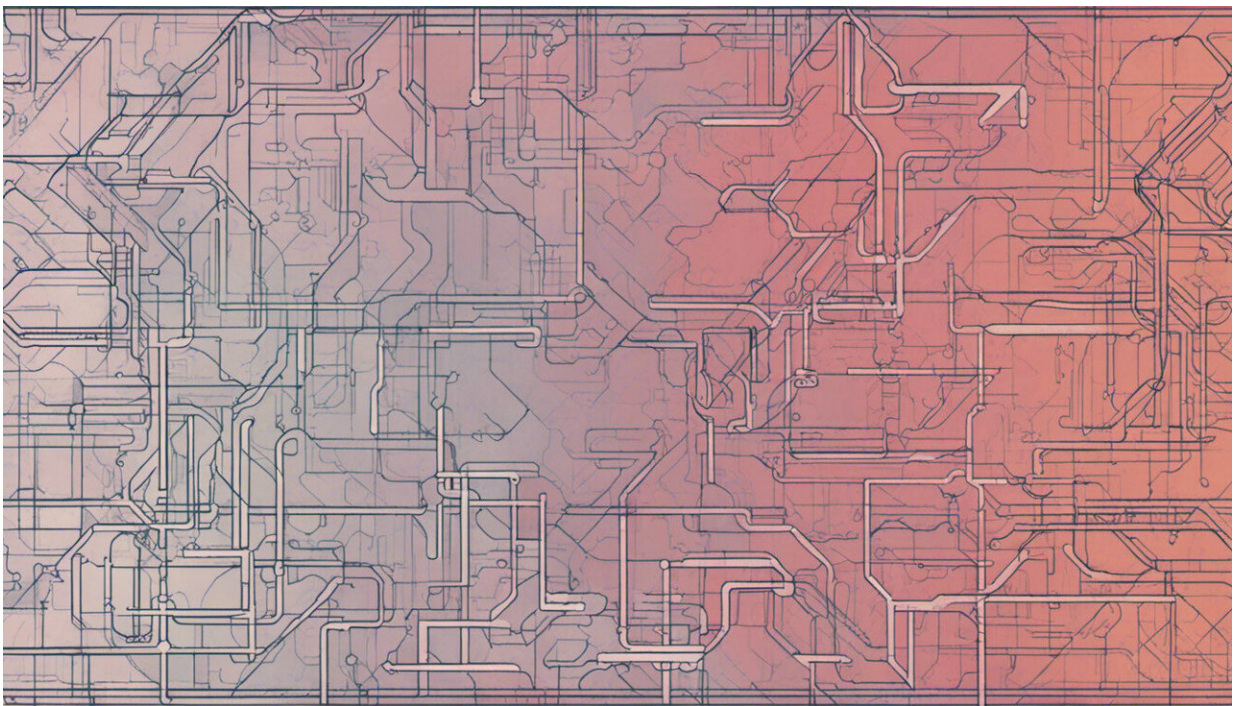


Abuse of shopworkers is on the rise—coronavirus brought it to our attention and now we need to act

June 5 2020, by Anastasios Hadjisolomou



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A well-known mantra, "the customer is always right," was once regarded by retailers as good customer relations, but now many fear it has led to a culture in which consumers can freely subject shopworkers to verbal and physical abuse with impunity.

In February of this year Boris Johnson [said](#) in parliament, "We should not tolerate crimes of violence against shopworkers," after a survey by the [British Retail Consortium](#) (BRC) revealed [an average of 424 incidents](#) of violence or [abuse](#) were reported by staff every day in 2019.

The COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity for governments, trade unions and employers to change this pattern of behaviour. For the very first time, the problem has come under the spotlight. Abuse against retail workers has [doubled since the outbreak](#) of the pandemic. Paradoxically, these shopworkers, once invisible to society, are considered key to keeping us all fed and supplied in times of crisis, and are now regarded with much appreciation.

It's time to tackle this abuse and provide workers with the proper protections and respect that they deserve, especially given the current circumstances.

Alarming statistics

[The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers](#) (USDAW), a trade union whose members are primarily (food) retail workers, launched the [Freedom from Fear](#) campaign in 2003 in response to concerns raised by members about increasing levels of violence and abuse. As part of this ongoing campaign, USDAW carries out an annual survey which, alarmingly, shows that this kind of customer behaviour is [on the rise](#). Even more concerning, recent [research](#) suggests that it risks becoming the norm.

Results from the USDAW survey have been consistent over the years, showing that [typically](#) in a 12-month period, 50%-60% of workers report at least one incident of verbal abuse and 30%-35% report at least one threat of physical violence. The 2019 results [reveal](#) that such incidences continue, while the BRC's [2020 Retail Crime Survey](#) shows a continuous

increase in the number of violent or abusive incidents.

The BRC focuses on retail crimes, such as thefts, as the main reasons for violence and abuse by customers. But this fails to recognise the existence of a service culture that tolerates abuse. [Academic research](#) clearly shows that customer abuse is strongly related to the promotion of a service culture in which "the [customer](#) is always right".

This encourages the perception that customers are superior to staff, whom many perceive as lesser citizens who should accept abuse as part of the job. This also allows customers to behave abusively to shop workers without fear of penalty. This is a fundamental and uncomfortable truth in retailing which needs to be confronted.



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The COVID-19 opportunity

Academics and [trade unions](#) have challenged this truth, highlighting the seriousness of the situation and urging measures to address this unacceptable behaviour. In Scotland this led to the 2018 [Protection of Workers Bill](#), which proposed that assaulting, threatening, abusing and/or obstructing a retail [worker](#) would be classed as a [criminal offence](#). Similar [bills](#) have been proposed in England, recognising the need to protect shop workers across the UK.

USDAW has recently, again, urged both the [UK](#) and [Scottish](#) governments to protect retail workers, and called on MSPs and MPs to back the respective bills, especially during the current pandemic, where frontline shopworkers are facing health-threatening conditions.

USDAW's latest survey on the [impact of coronavirus on the workforce](#) shows that customers continue to abuse retail employees during this crisis. The social distancing measures introduced in stores, such as limits on the number of customers in a store, and restrictions on some products to reduce panic buying have contributed to some of the flashpoints for abuse.

Since the outbreak, one in six workers are currently experiencing abuse on every shift they work. Even more concerning is the fact that 196 out of 5,000 participants have been physically assaulted. USDAW also reports that many customers have [refused to follow government guidelines](#) – or any safety precautions—and have harangued workers for carrying out their tasks required to keep the public, and themselves, safe. This is shocking but not surprising in a culture which has few consequences for aggressive behaviour.

Now is the time to re-evaluate how the staff in our shops and restaurants experience work, and for governments and employers to introduce the

necessary measures to protect them from any kind of violence or abuse. And for us all, as customers, to reconsider our behaviour towards them, especially under unusually pressurised conditions for everyone.

The Thursday-night claps for key workers may be over, but there must be a legacy for shopworkers. This appreciation and respect must transform into an opportunity for radical change in consumerist culture. This can be supported with legislation that will protect workers from any type of abuse in their jobs. The proposed bills are crucial to ensure customers are always held accountable for their behaviour, and to assure retail staff that safety and dignity at work is their right.

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