

# Preventing Violence Against Staff

## A Guide for Retailers

### The definition of violence

*While many may apply more stringent definitions, the Health and Safety Executive's working definition of violence is broad ranging. It is 'Any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of the course of his or her employment.'*

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### You can help prevent violence at your premises

This page provides information about crimes committed against retailers. It offers practical advice about what you can do as a retailer to deter and prevent violent, threatening or abusive behaviour in your shop. The page offers ideas and options which can of course be discussed in more detail with your local crime prevention officer.

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### What is the scale of the problem?

#### Recorded Crimes

Home Office crime statistics do not separately identify offences of violence directed at retail staff or committed at retail premises.

The Criminal Statistics for England and Wales do however show that violent crimes make up only 6% of all crimes recorded by the police. Of these, robberies account for 19%.

#### Surveys

Retailers' own figures on the scale of the problem are generally less reliable than those for property crime. Evidence from internal surveys shows that even where victims face physical violence, between 20 and 30% of incidents are not reported to management and/or head offices.

The 1994 Commercial Victimization Survey conducted by the Home Office, showed that 1 in 5 retail premises were affected by violent crime in 1993. This was most commonly non-injury assaults and threats to staff.

The British Retail Consortium's (BRC) annual survey showed that 12,055 staff were physically attacked in 1993-94, 90,241 staff were threatened with violence, and 209,645 were verbally abused (these figures include the victims of robbery). These figures almost certainly underestimate true risks but do represent a welcome fall on similar data for 1992-93.

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## **The main types of violence in retail premises**

Retail staff are at risk in two ways. The goods and cash held at retail premises puts them at risk from criminals who will use violence to steal. And contact with all sections of the public puts them at risk from people who become violent when they are angry.

Incidents usually fall into one of four main categories: theft; troublemakers; angry customers and drunk, drugged or disturbed customers.

### **Theft**

- Robbery – when others use force – or the threat of force against retail staff – to steal. This problem is dealt with in an earlier guide in this series ‘Preventing Robbery’.
- Confronting or trying to detain customers who steal can frequently result in violence (such incidents will not be classed as robbery because the victim was not subjected to violence at the time of the theft, but afterwards). In the larger stores these incidents are dealt with by uniformed guards or a store detective, which puts them more at risk.
- Dealing with suspicious payment cards can sometimes lead to violence if staff are required to retain the suspect card (especially when the card is being ‘overused’ by the correct user as opposed to actually ‘stolen’).

Although rarely, shop staff who have helped in preventing or detecting crime are sometimes the victim of reprisal attacks later, and not necessarily whilst at work. And they can also face threats of violence intended as a coercion to collude in crime – for example staff might be intimidated into turning a blind eye to (or assisting with) customer theft, under-ringing transactions on the till or not checking payment cards correctly.

### **Troublemakers**

In some cases youngsters – often in groups – can deliberately create conflict, for example by causing a disturbance to hide the fact that they are trying to steal goods.

Youths innocently playing for long periods on demonstration video games may cause staff to feel uneasy. So too may a large group of young people who accompany a single purchase of goods.

### **Angry Customers**

Disputes with customers over goods and services can sometimes lead to violence.

Complaints and requests for refunds are notable ‘flash point’. Genuine customers can get angry if they cannot immediately get what they want, but the situation is often made more sensitive because many demands for refunds are known to be fraudulent.

### **Drunk, drugged or disturbed customers**

Retail staff face possibility of violence when dealing with mentally disturbed people, or those under the influence of drink or drugs.

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## **What can you do about it?**

Preventive strategies need to be based on a sound understanding of what 'triggers' attacks. This requires close consultation with staff who face the risk of violence or have been victims. With larger businesses, discussion groups with staff victims can provide useful guidance on how violent incidents arise.

### **Establish a policy**

Establish a store policy for the prevention of violence and ensure all staff are aware of it. Emphasise that staff safety comes first, the protection of property second. Remember to brief new employees on store policy and procedures.

### **Train your staff**

Training is an important part of managing and preventing the risk of violence to staff and can help to defuse violence.

#### **Customer service - train staff:**

- to greet customers politely;
- to avoid long queues developing so customers don't get frustrated;
- to put emphasis on good customer service, for example helping customers to find the product they are looking for.
- To deal with complaints – training may include 'positive listening', owning the problem and keeping the customer informed of progress. (Staff at all levels need to be trained in dealing with complaints even if their role is only to pass the complaint on.) and

To be on the lookout for body language and signs of anger, tension or stress in customers – such signs are avoiding eye contact, nervousness, adopting a hostile, aggressive stance, etc.

#### **Share experiences:**

Give young or inexperienced staff the chance to benefit from older, experienced staff who have often developed techniques for dealing with difficult customers. This will help to build confidence in advance of an incident arising.

#### **Start and end of the day:**

Opening and closing times are particularly high risk occasions. Never open or close the store alone.

#### **Avoiding triggers:**

Staff should be warned to be aware of the actions that in difficult circumstance can trigger violence. For example, invading personal space by standing too close to people, touching, turning their back, shouting or retaliating to abuse or swearing.

#### **When an incident occurs:**

- If someone is using threatening behaviour, back away – tell staff to get behind the counter to separate themselves from the offender;
- Make sure staff know how to raise the alarm and how to operate security equipment, for example where the panic buttons are located;
- Staff should be assured that they are not expected 'to have a go' but to put personal safety first;
- Staff should not resist or follow violent offenders;
- Ask staff to remember as much information as possible about the offender so that

when police are called an accurate description can be given and

- Ask staff to remain calm and non-confrontational to minimise risks.
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### **Store design and layout**

Store design is usually intended to create a welcoming and stress-free environment. These aims will also tend to prevent violence. Particular attention needs to be given to queue management and good lighting. The colour scheme in furnishings and décor and the volume and type of background music can help reduce aggressive behaviour.

There is a range of ways in which store layout can contribute to the safety of staff.

For example:

- counters can be constructed to provide areas of comparative safety through the use of raised flooring, and wide surfaces to separate the public from the staff;
- Lines of sight can be kept free by keeping shelving units/goods/screens at a low height so that staff can keep each other in view, and see if an incident is developing;
- The view into the shop from the street can be maximised to increase the public's view – don't cover windows with posters, etc at eye level;
- It may be possible to provide access to a secure location which staff can use in an emergency and
- The environment around the store can be improved by lighting, etc to reduce the risks to staff as they are entering or leaving.

### **Remember...**

Most people assume that a threat of violence is less damaging to the victim than actual violence. In many instances the fear and anxiety caused by threats or an outburst of verbal abuse can cause extreme emotional distress. Conversely, actual violence against more hardened staff members may result in less serious consequences. The best judge of the seriousness of any incident is the victim.

### **Supporting victims**

Staff who have been subjected to any form of violence need to receive the support of their employer. The need for sensitive handling, and appropriate support for victims – applies in all incidents of violence. It is often not just the injured person who is affected: staff not directly involved, or not even at work that day, may suffer the psychological effects. Managers should be aware of professional counselling which is available, and local victim support schemes.

### **Employer's duties**

Employers in the retail sector are under an obligation to protect their staff against foreseeable risks (under section 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work Act, 1974).

### **Monitoring the risk**

The recording of incidents – as well as assisting with detections – will enable retailers to develop sound preventive strategies based on experience. It is important to actively encourage staff to report all incidents, in addition to providing a simple, accessible reporting mechanism.

## **Deploying your staff**

Generally, the chances of a member of staff being assaulted are reduced by the presence of other staff.

Problems, too, can be reduced if the appropriate staff are on hand at the times of greatest risk. It will help if young, inexperienced or otherwise vulnerable staff are not the only ones on duty at these times. A mix of age and sex among staff on duty builds confidence and is mutually supportive.

Employing staff with strong links in the community enables them to use their local knowledge to identify, and if necessary, deal with troublemakers.

## **Working with others**

### **Business Watch**

Groups of retailers can work together to reduce the fear of violence. Typical schemes are:

- A ring round system – which can be set up amongst a group of local retailers;
- A pager system – shared by local retailers (these can be rented at low cost) and
- A radio link – this can also provide warnings about the approach of known troublemakers, can be used to summon assistance and can have access to the local police.

### **Summoning help**

If a situation seems likely to result in violence you need to summon help quickly. Commercial panic alarms can be used to summon police assistance. Having enough phone extensions to always be close to one can be helpful. (It's no good saying 'I'm going to phone the police' if your only phone is on the other side of the room.) Stores with a number of staff need to have a system (like a bell in the staff room or Tannoy message code) to unobtrusively summon extra staff.

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## **Bringing in outside help**

The presence of uniformed guards can help prevent violence, and can provide specialist trained support in managing an incident. You need to determine when or where guards can be used to best effect.

Although the cost of guards may be too high for some small retailers, there may be opportunities to share the costs with others. Talk to the crime prevention officer at your local police station.

The standards of training and recruitment of guards can vary, but there are now some indicators of the quality of service offered by firms. Look for firms who meet British Standard 7499 for manned guarding. Ask about the calibre of their employees – they may have the appropriate National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). Consider whether such staff, and store detectives too, should be trained in control and restraint techniques.

As with any 'overt' defence the presence of guards may intimidate shoppers, and in some cases guards can become the target of taunts and abuse. Some shopping centres have resolved these problems by dressing guards in more 'civilian' wear rather than the usual 'militaristic' uniform.

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## **Keeping watch**

- Closed Circuit Television

The presence of CCTV may deter acts of 'premeditated' violence such as deliberate 'trouble making', and if they are of sufficient quality and stamped with the time and date it's more likely that offenders will be caught and prosecuted. CCTV needs to be obvious to have a deterrent effect, and display signs are good for this.

- 35mm photographic equipment

Installed along with CCTV, this equipment can provide a higher quality of evidence than normally available through CCTV alone.

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## **Thinking ahead about high risk situations**

- Preventing shoptheft before it occurs

Some retailers operate a policy whereby customers are approached immediately and offered help if they appear to have concealed an item without intending to purchase it, or are demonstrating behaviour typical of shop thieves (looking round at the staff, and taking little notice of products). This can generally prevent the theft without the conflict associated with making an arrest.

- Dealing with credit card fraud

Staff need to be trained in the correct procedures for dealing with suspected credit card fraud, and for avoiding confrontation when retaining cards. It can help if they have access to a phone that is out of earshot of the customer. However, in some retail operations it may be greater security risk for staff to leave the till area than to use a phone at the till.

- Responding to alarm call outs

Keyholders attending premises out of hours in response to alarm activations are at risk of violence, and need to be trained in the correct procedure – which is generally never to enter the premises alone.

- Making arrests

Managers need to have a clear policy, and make sure their staff are trained, and have the ability to carry it out. Staff can be trained to tackle thieves in the least confrontational way (for example, emotive words like 'theft' can often be avoided). And, again, staff need to be trained not to put themselves at risk by chasing a suspect into the street, particularly into deserted or unsafe areas. See forthcoming leaflets in the series 'Preventing Customer Theft – a guide to retailers'.

- Dealing with troublemakers

Addressing the problems caused by local troublemakers, especially gangs, is usually best done in partnership with other retailers, local authorities, the police and other local community groups. An aggressive response to violence and intimidation will only make the situation worse. Staff need to be trained not to respond in this way.

- Working away from the store

Any staff who leave the store to visit customers (for example, management staff who do home visits to resolve complaints; engineers and delivery staff) need training to keep safe. They need to keep strict appointments regime, ensure the store knows who they are expecting to visit, avoid dangerous situations, minimise the amount of

cash and valuables kept with them and, where appropriate, have a means of keeping in regular contact with base.

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For a copy of Your Practical Guide to Crime Prevention contact the Crime Reduction Officer at your local police station or write to:

Crime Prevention Publicity  
Home Office  
Room 155  
50 Queen Anne's Gate  
London SW1H 9AT