



**Thomas
Ashton
Institute**

Lunch and Learn: Managing Violence and Aggression in Retail

Professor Sheena Johnson

Dr Kara Ng



Today's agenda

Who are we?

- The research team
- VARN

Setting the scene for work-related violence and aggression (WVA)

- The scope of WVA
- The impact on employees and organisations

Best practice guidelines and the Retail Trust

- Research with RT
- Preview of the guidelines

Contact information and Q&A

Who are we?



Professor Sheena Johnson

- Professor of Work Psychology & Wellbeing
- Studies well-being, stress, health, and violence and aggression



Dr Kara Ng

- Senior lecturer in organisational psychology
- Researches workplace mistreatment (bullying, harassment, aggression) and well-being



Dr Lynn Holdsworth



VARN

- [Violence and Aggression Research Network](#)

Getting to know you all :)

Scan the QR code OR enter following code on menti.com



or

www.menti.com
Code: 5850 2945

Violence and Aggression Research Network (VARN)

- VARN is a collaboration between HSE and University of Manchester, hosted by Thomas Ashton
- A place for organisational/professional representatives across a variety of sectors to...
 - Learn about and contribute to research
 - Understand and raise awareness about work-related violence and aggression
 - Share practices on how to reduce and prevent violence and aggression



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Work-related violence and aggression (WVA)

HR Magazine

Most retail workers faced abuse at work in 2025

More than three quarters (78%) of frontline retail workers were verbally assaulted in 2025, according to poll findings published by retail...

18 Mar 2026



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'unacceptably high' levels, study
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M&S boss calls for more action on
crime and abuse of staff

- The HSE defines **work-related violence (WVA)** as *“any incident in which a person is abused, threatened, or assaulted in circumstances related to their work”* by members outside the organisation
 - E.g. customers, patients, members of the public
- WVA has become an area of **increasing concern**, especially due to COVID lockdowns and cost of living crises
 - British Retail Consortium: 1600 report incidents a day (2025/26) vs 455 incidents a day (2019/20)
 - USDAW: 90% respondents verbally abused, 9% physically assaulted
 - ACS: 40% increase in incidents, 1/4 involved weapons

The costs of WVA

- Academic research (including our own) has consistently shown that mistreated employees report...^{1, 2}
 - **Lower** well-being, job performance, job satisfaction
 - **Greater** burnout, absenteeism, turnover intention
 - Disruption in both work and non-work well-being
- There is also a **business cost** – a recent report estimates that WVA costs UK retail >£235m/year³
- **‘Drip effect’** of sustained verbal abuse reported as most damaging



Developing best practice guidelines

- Collaboration with **Retail Trust** over two projects:
 - (1) Researching the effects of WVA through member surveys
 - (2) **Developing best practice guidelines as part of their Let's Respect Retail campaign**
- **Conducted professional interviews** with members of RT's campaign steering group to understand how their organisations experienced WVA, how they addressed it, any challenges faced, etc.



Let's Respect Retail

We're together against abuse

Find the learning, tools and support to help you cope with challenging situations.

Get support today ↓

retailtrust.org.uk/incident-pathway

#respectretail

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The poster features a blue background with a dark blue speech bubble containing the main message. Below the speech bubble, two stylized figures are shown: one holding a shopping bag and the other holding the speech bubble. A QR code is located in the bottom left corner.

Let's Respect Retail

Retail
TRUST

MANCHESTER
1824

The University of Manchester

Managing violence and aggression in retail Best practice guidelines

Authors

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Special thanks

to the Retail Trust partners, including
Brewers Decorator Centres, FatFace, Foot
Anstey and Theo Paphitis Retail Group for
their involvement in this project.

Managing violence and aggression in retail: Best practice guidelines

- 28-page free report outlining ...
 - The challenges facing UK retail
 - The impact of WVA on employees and staff
 - Employers' legal obligations regarding WVA
 - Customisable retail tips
 - Resources on raising awareness of, understanding, and tackling WVA
- UOM collected and synthesised data from our interviews, VARN workshops, and surveys with RT members



RETAIL framework

- From our research, we created a mnemonic framework of **practical tips for retailers** to help to create lasting change in understanding and reducing WVA
- Many tips are **adaptable** to retailers of most sizes, budgets, sectors, and contexts



RETAIL – Report

R E T A I L

Report

You can't solve what you don't understand. Reporting incidents helps an organisation to understand the challenges, how prevalent work-related violence and aggression is, and where to get the best return in investments.

“We [management] only know what you tell us.” Customer experience director, retail

You can improve reporting by:

Putting simple, accessible, consistent reporting measures in place. Some organisations offer multisource systems with options for reporting incidents by telephone, paper forms, mobile app, face-to-face, or online. Avoid duplication of work (such as managers entering paper reports into an online database) or relying on technology unfamiliar to some workers.

“We use technology, a web-based portal accessible through any device, for people to report it on. It needs to be quick and easy and sufficient to triage, not too detailed.”

Customer experience director, retail

Involving both HR and health and safety together, as the reports of WVA are filed, works to provide a useful insight into, and a record of, any incidents.

Helping staff to familiarise themselves with reporting systems and technologies, in particular, part-time and temporary staff.

Encouraging staff to report incidents straight away while the memory is accurate.

Giving staff the time to make the report during work and allowing them to use workplace IT equipment, where appropriate.

Using apps that offer staff an anonymous reporting tool.

Having an emergency number available 24 hours a day for severe incidents.

Implementing simple systems, such as a 24-hour WhatsApp group (particularly useful for lone workers).

Capturing incidents on CCTV or body-worn cameras (BWCs).

Providing regular reminders about the importance of reporting. Newsletter, emails and bulletins can work, but only if the message is memorable.

RETAIL – Learn

R E T A I L

Learn

Reflect on work-related violence and aggression by:

Evaluating incidents, their impact, and the follow-up actions to identify opportunities for further improvements. Solutions can be developed with staff through working groups.

Collecting data on all aspects of abuse (verbal, physical and sexual): time, trends, locations.

Keeping track of the data so you can spot the stores with the biggest problems and try out solutions there first. Piloting changes in high-risk locations makes it easier to show what works and build the case for wider investment.

Encouraging feedback, for example, through annual engagement surveys. Monitor response scores at store level to identify problem areas.

Here are some questions you could ask when evaluating the effectiveness of approaches:

Has the number of reported incidents increased or decreased? It's normal to experience an increase in numbers when encouraging reporting, which doesn't necessarily mean more incidents are happening, just that you are finding out about more! Monitoring trends over time is helpful.

Has the type of reported incidents changed?

Are staff members feeling safer at work?

Do they feel the approach is working?

Have customer complaints about staff interactions changed?

What metrics are being used to track success?

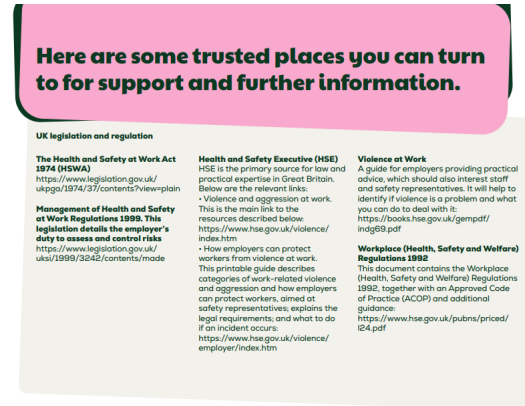
Were all staff trained in the new procedures? Are they using the tools and procedures provided?

How frequently is the data reviewed?

Have any adjustments been made following feedback?

Is there a plan for ongoing support or training?

Resources

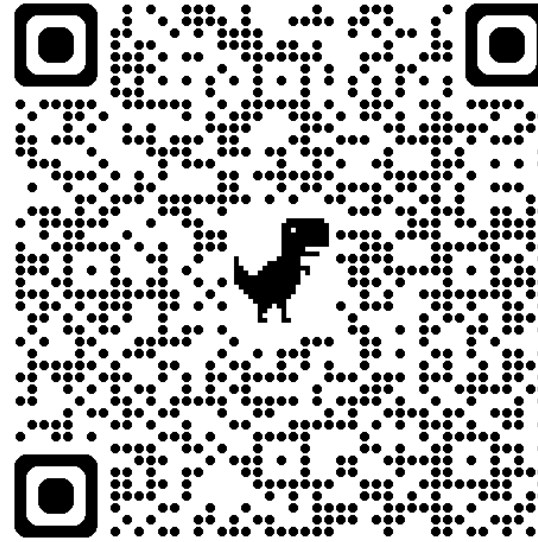


We provide linked resources from a variety of different sources (government, charity, advocacy, etc.)

Thank you and please get involved!



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Scan this QR or click the link below to download the 'Managing violence and aggression in retail best practice guidelines'

[Managing violence and aggression in retail | Customer resources | Retail Trust](#)

[Join our workplace violence and aggression research network \(VARN\)](#)

Interested in participating in research with your organisation - Please contact ashton@manchester.ac.uk



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