



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Violence and abuse towards retail workers](#), HC 1147

Wednesday 14 April 2021

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Members present: Yvette Cooper (Chair); Ruth Edwards; Laura Farris; Simon Fell; Andrew Gwynne; Dame Diana Johnson; Tim Loughton; Stuart C McDonald.

Questions 1 - 46

Witnesses

I: Joanne Cairns, Head of Research and Economics, USDAW; and James Lowman, Chief Executive, Association of Convenience Stores.

II: Iona Blake, Security and Incident Manager, Boots UK; Paul Gerrard, Campaigns and Public Affairs Director, The Co-op; and Tom Ironside, Director, Business and Regulation, British Retail Consortium.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[USDAW \(VTR0016\)](#)

[ACS \(VTR0021\)](#)

[BOOTS \(VTR0026\)](#)

[CO-OP \(VTR0027\)](#)

[BRC \(VTR0015\)](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Joanne Cairns and James Lowman.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to this evidence session of the Home Affairs Select Committee as part of our inquiry into violence and abuse against retail workers. I welcome our witnesses today to give evidence to us.

This is our first evidence session in this inquiry. We have launched this inquiry because we have been deeply concerned about the information we have seen about violence and abuse against shop workers and retail workers across the country, and evidence of it increasing. We want today to explore both the nature of the problem and some of the reasons behind it, and what action needs to be taken. Clearly, nobody should have to feel unsafe or like they might face violence or abuse in the workplace.

We are very grateful to our witnesses giving evidence to us this morning. In our first panel, we have Joanne Cairns from the USDAW trade union, which represents shop workers and distribution workers, and James Lowman, the chief executive of the Association of Convenience Stores. Welcome to you.

Can I begin by asking you about the nature of the problem? We will come on to some of the things that need to be done to address it. Can you give us your brief assessment of the nature of the problem with the violence and abuse that your members have faced, and what patterns you are seeing at the moment? Can I begin with Joanne Cairns?

Joanne Cairns: I thank the Committee for the invitation to give evidence today and for holding this very important inquiry.

We represent 400,000 workers, and the vast majority of those members work in retail. Clearly, the issue of violence and abuse against shop workers is a major concern for us and something we have been campaigning on for many years. We launched our Freedom From Fear campaign back in 2002, which aims to draw attention to the issue and to make progress politically and industrially to protect our members.

The issue of violence and abuse has been endemic for some time and it has worsened since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis. For our latest survey, which we released last month, we surveyed 2,729 retail workers during 2020. We found that 88% of those members had experienced verbal abuse in the past year, 60% had been threatened and 9% had been physically assaulted.

As I say, it is something that has been a growing issue for some time. We survey our members on this every year, and between 2017 and 2019, the proportion of retail workers experiencing abuse went from just over half to more than two thirds, so it was already growing before the pandemic and it has worsened since. We have found that the proportion of incidents of abuse linked to Covid measures is extremely high: 85% of



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incidents of abuse were related to Covid measures, such as queueing to get into stores, enforcing social distancing and requirements to wear face coverings. We are in this horrendous situation where retail workers are trying to keep customers safe and trying to keep themselves safe and, sadly, they are experiencing an increase in abuse because of that. It is clearly a matter of concern for us.

Q2 Chair: Thank you. Clearly you are working, effectively, on the frontline of handling the Covid crisis and facing abuse as a result. That is a very serious concern. James Lowman, can I ask you the same question?

James Lowman: I echo Joanne's comments about how grateful we are that this inquiry is taking place at all, and to have the opportunity to take part in this way.

There are 47,000 convenience stores in the UK, and over the past year there have been 40,000 violent incidents in those stores. There have been over 1 million incidents of abuse and 40,000 violent incidents in those stores, and over 10,000 involving a weapon. These are very serious incidents, violently perpetrated in those stores.

The question we keep coming back to with our members is: what were the triggers for those incidents? It has progressed over the years. Going back, certainly, the biggest trigger for abuse was refusal of an age-related sale to someone who was too young to buy that age-restricted product. In recent years, the No. 1 reason has very clearly become theft: retailers and colleagues intervening to try to prevent theft and challenging thieves, and sometimes just a level of violence and abuse that comes with the act of theft. The reason for that is that many of the people committing those crimes have problems with addiction. Many of them are in a heightened state when they are in the store, and many of them are prepared to escalate very quickly to acts of violence and abuse against shop workers.

In the past year, as Joanne says, Covid-related issues in-store have become another trigger for violence and abuse. Joanne has explained many of those things. It is about queuing, maintaining social distancing and wearing face coverings, which became a particular flashpoint probably a couple of months ago, as more retailers rightly started to be less tolerant of those who were not complying. Those reasons have become more of a trigger for violence in-store, but still the No. 1 reason is theft and prevention of theft in-store.

This is a massive operational issue for members. It is a massive financial issue. In every transaction in a convenience store, 5p of every basket of goods that you buy is accounted for by the cost of crime. That is the cost analysis, but it is much more than that. It is a personal issue and it is a safety issue for the individuals running and working in convenience stores. We have to try to break that cycle.

Q3 Chair: You talked about the drivers around theft having increased. Why



do you think that has happened?

James Lowman: I think that we have seen a move from maybe 10 to 20 years ago, when more theft was opportunistic; now, we are at a point where it is more organised and based around repeat offenders targeting stores, sometimes stealing to order and usually stealing items that they know they can resell very quickly. This is not, in the vast majority of cases, people stealing for personal need and household need. It is people stealing to resell products, for a variety of reasons, by a distance the most common of which is funding a drug or alcohol habit.

Q4 **Chair:** It is individuals rather than driven by organised crime.

James Lowman: I think there is a blurred line between those two things. Our stores are very locally based. If you think about the local shop, our heartland is villages, housing estates, secondary areas. We do not get a huge amount of travelling crime—people coming in to target stores from outside. It does happen, but we do not get a huge amount of that. We do get local problem individuals, problem families, and particularly groups with addiction problems targeting stores at a local level. There is a deliberate process, but I think that it is not what we would normally call organised crime.

Q5 **Chair:** Joanne, you obviously have members in very different kinds of retail settings. What do you see as the different patterns in different kinds of retail settings?

Joanne Cairns: We have members working in large supermarkets; we also have members working in small convenience stores. One of the issues that they often face is that they are sometimes working alone or with only one or two people in a store, and they work unsocial hours as well, because they tend to open late. There is heightened risk in those situations, whereas larger supermarkets tend to be more likely to have trained security staff in place so there is a little bit of added protection there.

We know that a number of employers—for example, the Co-op—have been doing a lot of work. I know that you will be hearing from them later, but they have been doing a lot of work to protect those workers in convenience stores with measures such as body cameras. We are doing a lot of work with employers to keep those members safe.

Q6 **Chair:** Can you give us an example of the kinds of incidents that your members might face and the impact that that has on shop workers—both those who experience the violence or abuse directly, and other people in the store?

Joanne Cairns: I have some examples of quotes from members from our recent survey. One member said: "I asked a customer to join the back of a queue. I was verbally abused. She then returned to the store with a knife and said she was going to cut me up." Others said: "I've been physically pushed, shoved, trolley rammed during panic buying."



"I've been screamed at when I told a customer we didn't have an item in stock, had members of the public cough on me as I was stacking shelves." "I had somebody pull my mask off and call me a sheep." "My car was keyed by a customer who was barred from the shop." "Since the pandemic I've had abuse nearly every day, even coughed on twice." Those are just some of the comments that we have had from members, and these sorts of things are happening all the time.

On the point that you make about the impact that it has on others, it is not even just experiencing the incident; it is the anxiety of knowing that the next incident could be just around the corner. Going into work every day not knowing what could happen has a massive impact on people in their daily life.

Q7 Chair: James Lowman, can you add anything to that in terms of examples of the kinds of incidents and the impact that they have? I noted from some of the evidence that we have seen that there has also been an increase in racist abuse as part of some of the incidents and crimes.

James Lowman: To add to what Joanne has said, yes, there is some hate-motivated crime that takes place in our member stores. One example we hear quite a lot is people being threatened with syringes as the weapon that is used or threatened to be used.

When I reflect on some of this, the fantastic thing about convenience stores that trade in the community is that the people who work in them usually live in those communities as well. Half the people who work in convenience stores walk or cycle to work, so that is fantastic. That flips around to being horrendous and having a huge personal impact because you are living alongside the people who are perpetrating these acts. The separation between a work life and a home life—not that it would be any easier if you could separate your work life and your home life—is made even worse by the fact that colleagues in stores are living as well as working in those communities, so it has a personal impact on them and on their families.

On the desire of people to work in convenience stores, the feedback that we get from our colleagues is extremely positive. We offer local, secure, flexible jobs—truly flexible, rather than as a euphemism for one-way flexibility. We offer really good local jobs to a whole range of people, but there is one mitigating factor for many people and their families. They say, "I am seeing incidents and hearing about incidents in-store. I am worried about your safety," and people might look for other employment. If you work in a convenience store, you are still more likely not to experience these things on a weekly or monthly basis. None the less, I understand why people would be reluctant to expose themselves and their loved ones to these sorts of incidents. It certainly goes beyond financial impact. It goes beyond personal physical impact. It has a very severe and ingrained mental impact.

Chair: Thank you. I am so sorry to your members who have had to



endure this completely unacceptable abuse and threats and violence.

Q8 Andrew Gwynne: I echo the Chair's words. It is completely unacceptable that anybody should have to face violence in the workplace in the way that so many shop workers do.

James Lowman, your organisation, the Association of Convenience Stores, represents that particular sector, and it covers small businesses as well as some of the larger chains. What particular problems do workers in smaller shops experience?

James Lowman: Joanne mentioned that one of the challenges we have is that, by their nature, fewer people work in convenience stores. We are small stores, so typically a couple of people work in a store—sometimes more, but it is usually a couple of people working in a store, often in more isolated areas. I am talking about not just rural stores, but more isolated urban areas—estates on the edge of towns and so on. One of the effects that has is that police response can be slower, police presence can be lower day to day, and in some cases those areas have broader underlying social problems that lead to a higher prevalence of crime and a higher risk in those stores.

I think it is about location and the nature of being a small store, which, as Joanne said, generally open longer hours. Most convenience stores open at about 6 am or 7 am and close at about 10 pm or 11 pm. Particularly in the winter when it is dark, we are often the only light—the only thing in that location—so that can attract some of those problems.

On the particular issues we face, there is, if you like, that undercurrent of daily abuse and intimidation, which is particularly powerful and impactful for those colleagues because, as I say, they live very close to the store themselves.

Q9 Andrew Gwynne: What kind of support does ACS give to shopkeepers in the particular group that you have just described—the small retail offer on the edge of an estate?

James Lowman: We provide a lot of advice on common-sense, simple crime prevention. Some of the simplest advice is greeting everybody who comes into the store so you are signalling to the customer that you have recognised that they are there, which makes the more opportunistic thief less likely to offend.

There is a lot of advice around physical security. That can be very sophisticated CCTV systems, or other physical security—body cameras, as I mentioned; monitoring systems; and headsets for colleagues to be able to communicate with one another and maybe with a central point that is gathering information. There are some simpler things as well, such as markings on the wall so you can judge the height of someone who leaves the premises in making a police report. I should mention other things about product security and cash security as well. There is a lot of advice in that area.



The other side is about local partnership and engagement with the police. Some of the best things, which are very effective, are in trying to engage with neighbourhood policing to say, “We see you here every Thursday night. If you could be here every Wednesday night, that is when we get more of our problems,” because there might be particular local dynamics that mean that that is when issues might tend to present. There are very practical things in trying to use that resource as much as possible. We are concerned to see that there is adequate neighbourhood policing resource, because if the police are not there and police community support officers are not there, then those partnerships ultimately cannot achieve anything.

So we give advice on things in the store, but also on things outside the store and building those partnerships, including with other businesses. There are many things that you can work together on, such CCTV for a public space that might be helpful, or initiatives around the built environment locally that might help to design out some of these problems. Partnership working outside the store is just as important as those physical measures and the training in the store.

Q10 Andrew Gwynne: Joanne Cairns from USDAW, we know that the retail sector workforce is predominantly female and disproportionately from minority groups. What can you tell the Committee about how violence and abuse has impacted the different demographics of your membership?

Joanne Cairns: Those points are very valid, because 58% of the retail workforce are women, as you pointed out, so anything that affects retail workers will disproportionately impact women. There is also a large number of black and minority ethnic workers in retail.

We have found that, on top of the fact that women are disproportionately represented in retail, they are also more likely to face abuse at work than their male colleagues. Perhaps that is partly because they are more likely to be in frontline roles—on the checkout, for example—where there can be confrontations over age-related sales and things like that. In our 2019 survey, we found that 70% of female workers faced abuse from customers, compared with 62% of their male colleagues. Clearly it is unacceptable for anybody to face that level of abuse, but there does seem to be a gendered aspect to it.

There is also a significant number of young workers in the retail sector. Young workers are more likely to work those unsociable shifts—Friday and Saturday nights—when incidents of abuse, threats and violence are most common, so there is an impact there as well. As James mentioned, the figures from the ACS report show that 20% of incidents of verbal abuse were hate motivated, related to prejudice towards race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity. There is certainly an equality impact.

Q11 Dame Diana Johnson: Joanne, I find the statistics in your March survey, which you have just gone through, shocking. I also note what



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James said about the increase of theft and abuse over the last few years. I want to concentrate on what has happened over the past 12 months with Covid. I wonder if you could say something about the nature and the incidence of violence and abuse towards retail workers. Obviously, we have had over 12 months of this now. How has that changed over time? Have there been things that have stopped happening? Will you also say something about the arrangements from this week, when, obviously, all non-essential shops have opened? Has it changed again? If you could give a bit of an explanation about the last 12 months, that would be helpful.

Joanne Cairns: The initial trigger point for violence and abuse was certainly, at the start of the pandemic, around panic buying. There was huge pressure on retail workers because there was such unprecedented demand and shops were extremely busy. At the same time, they were trying to implement these brand-new social distancing measures, which people had not yet become accustomed to, so it was an extremely difficult time for shop workers. At that time, one in six of our members reported that they were facing abuse on a daily basis. The incidents of abuse doubled from their usual levels in those first couple of months of the pandemic, so there was certainly a peak then.

There have clearly been ongoing issues as new measures have come into place—for example, as we mentioned, face coverings. Anecdotally, one thing that we have found from members is that every time restrictions are lifted, even if they are not related directly to retail—even if it is things like the pubs reopening—it has an impact on customers' behaviour in-store because they feel more relaxed and they become less minded to follow the social distancing rules. That potentially creates another confrontation, where the retail worker has to remind them to keep to the two-metre distance, follow the one-way system and get in a longer queue than they might want to.

We are very mindful that, every time we come out of restrictions—obviously we want to come out of restrictions; we want to get things back to normal—it does have an impact on retail. We very much welcome the reopening of non-food retail this week, because our members want to get back to work and they are very concerned about their incomes and their job security, but they are also very concerned about their safety. They are very keen to make sure that customers are safe as well.

We have been raising awareness with the Shop Kind initiative. We are working with retailers to put out to the public the message, “When you go back to the shops, as the non-essential retail shops reopen, please treat shop workers with respect and continue to follow the rules.”

Q12 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Just before I ask James the same question, in terms of the people who are now engaging in this abuse and this level of violence against shop workers, is it more widespread? You talked about how it may be repeat offenders coming in. Is it now more general across the population that people feel able to speak in this way to shop workers?



Joanne Cairns: I think that it is important to say that the majority of people do treat shop workers with respect and do appreciate the efforts that retail workers have been making, particularly during the pandemic. I think that, on the whole, it has given people a new appreciation for shop workers, but there is always that minority. It does seem that that minority has become emboldened, and clearly it is more widespread; the evidence shows that it is. Because of the under-reporting and the lack of data, it is difficult to know exactly who is committing these incidents. We certainly think that it is more widespread, but it is important to note that it is still a minority.

Q13 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Thank you. James, would you like to respond to my questions?

James Lowman: I echo everything that Joanne has said, particularly that last point. Most customers have been actively supportive of their local retailers and colleagues during this time, and that is the norm, but I think that those who are minded to cause problems probably do feel emboldened to do that. Those who are trying to steal from stores may use some of the Covid restrictions as a helpful cover for doing that. For example, they are wearing face coverings, thus they are harder to identify. I think that that has been a factor.

There are two points that I would make. One is that every time rules change, someone has to implement those, and someone has to communicate those policies, face coverings being the most obvious example. Our message to our members is to very clearly communicate the rules—that is our legal responsibility: to remind customers and communicate that clearly—but not to challenge. We have enough trigger points in-store; we do not want this to be another one.

Most customers are actively and supportively complying with that, but, sadly, different customers have different interpretations or different views and confront one another about their compliance with social distancing and face coverings and so on. We have found that our members and colleagues are spending a lot of their time refereeing and trying to handle challenges between customers. That is probably the thing that is new in Covid. We generally have not seen much of that before, but we have seen much more of that over the past year.

That is why the Shop Kind campaign, which Joanne mentioned and which launches next week, is so important and so well timed. As we come out of this and more parts of the economy open up, which is fantastic, it becomes even more important that we kick off with the right standards and with people norming to the right behaviours around supporting people working not just in shops but in hospitality and other sectors that are now opening up in various forms. There is a very important message from the Shop Kind campaign about treating colleagues in stores with respect and ensuring that crime is reported.

Q14 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I ask you one last thing? You mentioned



that when the rules change there is often confusion and people have different interpretations. Obviously, we are moving into the summer, and the restrictions are lifting each month. Is there anything in particular that you feel would be helpful to your members in terms of being very clear about what the rules are and what is still expected of people when they shop?

James Lowman: The one word is clarity. We implemented social distancing measures in hours. It was incredibly quick, the way that stores responded back around this time last year, 13 months ago, but we need clarity, because customers themselves will have different interpretations. The more we have that clarity, the better.

There is a review on social distancing taking place now. I think that that should be an objective review to see what are the best ways that we can minimise the chances of the virus spreading in all sorts of environments. We should conduct that review, but coming out of that we need real clarity.

It is very hard to be restricted and then to go back. We have to walk in very clear steps towards a time when, hopefully, we can all interact as we did in 2019, but we have to walk quite carefully to that point; otherwise, if the rules are not clear, it will be retailers and colleagues who are having to try to interpret them and to deal with customers who have a different view.

Q15 **Tim Loughton:** Good morning to our witnesses. I was alarmed to hear the level of violence. I read your report, Mr Lowman, from the Association of Convenience Stores. I want to come on to what we do about it. It is very alarming that 26% of the violent incidents that you report in those surveys include weapons. We are not just talking knives; we are talking axes and hammers and syringes. Somebody who goes around with an axe probably does not just come into one of your stores to buy a sandwich and then get a bit irritated at the checkout. They are there with an intention to cause violence.

To what extent is this people who are violent and premeditated, and to what extent is it people who come into shops and are then aggressive and abusive, ending up in violence towards your staff? Are we seeing an increase in those people, rather than people who are effectively criminals, and it just happens that the shop worker is in the frontline of their violence? Do you want to take that first, Mr Lowman? I am trying to extrapolate what is new and what is increasing.

James Lowman: That is a very good question. There is a group of people who are armed robbers, who sometimes rob convenience stores and other retailers. That is their method and we happen to be the victim at that time. Those crimes and those individuals generally are taken very seriously by the police, for obvious reasons.

The other route to this is the one that I think is often neglected a bit more by the whole system, and that is people who may start off stealing,



may then add more aggression into that behaviour, and might then bring a weapon. They move up, effectively, into armed robbery, but from a point of desperation around theft. That desperation drives them to more extreme violence and criminality. That is very concerning, because there are more people like that, who move in that direction, than there are committed career armed robbers. It seems that we have more of a chance to do something about that by tackling those individuals earlier on that path, when they are stealing from stores and starting to use more abuse, violence and threats. There is an opportunity to influence this issue at that point with that group of people, which I think represents the majority of those people.

Q16 Tim Loughton: Obviously, there is more of an interface between staff and people because of the Covid requirements. Are you saying that, having been challenged and then been abusive, perhaps only verbally initially, because they are refusing to wear a mask or whatever, people are then coming back and scaling up their violence, effectively—that they are still refusing to wear a mask and, rather than just calling the shop assistant whatever, threatening them with a weapon? Is that responsible for much of the increase?

James Lowman: Where abuse is Covid related, it is less likely to be premeditated. We have seen some horrific incidents of violence in stores, but it has been a reaction and an escalation that has been shocking in its speed and severity. The trigger for the path I am talking about is more likely to be acquisitive crime—theft. One of the reasons that that escalates quite quickly is that it is more linked to dependency and addiction; that ramps it up much more quickly. I am concerned about all these incidents, but the one that is probably most concerning and that we have the most chance to influence is where it is theft that ramps up into armed attacks.

Q17 Tim Loughton: Joanne Cairns, you are asking for a specific aggravated offence against shop workers. The Government, having done a study into this back in 2019, have decided that that is probably not what is required, but that we need better enforcement. Albeit 3 million members of the population are involved in working in retail, why should there be a specific aggravated offence, and how would that work, in your view?

Joanne Cairns: We think that it is very important that the Government send a clear message to the public, to the judiciary, to retail staff, and obviously most importantly to offenders, that violence and abuse against shop workers is unacceptable. Clearly, the current legislation is not offering enough protection. We can see that by the scale of the issue. Retail workers, because of the nature of their work, are at increased risk of abuse, threats and violence. When traumatic incidents happen in your workplace, that trauma is heightened because you have to go back to work in the same environment every day. It can also cost people their livelihoods because sometimes they are just too traumatised to go back to work.



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It is important to remember as well that we expect retail workers to enforce the law. They are required to enforce the law around age-related sales. They are currently having to implement Covid restrictions as well, but they are not being given adequate protection. Retail workers can be personally fined and can lose their job if they do not enforce age-restricted sales legislation, so, in turn, we believe that they should be protected by the law. Emergency workers, as you will be aware, are already covered by legislation, and the draft sentencing Bill is looking at increasing the penalties.

There is widespread agreement on this right across the retail sector. It is not just USDAW that is calling for it; employers' associations such as the ACS and the BRC, and many individual employers, are all in agreement, and there is widespread public support for this. Our petition calling for a specific offence to be created got over 104,000 signatures, so there is clearly a strong public appetite for something to be done on this.

Q18 Tim Loughton: What would the law look like? Interestingly, I was recently asked to go to one of the supermarkets where they have had problems with violence, and part of the issue there was getting the police to take it seriously. We know the problems with low-level shoplifting not being pursued as rigorously by the police as some of us might like, so part of this is enforcement and a greater understanding and better response from the police. Mr Lowman just said that where there is serious violence, by and large the police are pretty good at reacting.

Where there is abuse that then kicks off into violence because you have challenged somebody about their age to buy that bottle of gin or whatever and they have become violent, how do we get the police to take that more seriously? How would a specific offence be framed such that you would expect the police to turn up and pursue that person? In fact, the supermarket I spoke to—we have them as a witness later—do not stop anybody; they just have CCTV, and they report it to the police later and hope that it is taken on from there if they can identify the person.

Joanne Cairns: One of the problems is that all too often the level of police response depends on the value of the theft. There is this thing about thefts under £200 not getting a police response, which is an issue. The human impact is not being measured there. Whether you are dealing with a shoplifter who is stealing something worth £10 or a shoplifter who is stealing something worth £500, the impact on you as an individual is just as much.

Part of the reason that we want to have this offence in law is to drag up levels of enforcement—and levels of reporting, because a lot of the time these incidents just are not reported. When we asked our members why they are not reporting, 66% said it was because they do not believe it is a police matter. That is because that is the message that they have been given based on the lack of response and the lack of resources. If there was a specific offence, we expect that that would drag up levels of reporting.



In terms of what that offence would look like, we see the protection of workers Bill that was passed in Scotland in January as the blueprint for similar provisions in Westminster. That creates a specific offence of abusing, threatening or assaulting a retail worker. It also provides for that offence to be aggravated if the retail worker is carrying out their duties relating to age-related sales or other legal duties. We do not see any reason why retail workers in England and Wales should not receive the same protection as their colleagues are receiving in Scotland.

Q19 Laura Farris: Joanne, can I pick up what Tim asked in relation to the proposed new law? Just so that I understand, could you explain to me why it would not be good enough—if indeed that is your view—for an alternative change to be made, such as for an assault against a shop worker to be identified as an aggravating feature when it came to sentencing? That would automatically increase the length of sentence at the point when the judge passed sentence. Could you give me your view on that?

Joanne Cairns: There is already some provision for it to be considered an aggravating factor in sentencing guidelines, but the issue is that it never reaches that point because there is not enough reporting and there are not enough prosecutions. There are far too many incidents that just do not reach the point where the aggravating factor is considered.

We think it should go hand in hand with prevention. We have been working with Crimestoppers Scotland and raising awareness with the public of the fact that this is a specific offence, there are specific sentences and people need to be aware of it. It is very important to show just how serious this is, in exactly the way that the Government have in relation to emergency workers, to recognise the fact that retail workers are key workers, they are doing an essential role in their communities and they need to be respected and protected.

Q20 Laura Farris: I also want to pick up on something you said earlier about the equalities element. You talked about the disproportionate impact on female retail workers. Stepping back from the criminal element and looking at some of the racial abuse that you have identified, could I ask you both a question about the Equality Act and third-party harassment? Are you familiar with the provision in the Equality Act, which is no longer operative, that placed an obligation on employers where repeat offenders either racially abused or made sexist remarks to members of their staff? There was a three-strike rule; after the third occasion, the employer became liable. Is that something that either of you has thought about? Would it be workable in a retail environment?

Joanne, you described how there is an obligation on retail workers to check someone's age. Should there not be a simultaneous obligation on the employer that, if there is a repeat offender who comes in and makes racist remarks, it is their liability if that happens more than once? Is that something either of you has thought about? Do you have any views on that that you could share with the Committee?



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James Lowman: It is an interesting area. Implementing any policies like that for retailers can only be effective in partnership. The greatest opportunity for progress in those areas is, for example, with police and crime commissioners and remedy powers around banning repeat offenders from shops. Certainly, that could be applied to instances of racial abuse and violence as well. I think that there are opportunities to do that. Banning orders are used by retailers. Sometimes they become another trigger for more abuse and violence, so I would caution against seeing that as a simple response. Certainly we would be very open to a discussion about everything we can do to support everyone who works in stores.

In the case of the people running convenience stores, just over a third—nearly 40%—of independent retailers running stores identify as Asian or British Asian. They often run the stores themselves, and unfortunately their families are often the victims of that kind of abuse. Working with police and crime commissioners and local police and other agencies to implement banning orders and target those individuals is something that we encourage anyway, and this could be an interesting angle from which to explore it.

Q21 **Laura Farris:** Am I right in thinking that there is no consistency in how banning orders are applied? Is it the discretion of the individual retailer?

James Lowman: Yes, and there may be policies locally in terms of police and crime commissioner support and so on. It comes down to the retailer to decide. It could be through a very clear policy that all thieves are banned; it could be where there are other incidents and other factors associated with it. But yes, it comes down to an individual retailer's policy and approach to banning orders.

Q22 **Laura Farris:** Joanne Cairns, could I just ask you again about third-party harassment and potential employer liability?

Joanne Cairns: We believe that employers should take responsibility to protect their staff, particularly when it is related to harassment and to protected characteristics. When we asked our members what they would like their employer to do more, the biggest response was that they wanted their employer to back them up when they were dealing with an abusive or difficult customer. That would be even more important when there is any element of harassment involved.

Sometimes there can be very good policies in place and employers can invest a lot in technology and putting policies in place, but when it comes down to the ground level and the way that those policies are implemented, there can be issues in that managers do not have the necessary training or knowledge to be able to support members when that happens. There is the old adage that a customer is always right. Sometimes that can be to the detriment of the retail worker if they are not getting the support that they need from managers.



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In the retail sector there is quite a high turnover of staff, so there is an issue there with making sure that everybody has the proper training that they need—particularly in the last year, because an awful lot of new staff have come into the food retail sector. Sometimes there has been an issue with a lack of consistency because there are so many new staff and they are working under pressure. They need training and support.

We see the employer as having a duty of care to look after their staff's safety. They also have a duty of care to prevent harassment. There is an issue of sexual harassment as well. That is something that is often raised by our members, particularly young women working in the retail sector, and we would expect employers to make sure that those incidents are taken very seriously.

Q23 **Stuart C McDonald:** Thanks to our witnesses for their evidence. Could I take you both back to the Act of the Scottish Parliament that has already been mentioned and ask a couple of questions on that? First, are you saying that that is an off-the-shelf piece of legislation that could almost be cut and pasted across for England and Wales, or do you think there are any flaws in that or things that are missing that could be improved on?

Secondly, Joanne Cairns, you mentioned that a public information campaign was kicking off alongside that. To what extent is legislation the easy bit? Isn't it more important for attempts to be made to change public attitudes through information campaigns and other action? I will go to you first, Joanne.

Joanne Cairns: In terms of the balance between information and legislation, I think that they both need to be done together. That is the approach that we are taking in Scotland. Yes, changing attitudes is difficult, and that is why the legislation is so important in demonstrating how serious this issue is.

We fully support the model in Scotland. We are happy with the provisions there. There was a lot of debate and discussion. It is a comprehensive piece of legislation. We particularly support the aggravating factor related to enforcing age-restricted sales legislation because that is such a common trigger point. A lot of work was done on making sure that there were appropriate definitions of what is retail work and who is a retail worker. We welcome the fact that it is about not just physical assaults but verbal abuse, which is such a huge issue. It also covers dotcom delivery drivers, who often work on their own delivering to people's houses, so it is very important that they are covered too. We think that the new offence in Westminster should mirror the Scottish legislation, particularly to include that aggravating factor relating to age-related sales.

Q24 **Stuart C McDonald:** Before I go to James Lowman, could I ask you a little bit more about the nature of the information campaign? What work has been done to try to change attitudes? What does it look like?



Joanne Cairns: It has involved USDAW, the Scottish Grocers' Federation and Crimestoppers Scotland. The focus has been around preventing violence but also reporting it, encouraging retail workers to realise that this is now a crime and that, when it happens, they should be telling the police—they should be reporting it. That has been key to it. There has been a lot of work around social media and also work with employers to make sure that their staff are aware of it.

Q25 **Stuart C McDonald:** Thank you very much. James Lowman, your thoughts?

James Lowman: I agree with Joanne and with the thrust of your question. The legislation in Scotland is a template for the legislation that could come in in Westminster. I think the important thing is that it is not a solution in itself; it is about broadening and making available more good options for the courts, and for the police to be pursuing as they bring cases. It is not just about custodial sentences and that full process of going through the courts; it is also about using some of those out-of-court powers, particularly around rehabilitation, second chance programmes, banning orders and other community remedies that have a chance of tackling the root cause of the problem. Much as my members, when they are victims of crime, quite rightly want to see the person punished—as I would; we would all, understandably, probably start from that point of view—what we are trying to achieve here is to stop reoffending. That is the only way we will make an impact on the problem.

A broader range of powers—an enhanced offence and new legislation, as we see in Scotland, but also using those community powers more smartly and in partnership between the police and crime commissioners, the courts and businesses—is where we can make progress here, alongside that specific offence. I think that that specific offence would also have the effect of drawing more of these offences through into the criminal justice system, motivating colleagues and businesses to report and the police to take them forward into the criminal justice system. At the moment, so many cases seem to fall out at each stage. It is only by having more decisions made about how to tackle those offenders that I think we will start to see some progress.

There is an information campaign, Shop Kind, running down here and in the rest of the UK starting next week, with very similar messages to the ones that Joanne talked about in Scotland. It is about reporting and it is about respect for people working in stores.

Q26 **Stuart C McDonald:** That is helpful, thanks. Turning finally to the responsibilities and action being taken by employers, like Tim, I had the chance to go out and visit a Co-operative store in my constituency. It was an invitation from The Co-op and USDAW; I think they have been working closely together. I have to say that, as far as I could see, it seemed to be a place that had invested significantly in technology and trying to make sure that the staff were safe. Joanne, are there examples of employers who are doing a good job? Are there employers who are



not? Why are they not doing that job and what can be done to make sure that they step up to the plate?

Joanne Cairns: Most of the employers that we deal with are taking this issue very seriously and they are investing. I believe retail employers have invested around £1.2 billion in preventive measures. Prevention is very important. What is also very important is that when an incident happens, workers are properly supported afterwards. One issue is making sure that there are proper procedures in place after an incident to make sure that people are given the support that they need and that they are given paid time off work as well. The idea of having to go straight back into work after an incident like that in order to avoid losing pay would be horrendous. We do have some good agreements with employers where they are putting those provisions in place, but we know that that is not the case everywhere and that there are many non-unionised employers where that is not necessarily happening.

The main issue, which I have already mentioned, is backing up and supporting the staff when an incident happens. Another thing that our members always raise is repeat offenders being banned from stores. That is something that we have touched on already. It is very important that action takes place on that and that it is done effectively.

Q27 **Stuart C McDonald:** James Lowman, do you have any thoughts on that? It will be easier for some employers to take these actions than others, first of all because of the cost and the practicality. How can we support and encourage other employers to support this agenda?

James Lowman: Our sector invested £175 million in crime prevention last year, so certainly our share. Cost is one barrier, clearly. There may be things that Government could do to support that. For example, if you put CCTV in your store, at your next business rates valuation your business rates go up because of the improvements made to the store. It is counted as investment in the store. On a broad basis, it seems crazy to be taxing investment anyway, but certainly when it comes to things like crime prevention, it seems to be entirely counterproductive. There are things that Government could do to help make that more affordable.

Another big barrier is this faith in the information gathered through those systems being taken forward by the police and the justice system. Again, it is trying to tackle that. It all fits together as links in the chain, and that is a very important part of it.

I support what Joanne said about support for colleagues who are victims of crime in-store. There is a fantastic charity in our sector called GroceryAid. It provides a lot of mental health and incident support, but there can never be enough. We need to do everything we can to support colleagues who are suffering as victims of these incidents.

Q28 **Chair:** Can I ask you about the policing response? Some of the evidence that we have taken as part of our survey suggests that a big reason that



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people do not report crimes is that they do not expect the police to respond. What is your assessment of the police response?

Joanne Cairns: The police response is a huge barrier to justice and something that is repeatedly raised by our members. We have been told that sometimes workers have been advised to ring the non-emergency 101 number for any incident of a retail crime, even while the crime is still taking place. There needs to be clear guidance that those crimes should be treated as an emergency when it is an emergency situation, particularly when there is potentially a threat to people of physical assault. We understand that the police do not necessarily have the resources to send the emergency response to every single incident of abuse, but there needs to be some dialogue between retailers and the police, obviously involving the workers as well, about what an appropriate response should be to different types of incidents.

We also need more effective gathering of data and sharing of intelligence between retailers and the police, to identify where the repeat and prolific offenders are across different retailers and prioritise the response accordingly.

Q29 **Chair:** There is certainly a perception that the police do not respond to shoplifting and that those sorts of crimes will not get either a quick response or, sometimes, a follow-up response. If that is the perception, even if it is not justified, do you think that that contributes both to the concerns of staff that there is no point in reporting even more serious offences, and to perpetrators feeling that they can get away with it?

Joanne Cairns: Yes, I think it certainly does: 66% of our members who did not report incidents said it was because they did not see it as a police matter. We know that there is a common conception, and I think it is based on experience, that the police will not come out to shoplifting offences that are low value, even, potentially, where abuse and threats have been involved. I know that the Minister for Policing has written to police chief constables and to police and crime commissioners to advise that they can start court proceedings for offences of value below £200, but that figure is so engrained in the system that there needs to be a real concerted effort to change working practices and to make sure that all incidents are taken seriously.

James Lowman: It is not just a perception; it is absolute fact and reality that shoplifting offences are not met with a police response. One of the problems here is the huge volume of crime. It has been lumped in together, but there are some very different types of incidents here, from abuse, acquisitive crime and low-value theft, through to aggravated theft and violence. We need a different response to those different types of issues.

Looking at it from a positive point of view—at what good things are happening around the place—there is a pilot in Sussex about much better data sharing between businesses and the police to help identify repeat



offenders and particular individuals to focus on. If the police have an individual come before them, they see one incident, but if there are 50 or 60 incidents behind that, first, that makes a much more compelling case to take to court, and secondly, they are more likely to take it seriously. That data sharing is a very important part of it.

That triaging and differentiation of incidents I am afraid probably never existed at the time when £5-worth of goods were stolen and blue flashing lights were coming around the corner. I am not sure that ever happened. It certainly does not happen now, and it has not happened for a long time. Where there are instances of violence, or if it is currently taking place, we need an urgent response to that, because people's livelihoods and, even more importantly, their welfare is at stake in that situation. There should be that triaging and differentiation using all the methods: online reporting, 101 reporting, 999 reporting, and building relationships with the police and setting expectations of what should be reported and how so that it can be effective and efficient from everyone's point of view, including the police's.

Chair: Thank you. We need to move on to our next panel now. I thank both Joanne Cairns and James Lowman for their evidence this morning. We are grateful for your time. Please pass on our support to your members, who certainly should not have to face this kind of abuse and violence, which is so unacceptable in the workplace.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Iona Blake, Paul Gerrard and Tom Ironside.

Q30 **Chair:** We welcome our second panel of witnesses. We have Iona Blake, Security and Incident Manager for Boots UK, Paul Gerrard, Campaigns and Public Affairs Director for the Co-op stores, and Tom Ironside from the British Retail Consortium to give evidence to us this morning. Welcome. We are grateful for your time.

Can I begin where I began with the first panel and ask each of you for your assessment of the nature of the problem of the violence and abuse that shop workers and retail workers face?

Tom Ironside: Good morning. Thank you, Chair; we very much welcome the opportunity to give evidence on this extremely important issue. Needless to say, the scale and nature of the issue is profound. It is having a fundamental impact on the individuals affected and it also has extremely serious ramifications for the businesses concerned and the communities they serve.

In successive recent BRC crime surveys, retailers have identified violence and abuse as the top-tier issue facing our companies in this regard, because we are facing a deteriorating position. Our most recent annual retail crime survey, published in 2020, showed that there were 424 violent or abusive incidents against retail workers every day in 2018-19.



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Initial indications from our soon-to-be-published survey covering 2019-20 show that there have been 455 violent or abusive incidents against retail workers every day. The trend in violence is clearly upwards. There has been growth of about a third based on that reporting over the last three years.

Against that backdrop, retailers are spending record amounts on crime prevention. Our 2020 crime survey reported total expenditure of £1.2 billion for 2018-19, and this was sharply up on expenditure in the previous year. We can see here a strong commitment by the industry to maximise its contribution to crime prevention, but we can see a continuing deterioration in the position, which is of grave concern.

Iona Blake: Thank you for examining this matter. It is critical, not just for Boots UK team members but for the whole retail community. We feel that this is a big issue. It is not just an issue for retail; it has a wider community impact. The safety and security of our colleagues is absolutely paramount, but it is also an area that is particularly complex at this current time from a policing, enforcement and justice point of view. Our colleagues tell us frequently that there is not enough now and that they want to see more affirmative action going forward. They also recognise that they have a role to play in that.

Paul Gerrard: Thank you for the opportunity to make a contribution to the inquiry. Before Covid, we saw levels of abuse and violence against shop workers in our 2,600 stores across the country rising. Between 2019 and 2020, we saw a 76% increase in violence and abuse against our colleagues. We also saw a 10% increase in abuse against our colleagues. That means that across the 2,600 stores in the Co-op Group we saw something like 43,000 incidents of violence or abuse. That equates to 110 of my colleagues being abused or threatened every single day, 10 being attacked, and five of those attacks involving weapons.

The point I would make is that the frequency has become worse. It is happening more often and the violence of it has become worse—both the violence in the threats, which increasingly include racism, homophobia and misogyny, and the weapons. We have had colleagues attacked with syringes and with knives. A colleague was attacked with a medieval mace and lost their eye.

Covid has changed things enormously. Covid has been weaponised. In a number of incidents I was looking at over the last few weeks, spitting at colleagues is now a common way to intimidate and threaten. Going along with that spit is, "I have Covid and you are going to get it now." The virus itself has been weaponised over the last 12 months against the very people who, while we were all told to stay at home and stay safe, went into stores and made sure people had food to buy and eat while they stayed at home and kept safe. They deserve our thanks. They do not deserve abuse and violence.

Q31 **Chair:** The details that you give are awful and shocking. You are right:



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we should thank your members, your staff and the people working in shops across the country who have been on the frontline during the Covid crisis. There were increases in violence and attacks even before the Covid crisis started. What has been driving some of this? What are the reasons?

Paul Gerrard: We certainly saw a rise in levels of abuse and violence and shoplifting before Covid. There are two things driving that. We undoubtedly saw a reducing police response. I spent 10 years as a customs law enforcement officer and I have some understanding of law enforcement. Most crimes are based on risk and reward. The risk associated with these crimes has disappeared because the police response is, at best, variable. The reducing police response has made a difference.

We have seen increasing numbers of prolific offenders who either use shop theft to fund personal substance misuse or are being used by organisations. It is worth noting that we see in our stores particularly—our 2,600 stores are typically in communities—that quite a lot of the people who abuse and are violent towards our colleagues have what would seem to be significant mental health issues. That is undoubtedly driving some of the behaviour. We see reducing risk because there is little police presence, and we see increasing targeting.

I can give you one example. We work with an organisation in the West Midlands run by PC Stuart Toogood. He helps prolific offenders, particularly those with substance abuse problems, to turn their lives around. He does a fantastic job. One offender we supported had a 20-year, £3,000-a-week habit of cocaine and heroin use. She funded that through theft, often accompanied by abuse and violence. She had to get £150,000 a year to fund her habit. Over 20 years, that was £3 million. She got treatment and effective rehabilitation and she has not offended in 18 months now. She is a mentor for people who are in a similar position. Substance abuse is a real issue, as is how we respond to those people who are in that position.

Iona Blake: Absolutely, yes, the increase was definitely there before Covid. It has been an increasing picture over the last five years. There are a couple of factors in that. There is desperation around shop thefts and people looking to fund substance abuse habits or even to fund a style of living. Some individuals are in situations of real poverty. We definitely see that theft is one big driver of incidents of violence and abuse across all our 2,500 stores. Alongside that is the issue of antisocial behaviour. They are two key trigger points that we see. Very much in line with what Paul just said, the risk of prosecution and being caught has deteriorated so much that people are seemingly prepared to take more risks more frequently. There is definitely an increase around prolific and persistent offenders.

There is not just one solution that will fix that. We cannot arrest ourselves out of the problem we are currently experiencing. It is evident already that many of these individuals, if and when they are arrested and



if they face a custodial sentence, are coming straight back out when they are released and committing offences on the very same day. We see that on a regular basis across the country. It was definitely complicated pre-Covid. Covid has added an additional layer and an additional shift in some behaviour that we see. It certainly has not gone away.

Tom Ironside: The story that we have seen is entirely consistent with what the other two members of the panel have described. Before Covid, there was a year-on-year ramping up and a deterioration of the picture in relation to violence and abuse affecting shop workers. I would pull out one area to elaborate on in relation to the evolutionary element of criminal activity. As retailer protection is strengthened in some areas, criminals seek to identify and exploit new areas that may not have been targeted to the same extent or in the same way in the past.

Consumer electronics retailers have highlighted new approaches that target higher-value consumer goods, which are likely to be more tradeable and/or valuable. That in turn reflects a broader trend. Retailers frequently report seeing an increasingly sophisticated, premeditated, well-planned element to some shop theft. In so far as that is a trigger for aspects of the violence and abuse issue, it is worth highlighting.

Q32 **Dame Diana Johnson:** What do you consider to be the impacts of the Covid-19 regulations over the past 12 months, and what consideration did you give to the possible effects on violence and abuse against your staff? I was listening carefully to what Paul said about the weaponisation of Covid. Could you say something about that?

Paul Gerrard: Over the Covid period, we saw it become the predominant trigger for abuse and violence. Previously it had been shoplifting and age-restricted sales. Covid became the prominent trigger. It could be queuing outside stores or social distancing in stores. In the early days of the pandemic, it was restrictions on the amounts of certain items that people could buy and sell. We were aware of that early on. With the BRC and ACS and other colleagues in food retail, we tried to make sure that we were prepared and had prepared colleagues for that.

For example, this year we increased by over half the amount of guards we have in stores. That reflects the fact that we could see there were going to be additional flashpoints. People were getting distraught at times and therefore we wanted to try to anticipate that. Particularly outside, where there were queues and limitations on stores, we put guards in. We expected, and we have seen, an increase.

The weaponisation of it is frequent now. I was looking at the six days from Easter Sunday to the following Friday, and of the 40 or so incidents, at least 12% are about spitting and 30 of them are in relation to Covid restrictions. They have become another flashpoint. As those restrictions lift, the problem will not go away. We may go back to challenging shoplifters and age-related sales being the predominant triggers.



Q33 Dame Diana Johnson: In terms of your duty of care as an employer to your staff—you have talked about the increase in the number of guards—what did you put in place to deal with a situation where someone spits at a shop worker in a Co-op store and says, “I have Covid. I hope you get it”? How are you supporting your staff in terms of that level of assault?

Paul Gerrard: Whenever there is an assault or an incident—it does not have to be a physical assault, of course; it can be a verbal threat—we have in place a system for those colleagues to make sure they can get access to whatever support they need. It could be counselling; it could be some paid time off; it could be perhaps moving them to a different part of the store. Over the last two or three years, we have encouraged colleagues to report as many incidents as happen, which is one of the reasons we have seen an increase in the number of reported incidents. We have tried to create a transparent culture that says, “If something has happened, tell your store manager or your team leader. We will make sure that we take action to protect you.”

We have also increased the number of actions we can take to ban individuals from stores if they continue to do that. Police response rates are quite poor and therefore we have been left with what we can do to support colleagues. It is about supporting them pastorally and also taking them out of areas where they may be in danger. When there is an individual doing it on a regular basis, we try to exclude that individual.

Iona Blake: The Covid incidents we have seen have been varied. Early on in the pandemic, we saw quite an increase in some of the hate-related types of incidents. The weaponisation of Covid through people spitting has been a real concern. It is something that we have never experienced before in the volume that we have seen, and it continues. We are doing everything we can to help colleagues ensure that a two-metre distance is retained at all times to minimise opportunities for people to be spat on.

It continues even further than that. To make our stores Covid-friendly and Covid-secure, the enforcement of wearing face coverings is absolutely important. However, we are seeing individuals use those face coverings to avoid capture from a shop theft point of view, even to the point where some police forces are saying, “Because you do not have a full-face CCTV image of those individuals, we are not going to pursue this.” That is a dialogue that is happening routinely across the country, across a couple of forces. It is a difficult and complex area. We have seen some good police responses to some of the spitting-related incidents. Sadly, sometimes that has not been supported by the justice system later on down the line. It continues to be a concern. Definitely the spitting is a concern.

The different layer that we have as an organisation is that we provide healthcare and pharmacy services both in the community and on a bigger scale. Customers have wanted to come to us for their healthcare needs during the pandemic. It has been a real challenge for members of the



public to be in that space where individuals are persistently wanting to cause a menace within a retail space.

Q34 Dame Diana Johnson: Picking up on the issue of pharmacists, from reading some of the evidence in the documents we have been provided, it sounds like pharmacists have at times been attacked and abused—I imagine that in the past they have not been—because of Covid and the regulations in force. How has that played out? What support are you giving to pharmacists in particular?

Iona Blake: We work closely with every colleague. We are listening to the feedback from all of our colleagues about what is happening to them and how they feel, because that is important. Incidents affect colleagues in different ways. Some colleagues, certainly those working in areas where they are almost used to the violence and abuse—places like Manchester—need less support. In areas where this is more of a shocker—places that are that bit nicer, like in the south-west, such as Devon and Cornwall—colleagues will be more upset after an incident. We have to make sure that the support we give them is relative to what they need. That is important.

All colleagues get follow-up calls. We have been providing additional support through our employee assistance programme, which has been key for us. Depending on the level of criticality and the type of incident, counselling and all types of support are available. We have also invested quite significantly in connecting our stores, particularly in our pharmacy space, into our centrally managed CCTV monitoring centre. They can press a panic alarm and get an immediate response from a team in real time if something is happening. The team can broadcast into the store to say, “The police have been contacted. Please leave the store.” There are lots of things we are doing.

We have introduced on a trial basis, as part of our Safer City programme, body-worn video cameras for colleagues, which is different for a retail space, but we are seeing real benefits from what we have introduced in that space. Pharmacists are not exempt from being verbally abused or physically attacked.

Q35 Dame Diana Johnson: As we now move into regulations being lifted, non-essential retail opening and everything happening over the summer leading up to June, is that going to change the challenges you are facing in your stores? Will they become different challenges? What is going to happen over the next few months?

Iona Blake: Every time we have seen restrictions ease, we have seen an increase in incidents, so quite the opposite. Some of that is because there is more footfall out there. Equally, people become a little bit more lax in terms of social distancing and a little bit less tolerant of those who are not observing social distancing. Members of the public can feel quite agitated with each other. There is definitely a presence of that and I do not see that changing at this point in time.



It remains a complex area and the partnership is working through local policing in a positive way. Certainly, the support that we have had from the National Business Crime Centre, throughout the Covid pandemic in particular, has helped us move things forward for our colleagues in stores.

Paul Gerrard: I agree with what Iona said. We are expecting there to be spikes as we move through the road map. We will be prepared for those and will be making sure that our colleagues continue to be as safe as they can be. We expect that, as the social distancing triggers become less important, we will see the traditional triggers come back and therefore the things we have put in place to keep colleagues safe over a number of years will become ever more important.

Q36 **Stuart C McDonald:** Picking up on the investment you have all spoken about that businesses have made in keeping staff safe, to what extent is that investment made necessary because of challenges and deficiencies in the police response, and to what extent would it be necessary anyway to support that police response, even if it was functioning as we would like it?

Secondly, are there any particular features of that investment that you would highlight as having been most effective in improving safety for your staff? Are you aware of any unexpected or unintended consequences of that investment? For example, one issue that was raised with me was that if you invest in protecting a big high street supermarket, you tend to shift the problem along to smaller convenience stores that maybe do not have the same resources to invest.

Paul Gerrard: We are quite clear in the Co-op that the primary responsibility for keeping shop workers safe is with the owners of those premises. It is the shop. It is the Co-op's job to keep those colleagues as safe as we possibly can. Therefore, regardless of what the police can or cannot do, we will do everything we can to keep those colleagues safe. We have spent about £140 million over the last six years or so to keep our shops safe and keep our colleagues safe. Per store, that is twice the sector average. Undoubtedly, a physical presence works particularly well. The use of guards is important, but so is the physical layout of stores and where you put things, particularly in convenience stores, and the Co-op is fundamentally 2,600 convenience stores.

Connecting colleagues with each other is also important. If you go into a Co-op store, you will see they all have headsets and can speak to each other whenever they are in a store. That gives my colleagues a greater sense of security because they are more connected. That is important. We have seen bodycams become important. We have rolled those out in several hundred of our stores. It is important for the colleagues if it makes them feel safer. It undoubtedly deters behaviour by individuals when they see that, whether the camera is turned on or off. It also provides a set of evidence we can use. Those have been particularly effective.



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It has also been effective to work closely with our security provider, Mitie. When there are incidents, we will package up the evidence for those incidences from the CCTV that we have in all the stores and the bodycams. We take the witness statements and bring the CCTV together. We do it in a PACE-compliant way. We package it up and we pass it on to the police. That takes demand out of the police, who are busy, and allows prosecutions to proceed. Of the 100 or so prosecutions since January, over 80% have come from those packages we have produced with Mitie. Working with our security provider to provide the evidence to the police is important.

You made an important point about displacement. We have seen that, as we put in place interventions to keep our colleagues safe, the problem does not go away; it goes to places where perhaps there is not as much protection. In addition to the 2,600 stores we run, we also supply over 5,000 independent convenience stores like Nisa and independent co-operative societies like Scotmid and so on. Those family-run businesses do not have the same resources we have to protect our colleagues. Therefore, if it is going to be a hard job for someone to steal, why would they do it at a Co-op store? They might go around the corner to a family-run independent store, and they are at risk.

Although it is our responsibility to keep colleagues safe and we will never shirk from that, if we are going to keep all shop workers safe, there needs to be a holistic approach that includes the police response.

Iona Blake: On the investment and why it is necessary, where we have put the investment into our stores, certainly with the body-worn video cameras, colleagues tell us they feel safer and the numbers of violent incidents have come down. It is about finding the right solution for the format of the store. I have 2,500 that we need to make decisions for. Some of them are small community stores and some of them are big flagships in shopping centres. We have to find the right solutions for them because what works for a small store may not work well in a big store. It is finding the right solution and making sure that we work with whatever technology is out there or whatever approach.

Sometimes the right thing might just be capability and training and helping the colleagues in stores build those relationships locally. We could put a ring of steel around each of our shops, but it would just force the problem next door. When we recruit from the community where we are based, it is still a problem for them to get to work. We have done some work around our Safer City programme and have been speaking to our retail neighbours, talking to the local councils and the local business teams, looking not just to create a safer place for Boots because it is important to do that for our colleagues, but also from a wider community aspect.

On the importance of the right solution for the right place, it is important that we do not give the fear to customers that this is not a safe place to



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shop. If customers do not feel safe, they are not going to come and shop. At a time when we want retail recovery—it is important for all retailers on the high street, particularly this week, to be able to get to that place—customers do not want to come in and feel fearful: “Why do you have a security guard? Why are you wearing body cameras?” It becomes complicated to find the right thing.

That is not a straightforward answer, but it is not a straightforward problem. It is very much about how we create a safer community, not just within the store to displace it, because it is so important that we do not move the problem next door.

Tom Ironside: The contributions of the other panel members have shown that the increased investment is not optional; it is essential. We have a situation where that investment has been shown to ramp up year on year, and that increase is reported consistently across recent years in our crime survey. But as a result of that investment, looking at it in the totality, we have not seen an impact on the overall level of criminality and the incidents that occur.

For us, it is very much a situation where we are making this investment to ensure that we are executing our duty of care and making our staff feel as safe and protected as possible, but we are not getting to the point where we are stabilising and addressing some of those other issues and problems. For us, it is about how we take real steps forward that will start to shift that element of the puzzle, because the investment being made is not leading to a longer-term solution.

Q37 **Stuart C McDonald:** You are encouraging your members to take these steps on the basis that this is what they have to do to fulfil their obligations, essentially, to their own staff. What else are you doing to encourage your members to do that?

Also, are there things that we as politicians could think about? We heard from the previous panel that one challenge is that if you invest in security measures at your property, you might end up paying higher rates. Are there other things like that that we could start thinking about to encourage businesses to take these steps?

Tom Ironside: It is probably best that we do not start talking about business rates or this could be a long and different panel. If we look at the categories of things we are doing currently, there are the company-specific initiatives that we have already heard about from both of the other witnesses on this panel. There are collaborative initiatives. We are working through the National Retail Crime Steering Group. There are a number of task and finish groups that are currently working on reporting, data sharing and supporting victims. There will be some announcements next week about those task and finish groups’ conclusions and recommendations. There is collaborative work of that sort.



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We also work with retailers ourselves. We provide a data and benchmarking function so that people can measure what is happening and, on the basis of that measurement, make informed decisions. We have recently had a good example of an initiative. We worked with members and the Suzy Lamplugh Trust to develop a specific piece of de-escalation training to help retail shop staff to identify and react effectively to flashpoints within stores. I know that is already being used widely across the industry.

There are lots of different individual interventions we can make, but there is a missing piece of the jigsaw here in terms of making sure that the police response and the subsequent justice response is the right one.

Q38 Tim Loughton: Good morning. Some of you will have sat in on the previous session, when I raised the issue of why we need a specific aggravated offence for abuse of shop workers rather than the existing law, which is what the Government determined a couple of years ago. Is there anything you would like to add to what you might have heard earlier?

Paul Gerrard: We are in a position now where it has become normalised in society to go in and abuse and attack shop workers, often with weapons. That is a difficult place to get to. By the way, a new offence is not a panacea for it all. It has to work in concert with other things.

There are three reasons why we would support a new Bill. First, I often get asked why we need a new offence when there are existing offences. There are plenty of people for whom attacking them or abusing them are major offences: police officers, emergency workers and customs officers. There is a specific offence of attacking a customs officer in the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 and the Commissioners for Revenue and Customs Act 2005. It is not unusual for Parliament to create specific offences.

Secondly, there is a point of principle that if Parliament expects individual groups of people to uphold the law that Parliament makes, Parliament should also give those people additional protection. Pre-Covid, a quarter of all the incidents that we saw were related to age-restricted sales. We and our colleagues could be in significant trouble if we did not enforce that law. It is a point of principle.

Coming back to that societal reset point, legislation is often used to reset expectations in society. I cannot overstate the position of my colleagues in the Co-op that, at the minute, the police and the courts do not care. They wonder at times whether Parliament cares about the fact that they are being abused and attacked every single day. The reaction of my colleagues in Scotland when Daniel Johnson's Bill was passed was, "Thank God, they actually care."

Q39 Tim Loughton: I absolutely understand where you are coming from on that. Part of the reason for this inquiry is that I am undecided on whether



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we need specific legislation. The trouble is that there will be another group of people. Should we cover all teachers or others who are subject to abuse? There are 3 million people in retail, so it is a large number of people involved. Of course, all those other professions you have mentioned are uniformed professions—not that that makes any difference in terms of the abuse you get, but there is an official role.

Two things come out of that, though. Should it be limited to abuse when you are fulfilling that law-enforcement role in the place of a police officer, for example, when selling drink and other age-related things? It becomes problematic if you get attacked because you refuse to sell a bottle of beer when there are implications, but when you get attacked for trying to stop someone pinching chewing gum or whatever, it is not on the same basis. That sounds problematic.

Secondly, I have been to Co-ops a couple of times in the last year; I was asked to because of attacks they had. When I was in one of my Co-ops recently, I was talking for about half an hour at the front of the shop with some of the managers there. Interestingly, I counted at least six people who came in not wearing masks, only two of whom appeared to have an exemption lanyard. Nobody was challenged. I raised this and they said, “We do not do that. It is up to the police.” There is a grey area with shop workers themselves doing enforcement stuff and what is down to the police. That is where things appear to be going wrong in the dynamic between shop workers and the police themselves, with the police not taking it seriously unless it is a bigger offence and shop workers not reporting it to the police. It is a bit of a Catch-22 situation.

Paul Gerrard: In relation to how wide the offence could be, Daniel Johnson MSP’s Bill is wide. It includes any attack, abuse or threat against a shop worker carrying out their duties, and age-restricted sales is an aggravating feature. My preference would be for the greatest protection we can get for my colleagues, but if Parliament decided that it should become an offence in line with the principle of putting obligations on them and protecting them, that would be better than where we currently are. My preference would be for a wide offence, but I can understand why Parliament may go for a narrower offence.

In relation to the enforcement of face masks and indeed more generally, you are right that it is about the balance. We did a freedom of information request last year. Bearing in mind that we report only the most serious offences to the police because we do not want to report every incident of shoplifting, two times out of every three the police did not attend for those serious offences. As an example, three weeks ago in one of my local stores, an individual came in at 5 o’clock in the afternoon wanting to buy more paracetamol than you are allowed to, was refused, made threats, began to get aggressive and abusive, assaulted people, was removed from the store, stayed outside the store and then made personal threats against the female manager. My colleague called the police and heard nothing back until the next day when they rang to see if everything was okay.



If the police do not respond when there is an issue, then we will not put our colleagues at even greater risk. If we put our colleagues at risk and we know we will get a police response that will support us, that is a different conversation. But when the police do not come even when there is a threat to the life of a woman at night, we are going to make sure that we put the protection of our colleagues first. I am sure you understand that.

Iona Blake: With regard to an aggravated offence, it would be difficult if the law was passed to make that specific to under-age sales because you are almost delivering a message to what feels like a potentially vulnerable community already that some violence is okay and some is not or is treated less seriously. On behalf of the wider retail community, it would be a real worry if that was an approach that was taken by the Government or policing. It is a complicated area that needs a layered approach. We need to give confidence and belief back to retail workers and also to the police that they can pursue some of these things and then be supported by the justice system.

We have an example where an individual has pulled apart Perspex screening to spit on colleagues behind a counter because they asked her to make sure she had paid for all of her goods. The Met Police attended with a brilliant response and the individual was arrested. When she appeared in court, it was at the end of the day. They watched the footage from one angle, three magistrates huddled around a tablet device, and decided there was not enough evidence, despite statements that were not read. That individual has been back into the store to taunt the colleagues who were involved in that incident.

There is not just one thing that has ever happened; there have been other incidents related to that. It would be difficult to say that it is not needed across all of retail, but it is complex and it needs to be layered with understanding the root causes of some of these incidents of violence.

Q40 **Tim Loughton:** The spitting thing is extraordinary. We have had prosecutions in the past, particularly against police, and there is the whole controversy around spit hoods, which the police can issue when they are detaining somebody. There have been prosecutions of people who have said that they have AIDS, going back that far, and other things.

Have there been some successful prosecutions, though, of people recently spitting at staff and then saying, "I've got Covid"? That is a weapon. It is no different, frankly, than if they had thrust a knife at them. It could ultimately be fatal in just the same way as a knife attack. Has it just not happened that we have had successful prosecutions?

Iona Blake: It just has not happened, certainly not that we have seen. We had an incident where a pharmacist was struck to the floor twice in the face and then spat on several times while the offender was trying to



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steal goods. That individual was known, was named and has not yet been arrested several months later. There has been no further action. As far as the colleagues in the store are concerned, the case has been closed. It is not just a straightforward matter.

There is a difference between the risk of being caught with a knife and the risk of being caught with a syringe. If you are a substance user, you are possibly going to have syringes on you and there is no law against that, but there certainly is from a knife point of view. You will not be arrested for not carrying something, but you can spit quite easily. It is a complex thing to talk about.

Q41 **Tim Loughton:** It is horrific. On the issue of banning people from shops, I do not know what the law is and, if you ban somebody, whether that is purely a private matter for your company or whether it can be legally enforced—that somebody who enters a store after you have issued a banning order, however you go about it, is guilty of a criminal offence. Is that a change in the law that is required that might help on this?

Tom Ironside: It may well be. Before I come to that, we have some statistics from our current crime survey that are soon to be published, which will perhaps shed some light on the question of the proportion of cases reported to the police and what is happening as a result of that reporting. Our analysis shows that, overall, 54% of incidents of violence and abuse are reported to police currently. Of those incidents recorded, only 6% resulted in prosecution and only 3% of those recorded were prosecuted as aggravated offences. That shows the break in the chain that we are trying to address through the more widely drawn, retail-specific offence that has been discussed by other panel members.

On banning orders, I know there is variation in approach between companies. I also know there is variation in approach between police forces, and particularly the role of the police and crime commissioners. There is some inconsistency there that would need to be addressed for that to be a fully effective way of approaching things. I know that the industry is not closed to discussions about how greater consistency and greater effectiveness of approach could be taken forward.

Q42 **Tim Loughton:** How does it work at the moment? If you say somebody is banned from your shop because they are constantly coming in and being abusive, but it has not resulted in criminal action being taken, how can you enforce that?

Tom Ironside: I have to admit that we have not had detailed discussions with our members about that. We would need to go out to them and ask for more information. If that was helpful to the Committee's consideration, we would be happy to do that.

Q43 **Tim Loughton:** Okay. Mr Gerrard wants to come in. Do you have some more information?



Paul Gerrard: Yes. I am by no means an expert, but my understanding is that there are two options here. There can be a private arrangement where we decide that an individual is no longer welcome within our premises. We are within our rights to do that and we will need to enforce that. That can often lead to additional trigger points. In addition, there is an order that we have secured from the courts. If that is breached, then it becomes a criminal offence and the police can be involved at that point. It depends which route we go down.

My own view is that businesses need to make more use of that court procedure and therefore we need to make sure it is quick and easy to use. That is an area where businesses can look to do more. Ultimately, if it is breached, you are going to be reliant on the policing element too.

Q44 **Tim Loughton:** It would be useful to have some more information on that. If you are a larger shop and you can afford to have somebody stewarding at the front and they are big and tough enough to deter people from coming in, fine, but that will not be the case for most shops. Hopefully we will not have to have security guards at every corner shop, for goodness' sake.

If you are saying that there have been lots of instances where you have applied for a banning order or whatever it is called and do not have it, or, even with a banning order, that there have not be subsequent prosecutions, then that would be useful to know. That could be another part of the law that could be better enforced, changed, upgraded or whatever.

Paul Gerrard: I do not have the data with me, but I am happy to write to you with the data we have.

Tim Loughton: That would be helpful. Thank you.

Q45 **Chair:** What more could be done to help things in terms of the policing response, some of the prevention work and other measures that you think would be helpful?

Tom Ironside: There are a number of areas that are currently ongoing following the call for evidence and the Government's response in the summer of last year. We do know that there is more that could be done, working with both retailers and the wider law enforcement community, to make sure that reporting is supported, encouraged and takes place in a way that is usable and appropriate for law enforcement purposes. There is a bundle of stuff in that regard. There is also more that could be done in terms of data sharing between companies. I defer to Paul, who has been leading work in that space, on the detail of that.

Looking more broadly, we have a number of suggestions as to how the policing response could be improved. We have suggested a thematic review of violence against retail colleagues to be carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. There is a real role for consistency and promotion of approach across different



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police and crime plans and in the prioritisation by police and crime commissioners. We are doing a lot of work in that regard to try to make sure it is pushed up the priority lists for those local forces. There is inevitably a question about the level of resourcing that is made available to local police forces to make sure they properly prioritise this issue and to ask them to allocate some of the new policing resource that has been announced to focus on retail crime.

Looking at the premeditated, co-ordinated, serious and organised end of things, we are thinking about how we can get better engagement across police forces to ensure that crimes that cross police force boundaries are responded to effectively. We do have a perception that violent offenders who work across and between force boundaries are not dealt with in a fully co-ordinated and consistent way.

Iona Blake: As an organisation, we certainly believe more could be done. There needs to be a review of everything going on in this space and what businesses can do. The consistency of police response across all 43 police forces absolutely needs to be addressed. I would welcome the PCCs ensuring that this is something they address as part of their own leadership of those forces.

There is definitely more to be done to address the root causes. I know we cannot arrest our way out of these problems, so what can we do? How do we tackle the root causes? What early intervention can be done to stop the new offenders becoming prolific hardcore offenders who then feel their only resort is violence? How do we look at the learnings that West Midlands police have so brilliantly implemented with the Offender to Rehab programme and take that further? It is only the West Midlands police doing that, and they are tripling their capacity to help put more individuals through that programme. It has had mixed results because this is not a one-fix-all solution for everybody. There are individuals who need help and want help. That support structure is not available for them. How do we safeguard them and their futures and stop this being a problem further down the line when it is almost too late to help individuals who feel they have no other way out?

They are the key things for me. How do we work better from a partnership point of view? As a retailer group, we are all speaking to each other and wanting to work closely with each other. How do we build those relationships and work more collaboratively with policing and with the Ministry of Justice so that people can see what impact that is having on the frontline shop workers? That will in turn impact the economy. We will get to a place where people will not want to come and work in retail because of a fear of violence. That is not okay. It is important that we all address that because it is a concern for everybody—not just retailers but the wider community.

Paul Gerrard: I absolutely agree with Iona about the work they have been doing in the West Midlands. It is well worth looking at because it is



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genuinely impacting prolific offenders, who are often behind a great deal of the problems.

First, there is no single intervention that will resolve this. Businesses have to continually look at how they are protecting and supporting their staff. You have heard from businesses like Boots and you have heard from the ACS. There are lots of good businesses doing the right things, but businesses should always be held to account for what they are doing to protect and then support their colleagues.

There is a role for the police to step up. Two thirds of all police and crime plans do not even reference business crime, let alone violence against shop workers. There needs to be a seriousness with which the PCCs and police forces take this. I was speaking to one of the biggest police forces in the country three weeks ago. They do not even have in their system a tag that can identify business crime. When we put in the freedom of information request, they could not find it because they do not record it. You will know better than me that if you do not measure things, you certainly do not manage them. There is a real issue about the seriousness with which the police take this.

What I would say—this is a really important thing—is that this is not an insolvable problem; this is about the will. We have worked closely in Sussex, in Mr Loughton’s patch, with the police and crime commissioner and have created a one-stop reporting process and a data-sharing process as part of the National Retail Crime Steering Group. I lead the data-sharing work. We created a pilot there, which within a couple of weeks has already led to five prolific offenders being arrested and prosecuted. This is not insolvable—this can be fixed—but it needs the police to take it seriously. Some of those resources that I hear are coming into the police force need to go into neighbourhood policing teams because it is neighbourhood policing teams that will help address these issues.

Finally, there is a role for a new piece of legislation that gives greater confidence to the police to prosecute such crimes and greater confidence to retail workers. Not only are retail workers afraid, but if you are the mother, the father, the wife or the husband of a retail worker, you are now worrying that, when they go to work to sell people food, pharmaceuticals or whatever it may be, they might not come back in one piece. That cannot be right in 2021 in the UK.

Q46 Chair: I have a final question for a one-word answer. If we carry on with the work we have in place—the examples you have talked about; the work the Government are doing at the moment in co-ordination with you and some of the work the police are doing at the moment—do you think things will get better, carry on at the same unacceptable level of violence and abuse, or get worse?

Tom Ironside: At best, it will be the same, and without the additional interventions we have talked about, there is a real risk it will get worse.



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Iona Blake: We have only just scratched the surface of making a real difference. I cannot see things getting better quickly and certainly not in the short term.

Paul Gerrard: I think the momentum means that it will get worse. If we carry on doing what we are doing, even with the things that are in plan, it will get worse.

Chair: Thank you very much for the serious and sobering evidence that you have given us today. These have been two powerful and informative panels. On behalf of the Committee, but also Members across Parliament, thank you to all of the staff working in retail, many of whom have been key workers throughout the Covid crisis in very difficult circumstances. Others have had difficult financial circumstances as well in what has been a difficult year for retail. None of those workers should ever have to face the kind of violence, abuse and lack of respect that you and the previous panel have described. Thank you very much for your evidence today. That concludes our session.