

Campaign To End Violence And Abuse Against Retail Workers

Survey Results 2024





VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

"As I was leaving work, I was confronted by a man who came straight at me and physically hit my shoulder without any reason or motive."

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Foreword



Retail crime and abuse of retail workers continue to be growing problems that impact the industry, communities and our members. Usdaw has long campaigned, with the support of many retail employers, for legislation to tackle these issues. After years of being ignored, I am delighted that we now have a Government that is acting, and accepts that new legislation will only be the beginning of ensuring that retail workers are treated with the respect they deserve.

The Crime and Policing Bill will deliver a much-needed protection of retail workers' law; end the indefensible £200 threshold for prosecuting shoplifters, which has effectively become an open invitation to criminals; along with introducing Respect Orders for repeat offenders. The Chancellor announced in the Budget funding to tackle the organised criminals responsible for the increase in shoplifting, and for 13,000 more uniformed police officers, patrolling our communities and high streets.

This is a huge step forward and represents delivery of the political aims of Usdaw's 'Freedom from Fear' campaign, but it is by no means job done. As this report sets out in the results of our latest annual survey, far too many retail workers are being abused, threatened and assaulted. We welcomed the commitment the Prime Minister Keir Starmer made to the Trades Union Congress last year, that the Crime and Policing Bill is only the beginning, not the end, of tackling retail crime. However, it is important that we work with employers to ensure that these new legislative measures are fully taken advantage of by the retail industry.

Having won the Protection of Workers Act in Scotland in August 2021 and the Crime and Policing Bill in England and Wales, we still have to focus on delivering on the Northern Ireland Executive's promise of new legislation in Stormont, to ensure coverage across the whole of the UK. This report will evidence the need for that and provide a backdrop to our ongoing discussions with employers.

While this report does not cover staff who deliver to customers' homes, they are nonetheless retail workers. They quite often have more interactions with their customers than in-store colleagues, are responsible for delivering great customer service and are still required to undertake all statutory requirements around age-related sales. Furthermore, despite significant safeguards, these workers are generally working on their own, away from their store base and at greater risk of violence and abuse. Unfortunately, all the significant causes of violence against in-store retail workers: theft, age-related sales requirements, stock unavailability, to name but a few, also impact delivery drivers. So we are calling on home delivery drivers to be covered by new legal protections, as they are in Scotland. This year we will be running a separate survey of delivery drivers to further evidence that call.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Paddy Lillis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Paddy Lillis
General Secretary

Summary

This report sets out the results of our latest annual survey of retail workers and their experiences of violence, threats and abuse. It is largely a face-to-face survey conducted in workplaces during the whole of 2024. Some responses have come from individuals completing an online version on the Usdaw website.

In 2003, Usdaw launched the '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.

Before Covid-19, levels of violence, threats and abuse were rising and through the pandemic the situation became much worse. While levels have come down from that extraordinary peak, they remain higher than before the pandemic and are growing.

A significant factor in the high level of abuse faced by retail workers is theft from shops. Official statistics show that shoplifting has nearly doubled since the pandemic and rose by 23% during 2024. It is increasingly common for retail stores to be targeted by organised crime gangs stealing to order. This is in no way a victimless crime, with weapons and violence used to ensure these criminals are not stopped.

Having to deal with repeated and persistent offences can cause issues beyond the theft itself like anxiety, fear and physical harm to retail workers. 66% of respondents had suffered incidents of violence, threats and abuse that were triggered by shoplifting and armed robbery.

Usdaw's survey of 9,481 shopworkers found that in the last twelve months (% last year) [% in 2019]:

- 77% were verbally abused (70%) [68%].
- 53% were threatened (46%) [43%].
- 10% were assaulted (18%) [5%].
- 93% agree there needs to be a change in the law to protect retail workers.
- The leading underlying issues that triggered these incidents were shoplifting, then customer frustration and enforcing the law on the sale of age-restricted sales.

The details behind these headline statistics are set out in this report and regional results can be found on pages 9-11.

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

"Shoplifter grabbed my arm and scratched it.
Customer told me the shop is a f**king joke and
she would wipe smile off my face."

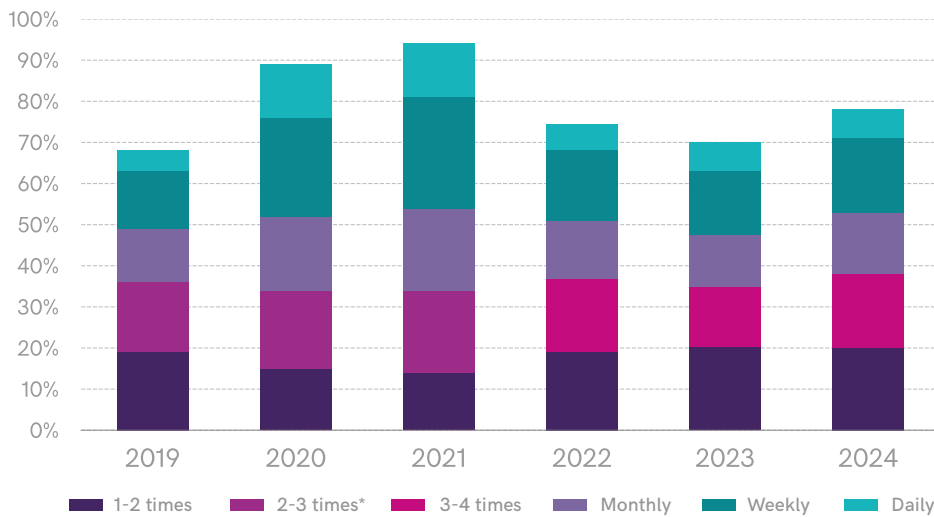
2024 Survey Results

From 2007 to 2023, Usdaw surveyed between 1,500 and 10,000 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 (the 2020 survey was entirely online because of Covid-19).

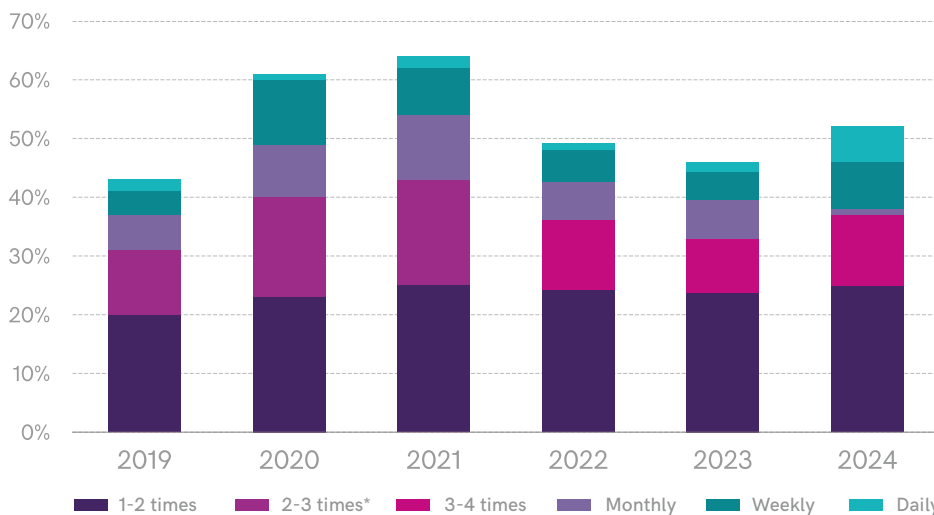
This survey captures more incidents than formal reporting systems operated by employers and the police. It gives a unique perspective into the workers’ perceptions of the risks that they face and the solutions that are needed to reduce or prevent those risks, and dramatically exposes the level of under-reporting of incidents over that period.

This year’s survey was the third consecutive year of returning to our face-to-face interviews. These findings are best compared to the 2019 survey results, before the extreme peaks seen during the pandemic. The survey results are based on 9,481 responses received throughout 2024. They show that the growing levels of abuse and violence recorded in 2019 have continued to increase year on year since the pandemic.

Frequency of Verbal Abuse in the Last 12 Months

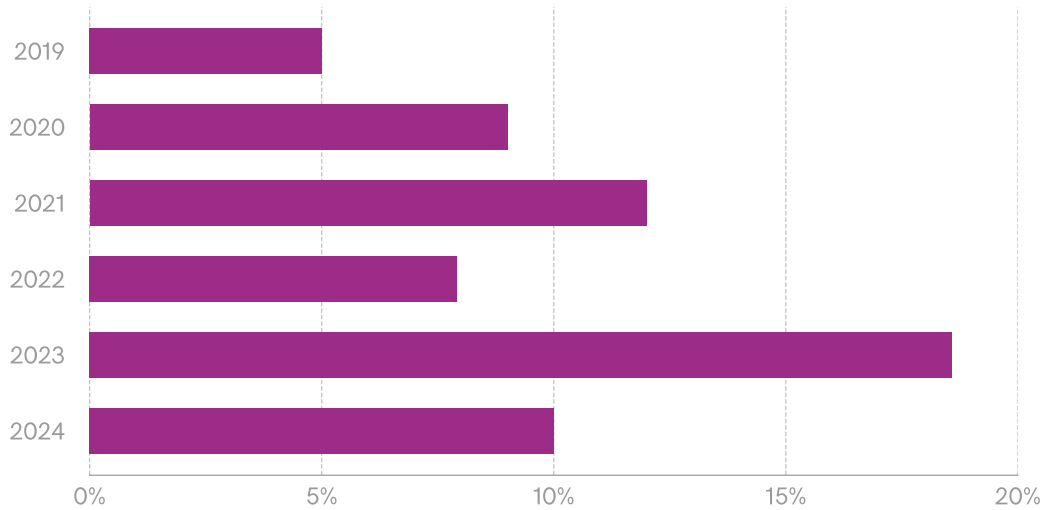


Frequency of Threats of Violence in the Last 12 Months



*In 2022 the answer parameters for these questions were changed from 2-3 times to 3-4 times to provide a more accurate measurement

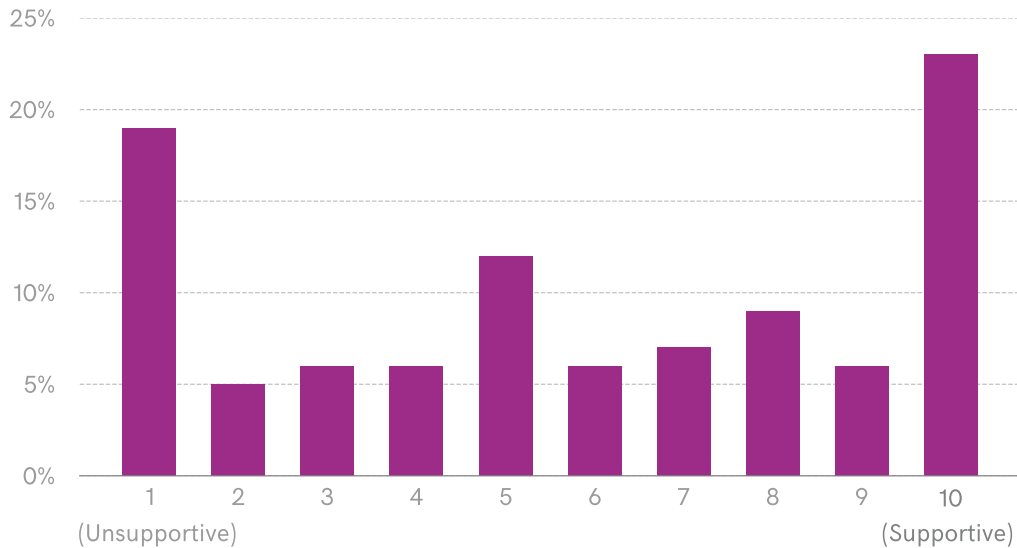
Physical Assaults in the Last 12 Months



Support from Employers

We asked 'on a scale of 1 to 10, how supportive was your employer after you reported the incident?' The average score was 5.8, with 52% scoring over 5. That has remained steady over the years and is something Usdaw will be seeking to improve, having won legislative solutions.

How Supportive was the Employer

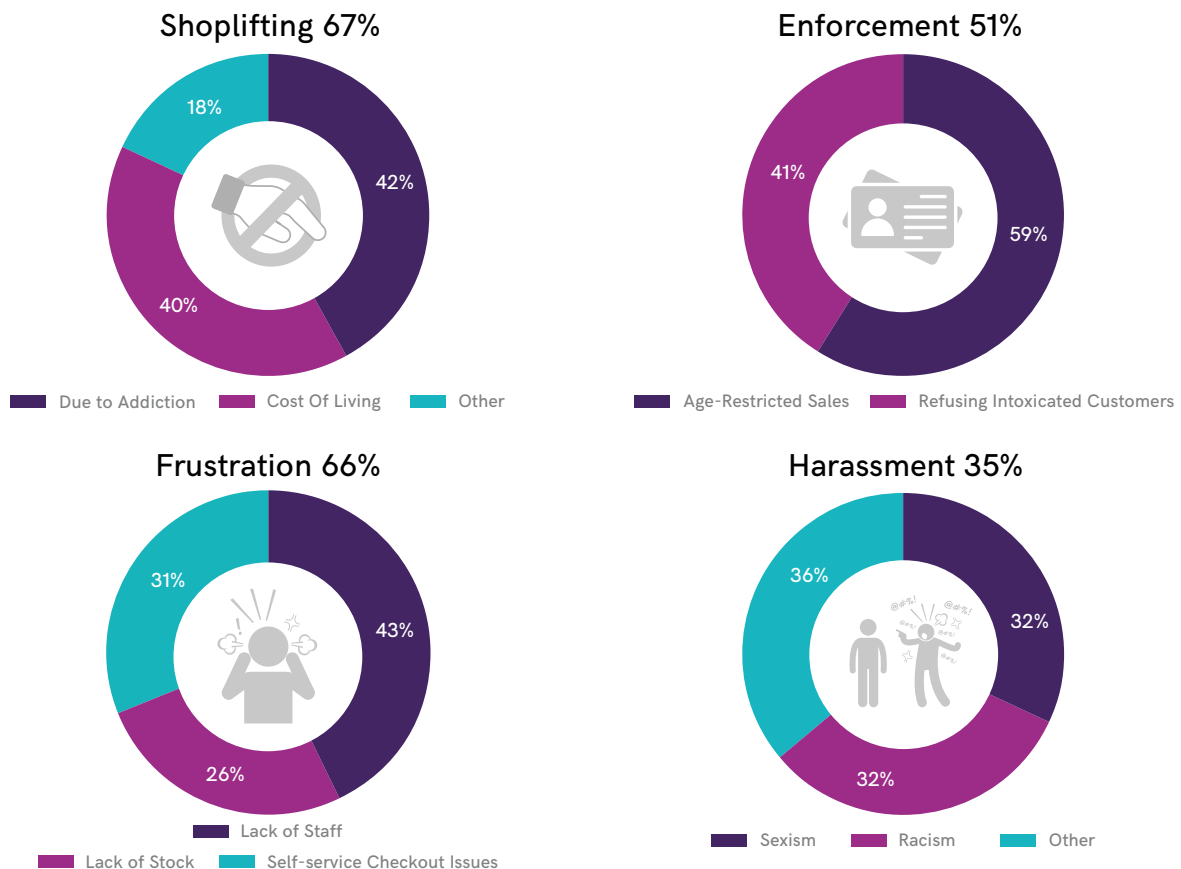


VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

"Aggressive and rude, no manners, just push their way in. Blame you for things not being stocked anymore. Hit with trollies or baskets without a sorry."

Triggers for Violence and Abuse in 2024

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.



Frustration of customers all too often ends up with an attack on a shopworker. It should be noted that the leading cause of customer frustration is short-staffing. Many respondents referred to retail staff being on the frontline when anything goes wrong or the customer feels they've been treated unfairly, even if it is company policy that is the issue.

Shoplifting increased significantly during 2024, with the police and employers both recording higher levels of incidents, and this is reflected in it being a major flashpoint for abuse of retail staff. Thieving to feed an addiction and the cost of living crisis are the main causes.

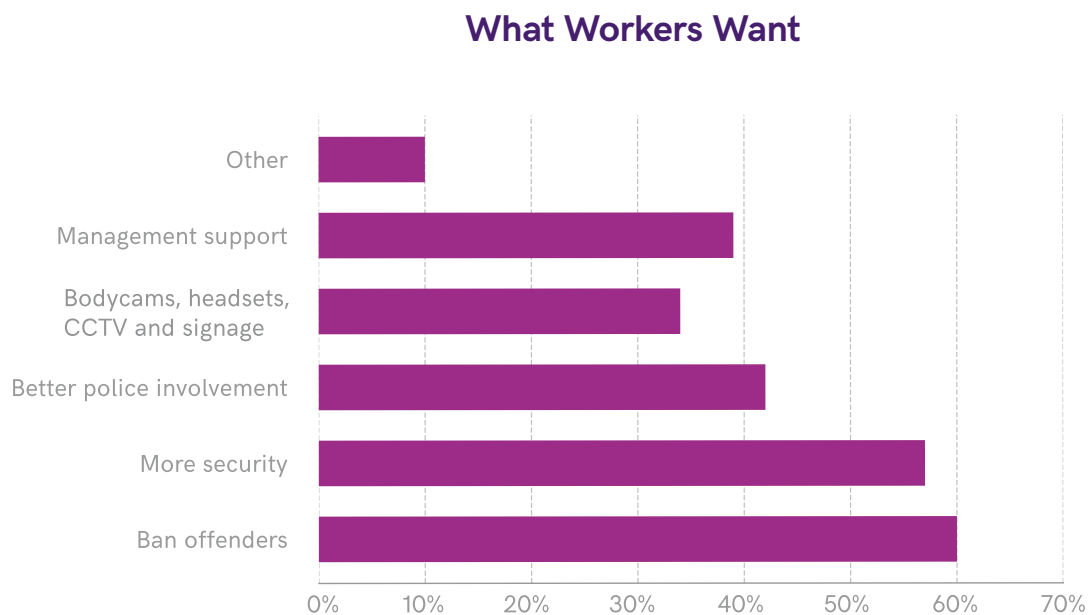
Enforcement of the law remains a considerable issue for our members, particularly alcohol sales and other age-restricted products. A key argument for a protection of retail workers law is that legislators passing laws should offer suitable protection for those who are enforcing them.

Harassment is relatively low among the whole sample, but the survey found that racial harassment among all non-white workers is 48% and is slightly higher at 52% for non-white women. One-third of women under 27 suffered sexism.

36% of all respondents identified other issues, which included: lack of respect for staff, store closing times, displays obstructing aisles, having to do shelf replenishment while customers are in the store, customers fighting with each other, dealing with exchanges and returns, and enforcing company rules and policies.

What Workers Want

We asked what employers could do to support their workers more (this provides Usdaw's health and safety representatives with a list of negotiating aims):



Topping the list is the call for a ban on offenders, and the Government's announcement of Respect Orders could go a long way towards delivering that. Many retail workers are frustrated that the theft from shops and abuse of staff are committed by the same people over and over again.

Security staff have long been popular with shopworkers; they provide reassurance and act as a deterrent in many instances. Many companies have sought to replace security guards with electronic measures like body-worn cameras and headsets that link individual workers to a central control for backup and support. While not as popular as a security guard presence, they are valued by staff.

Support from management and from police are highlighted in the survey, and both are crucial to whether workers report incidents. With nearly half of shopworkers not reporting incidents, including 13% who were assaulted, there is a great deal to be done in raising confidence that it will make a difference. The Government is committed to an extra 13,000 uniformed police officers patrolling communities and shopping areas; it is our hope that this will help boost confidence in the system and put the police more in touch with retail crime.

10% of all respondents suggested other improvements, which included: signs in stores, ensuring young workers have full support, prosecute offenders, protective screens around tills, giving staff time to recover from an incident, no lone working, and not rewarding customers for being abusive.

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

"Homophobic comments, threats to hurt me because I refused a sale, mocking me when asked for ID. I was once held up at knifepoint. Often told to f**k off."

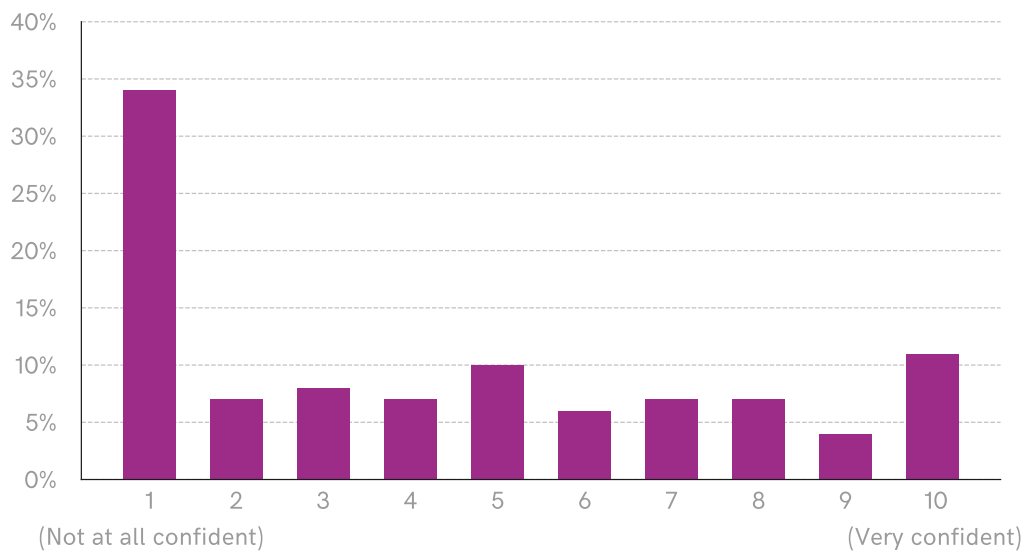
Confidence in the System

The reporting of incidents remains steady at just over half (52%), which shows there is more work to be done to encourage staff to tell their employers when they have been abused, threatened or assaulted. Worryingly, 13% of those who have been assaulted did not report it. So Usdaw will continue to promote the 'report it to sort it' message to our members and seek similar awareness campaigns from employers.

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 a reduction in the negative scoring, but it is still somewhat negative.

Over one-third of all respondents reported a total lack of confidence in their employer, which is three times as many as those who have full confidence. The average score is 4.3 out of 10, with 66% scoring 5 and under.

The Impact of Threats and Abuse



Conclusions

Usdaw's 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 doubled since the pandemic and risen significantly over the last year.

Employers are providing more body cameras, improved CCTV, and panic alarms as part of their suite of preventative risk-control measures. To help reduce the significant under-reporting of incidents, some employers have introduced electronic reporting systems to make it easier to report incidents. These measures are no silver bullet, and employers must do more to support staff by ensuring they are afforded the time to report incidents, they are provided with further support after the incident, and that they report it 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 last Government launched Project Pegasus to tackle organised crime but, while we recognise the need for intelligent policing, there was no commitment to giving the police the resources needed to ensure high streets and shopping areas were regularly patrolled by uniformed officers or that incidents would receive a police response. So we welcome the new Government's pledge to increase neighbourhood police officers by 13,000 as part of its community policing guarantee, and funding to tackle the organised criminals responsible for the increase in shoplifting.

In the coming year, the focus of Usdaw's Freedom From Fear campaign will shift from political solutions to promoting health and safety measures with employers. The industry is already spending £1.8 billion on tackling retail crime, which is a huge drain on businesses, and obviously results in higher prices for customers. Usdaw wants to see the burden of crime on business, staff and customers reduced, and we will work with employers to ensure that they take full advantage of the legislative gains we won together.

The purpose of a protection of workers law is for it to be a preventative measure, and that can only be achieved by promoting the law in workplaces and ensuring that it is clear that prosecutions will be pursued. So we want to see signs in stores promoting respect, simpler reporting systems for staff and greater co-ordination with the police, with the expectation they will be targeting patrols to retail settings and prosecuting retail crimes.

The retail industry was largely left to fend for itself in the midst of a crime epidemic; that is no longer the case as we see new legislation and additional resources for the police coming through. Usdaw will work with employers to help ensure that it provides the respect our members deserve.

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

"Threatened and attempted assault for note checking. Been asked out, he refused to take it I already have a partner. Pushed me against the wall."

Results by Regions and Nations



UK-wide (sample of 9,481)

Abused 77%
Threatened 53%
Assaulted 10%

Comparison with national average:

Above - Below - Equal to

North East
(338)

Abused 83%
Threatened 62%
Assaulted 10%

Scotland
(1011)

Abused 70%
Threatened 45%
Assaulted 8%



Top 5 Regions with the Highest Number of Incidents:

Abuse	Threats	Assaults
=1st London 83%	1st London 68%	1st London 17%
=1st North East 83%	2nd North East 62%	2nd South East 12%
=3rd South East 82%	3rd West Midlands 60%	=3rd East of England 11%
=3rd West Midlands 82%	4th East Midlands 57%	=3rd West Midlands 11%
=5th East Midlands 80%	=5th South East 56%	=5th North East 10%
=5th Northern Ireland 80%	=5th Yorks & Humber 56%	=5th Yorks & Humber 10%

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

"Daily personal insults. Swearing because I can't sell them alcohol because they're drunk. One squared up to me and threatened me with physical violence."



FROM VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

USDAW'S

Freedom
From
Fear

PROTECT WORKERS



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 2025
Stock photography, posed by a model



www.usdaw.org.uk

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#FreedomFromFear

Ussdaw Union

