

AVOIDING ABUSE

Abuse towards retail workers is on the up. GCS's **Jeremy Davies** speaks to Garden Centre Retail about how stores can help to protect their staff

Violence and abuse against retail workers is rising year on year. That's just one of the disconcerting headlines from the British Retail Consortium's latest annual Crime Survey. In 2019/20, there were 455 incidents reported every day, a 7% spike from the previous year.

The BRC is calling on the government to better protect retail workers by passing legislation that would make assaulting or abusing a retail worker a specific offence, along with introducing tougher sentences. The trade body, which represents more than 5,000 businesses, argues this could act as a deterrent and increase visibility of incidents in order for appropriate police resources to be allocated and an adequate response provided.

Scotland's government has already taken action, with the new Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) Act 2021 coming into force in August which gives retail workers in Scotland better protection than those in other parts of Britain. Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the BRC, says: "We need legislation in England and Wales to protect our hard-working retail colleagues. It

makes no sense nor is it remotely fair that people who work in retail are better protected in Dundee than they are in Doncaster."

So, how big a problem is abusive behaviour towards those working in the retail sector? What are the reasons behind the rise in reports? And what can stores do to help protect their staff?

In the last year, an overwhelming majority (92%) of retail staff experienced verbal abuse, according to a recent survey by trade union Usdaw. An astonishing 70% reported being threatened by a customer and around a sixth (14%) said they had been physically assaulted. Despite this, one in five victims did not report an incident to their employer. The BRC's Crime Survey revealed just over half (54%) of incidents are reported to the police, sparking the association to call for a single online reporting tool to help bolster this figure.

Seven in 10 retailers now put violence and abuse against staff as the biggest



issue, according to the BRC's Crime Survey, with the two most common causes – or 'flashpoints' – being challenging shoplifters or asking a customer for their ID when purchasing age-restricted items. A third flashpoint was added over the last 18 months, with COVID-19 restrictions coming into effect and being enforced by retailers. Incidents have soared over the last year as a result, says Jeremy Davies of national security company GCS.

"Before the restrictions were lifted, there were longer queues to get into garden centres where the number of those allowed inside the store was limited. So, customers were getting frustrated waiting," explains Jeremy. "It created more abuse against centre staff, as they were seen as a representative of the business."

And where high street stores were closed during the various lockdowns, garden centres – which took on 'essential' status and were able to remain open – had to bear the brunt. Those who would typically visit high street stores headed to garden centres instead and soon realised they were perhaps easier targets for theft.

"High street retailers have security measures in place already: high quality CCTV, security tagging systems, and their staff would have received some form of anti-conflict training on how to deal with an irate shoplifter or a disgruntled



shopper. So, the high street is more hardened to that sort of situation. A garden centre, on the other hand, is a softer environment and it's unlikely staff would have been through loss prevention or anti-conflict training.

"So, we're now seeing more aggressive behaviour and verbal abuse towards garden centre staff, which is not helped by customers being able to wear face masks; they're anonymous, so whether they're criminals or genuine customers, it seems more acceptable for them to behave badly and be more confrontational."

Restrictions might have been lifted, but some stores have kept COVID-19 measures in place, and the usual

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flashpoints of confronting shoplifters and asking for proof of age remain. A record £1.2bn was invested in safety measures such as body-worn cameras, more security personnel and panic alarms, the BRC's Crime Survey reported. "Abuse towards staff is generally quite difficult to solve; it's not as straightforward as, say, trying to reduce customer theft," says Jeremy.

"It's sometimes a consequence of having a lower level of security. It's about trying to make the environment more secure generally so that thieves or other criminals don't come to the garden centre because it's not an easy target. By making it tougher to steal, there should be less contact with criminals and fewer attacks on staff."

One potential deterrent are CCTV Customer Awareness Monitors, which allow customers to see themselves on a screen as they walk into the store and at other high-risk areas around the garden centre, such as the tills or a customer service desk. "The customer can immediately see that they are being recorded and it makes the environment more secure.

"They register that their behaviour is being recorded, and if they behave badly or are abusive, the footage can be reviewed and used by management. It could lead to the individual being banned from the store, so if they come to the store



in future, it's trespassing, and the police can intervene."

Jeremy says preventative measures such as CCTV Customer Awareness Monitors can help to avert the flashpoint rather than CCTV being used simply as a way to review footage once a crime has taken place; but he advises against garden centres displaying all of their cameras on one monitor. "Criminals can then see which parts of the store are not covered by CCTV. It's a really bad practice and is far less impactful than customer awareness monitors which only shows one image."

Better customer service and engagement can also prove useful in avoiding conflict. "Improving customer service can help to reduce flashpoints. For instance, if someone is returning an

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item, a member of staff should handle that process in a polite manner and engage with the customer, more than it simply being transactional. If a customer being verbally or physically abusive, the member of staff needs to back away and call for assistance and try to defuse the situation rather than being aggressive back."

When this type of situation arises, panic buttons at the tills are an effective reactive measure. "The panic button is there to draw attention and call members of staff to support that individual. Take a holistic approach – putting security and safety on the business agenda is a best practice.

Garden centre owners or managers should be asking themselves: How are we dealing with security and the safety of our staff? Are we putting our staff at risk? For example, when removing cash from the tills, some stores may only send one individual to collect it, but sending two individuals might dissuade theft, removing a flashpoint. It's about being preventative as well as reactive or responsive."

Businesses should have a procedure in place for reporting abuse to the senior member of management and consider ways to mitigate risk, says Jeremy. "Garden centres are growing their ranges of high value alcoholic drinks, for instance, which can put more staff at risk, so they should consider how they are going to mitigate this. This could be with age-related signage or with a short training session on asking for ID and how best to handle situations which can arise."

Whilst the legislation proposed by the BRC may help to deter abuse towards retail workers, there are measures which can be taken by stores to avoid flashpoints and perhaps help combat the biggest issue faced by retailers today. ▀

ABOUT

Established in 2013, the team at GCS focus on helping Garden Centres to tackle customer theft and reduce shrinkage. GCS offer loss prevention training, security tagging systems and CCTV. Their clients include most of the biggest names in the industry. GCS is also the provider of the HTA's Security Advice Line. GCS can be contacted at 01892 300 878 or via its website. www.gcsgb.com