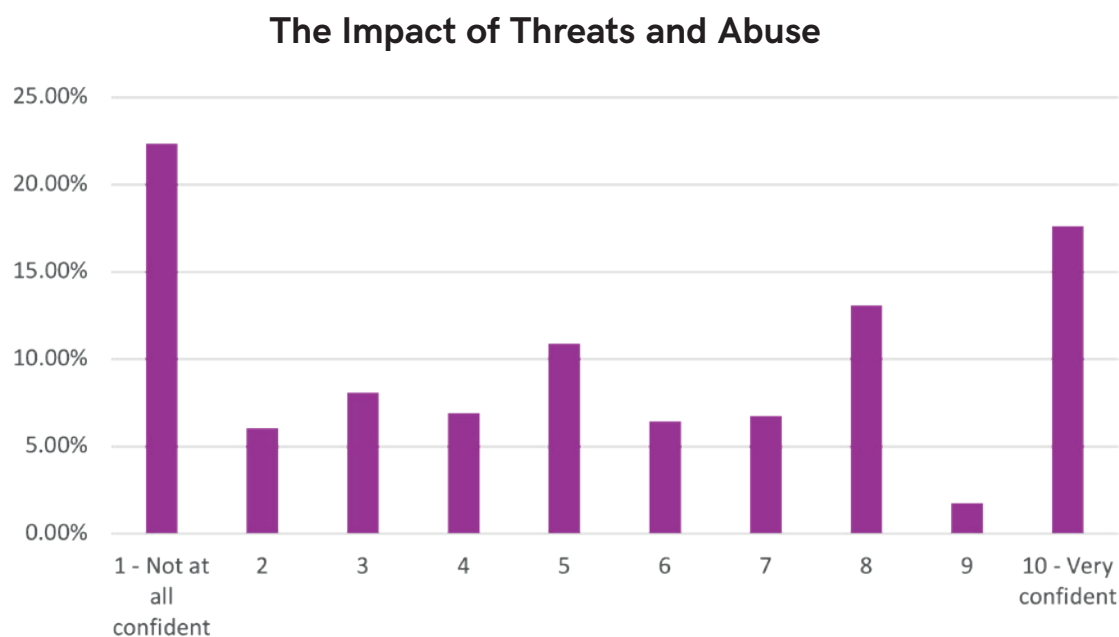
The calls for body worn cameras, headsets and CCTV are only getting louder. This is reflected by the statistics, which have more than doubled compared to last year.

# 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 would make a difference. The response to this question has seen an improvement in the negative scoring but it is still somewhat negative.

Nearly a quarter of all respondents reported their staggering lack of confidence in their employer by scoring them a 1 - not at all confident. This figure is around 5% more than 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, 8 and 5. 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.



# Conclusions

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Our Freedom From Fear survey has once again highlighted the hugely challenging and potentially dangerous environment shopworkers face when simply going about their job. The Government's own figures back this up, highlighting the escalating crisis of retail crime, with shoplifting having risen significantly since last year.

Employers are providing more body cameras, improved CCTV and panic alarms as part of their suite of risk control measures to act as deterrent and to improve support. These measures are no silver bullet, and they must do more to support staff by ensuring they are afforded the time to report incidents and they then follow up and report them to the police. It is also important that feedback is provided to workers after they report, so they know what has been done, and this will highlight to shopworkers that the employer will act.

The UK Government launched their Retail Crime Action Plan to improve the police response to shoplifting. Project Pegasus tackles organised crime groups movement into retail crime. While we recognise the need for intelligent policing, there appears to be no commitment to giving the police the resources needed to ensure high streets and shopping areas are regularly patrolled by uniformed officers and incidents receive a response. We support Labour's pledge to increase neighbourhood police officers by 13,000 as part of their community policing guarantee.

Too many think it is acceptable when they are unhappy to take out their anger on the first person they see who works for the company. Shoplifters do not think twice about attacking shopworkers to aid their escape. Our survey has highlighted that there has been a large increase in the levels of physical violence from 2022, jumping from 8% last year to 19% this year.

The concerning rise in violence towards shopworkers highlights that the UK Government needs to act, by giving shopworkers confidence in the criminal justice system and sending a strong message to violent criminals. By introducing a new protection of shopworkers law, ensuring that the police prioritise attendance at retail crime incidents and giving courts the resources and framework to hear cases speedily, we can work to give all retail workers freedom from fear.





For further information or to join Usdaw  
call our Helpline on **0800 030 8030**  
or visit **[www.usdaw.org.uk/fff](http://www.usdaw.org.uk/fff)**

FFF Survey Results March 2024  
Stock photography, posed by models



[www.usdaw.org.uk](http://www.usdaw.org.uk)

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