

# Harassment in the retail workplace

2021 report

September 2021

## Harassment in the retail workplace

Shopworkers have been at the forefront of keeping the nation fed and clothed throughout the pandemic, working long hours and designated as keyworkers, as the country responded to COVID-19. However, Foot Anstey's research shows the majority of these same keyworkers experienced physical, sexual or verbal harassment during this period.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought more attention to those working in customer facing roles and recognition from the government of their key role. [An open letter](#) to the Prime Minister in July, organised by the British Retail Consortium and signed by 100 retail leaders calling for better protection for retail workers, was an indication of the widespread nature of the issue.

This report highlights the key findings of the Foot Anstey survey, and reflects on what the data might mean for the strategies employed by retailers to provide greater protection for their employees, and enable those on the shop floor to feel safe and protected in their daily working lives.

The Foot Anstey study surveyed 1,048 retail workers during the period July 2021 to August 2021. Interviews were conducted by online panel and comprised shopworkers from a variety of retail settings, including but not limited to, supermarkets, department stores, petrol stations, and online retailers.

## Harassment in the retail workplace Key data at-a-glance

61% 

had experienced offensive behaviour while working for their current employer

50% 

noted a rise in harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic vs. **42%** who did not

52%

reported a rise in aggressive behaviour when enforcing their retailer's COVID safety measures after 'Freedom Day' on 19 July – **21%** did not

65% 

believed there are not enough laws in place to protect shopworkers

39% 

had experienced unwanted touching or hugging or inappropriate touching of a sexual nature

65% 

wanted zero tolerance messages to customers and **42%** highlighted a need for clear guidance on how to report harassment

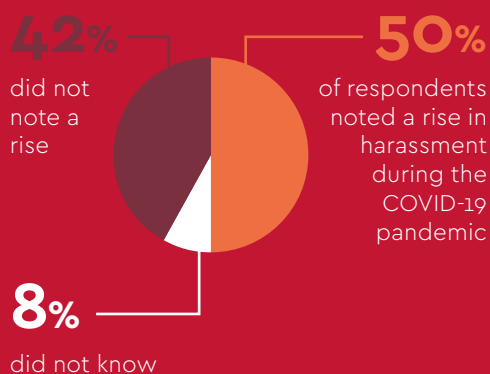
# Harassment in the retail workplace

## Type of harassment and the triggers

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic placed a strain on many of the people who worked in a retail environment. Like many other keyworker groups, they stepped up and headed out to work knowing they would be surrounded by people, while others were being told to stay at home.

The stories of physical, sexual and verbal harassment experienced in the retail workplace during this period are both unpleasant and concerning.

Our 2021 survey found that:



Of those that had seen a rise:



Masks (57%), social distancing (45%), limits on customer numbers in store (38%) and stock shortages (36%) were listed as the main causes of confrontation

52% reported a rise in aggressive behaviour when enforcing their retailer's COVID safety measures after 'Freedom Day' on 19 July – 21% did not

**"Many of our colleagues have been coughed at or spat on."**

British Retail Consortium (BRC)

Open Letter to the UK Government

July 2021.



# Harassment in the retail workplace

## The impact of COVID-19 safety measures



"Our 2021 study paints an unpleasant picture of the experiences of many retail workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the keyworkers faced physical, sexual or verbal harassment as they went about their daily work, resulting in significant numbers experiencing mental health issues as a direct result. Many of these people fall into the 18–34 age bracket, widely reported to be the group at greatest risk of suffering with mental health issues."

**Nathan Peacey**

Head of Retail & Consumer  
Foot Anstey



**72%** believed COVID safety measures in stores made them feel safer, versus just **10%** who did not

The safety measures favoured included:



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## The impact on mental health

The Foot Anstey survey shows an alarmingly high percentage of workers who responded that they had experienced or seen some sort of harassment in their working environment – and there are potentially longer term effects.

The survey found that **61%** had experienced some form of offensive behaviour while working for their current employer, for whom the impact manifested as stress (**45%**), anxiety (**43%**) and a loss of self-esteem (**19%**)



Retailers recognise the importance of protecting their frontline employees and can encourage the government to offer great legislative protection, however, this survey highlights the need for a continued focus on ensuring their own organisations have the appropriate protocols, training and support in place.



**Patrick Howarth**

Partner  
Foot Anstey

"Responsible retailers are increasing the pressure on government to take effective steps, whilst doubling down on their own efforts to look after their people. Retail workers told us they felt there were not enough laws in place to protect them. It is essential that existing laws are enforced, or new ones brought in, to support retailers' own protocols, guidance and response measures and support those on the retail frontline in feeling safe and supported."

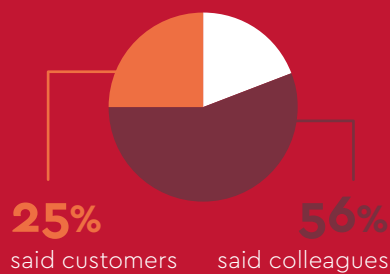
# Harassment in the retail workplace

## The impact of physical contact

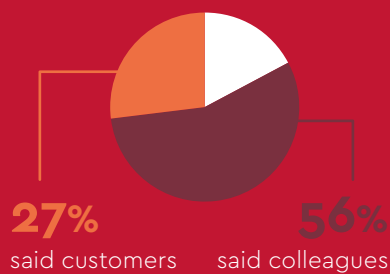
39% have experienced unwanted touching or hugging or inappropriate touching of a sexual nature.

### 2021 results

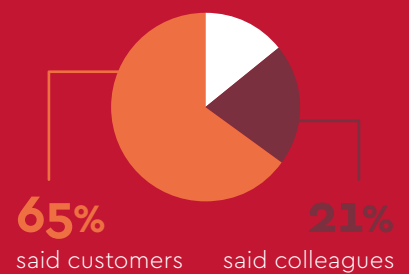
You said that you had experienced **unwanted touching or hugging** while working for your current employer. Who carried out this behaviour?



You said that you had experienced **inappropriate touching of a sexual nature** while working for your current employer. Who carried out this behaviour?



You said that you had experienced **physically aggressive or violent behaviour** while working for your current employer. Who carried out this behaviour?



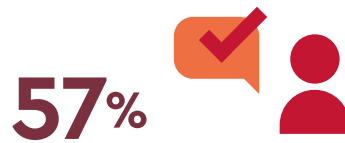
# Harassment in the retail workplace

## What are your employees saying about your services?

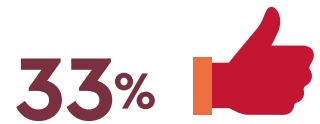
Foot Anstey's survey asked all respondents how they felt about their current employers' HR services/grievance processes.

The results show a level of confidence in the protocols and guidance retailers had in place but some did report a lack of understanding about what policies were in place and how a complaint would be handled.

This suggests that, while retailers have taken many steps to address the issue, there is still more that can be done to improve employee perceptions around the level of support available.



of those surveyed said they know there are HR services or assistance lines available for them to contact at their place of employment



said that they think their employer deals with harassment complaints 'quite well' and **13%** said 'very well'

"Imagine confidential HR services were available at your workplace and you had experienced an incident you wanted to complain about. Would any of the following reasons deter you from using HR services?"

48%

"If I thought my complaint would make no difference to my situation"

45%

"If I thought my complaint would not be dealt with honestly"

40%

"If I thought the person I'm complaining about would be told who made the complaint"



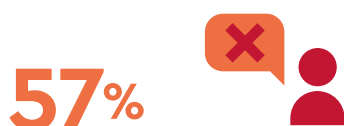
said they were confident in their employer's ability to handle grievances, compared to **37%** who said they were not confident



of female retail workers believe there are not enough HR protocols in place at their current employer, compared to **36%** of men



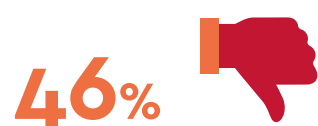
of all respondents believe their employer does not care about protecting staff from inappropriate behaviour



of those surveyed have not accessed a confidential HR service, **26%** said such services are not available at their workplace



of shopworkers surveyed had raised a complaint relating to inappropriate behaviour from colleagues or customers – **68%** of this group were female



of this **20%** said they were satisfied with the outcome of the complaint but **53%** were not satisfied



# Harassment in the retail workplace

## Opportunities and recommendations

Two years on from our first study into the issue, harassment in the retail workplace remains a real problem. The COVID pandemic has only exacerbated the issue and made many front-line retail workers feel vulnerable.

While many believe further laws are required to protect shopworkers, there is also a clear need to ensure existing laws are enforced. We are seeing responsible retailers doubling down on their efforts to protect and support their employees, and the research shows this will need to be a focus for some time to come.

Additionally, retailers' focus on ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) represents a real opportunity and an additional impetus to invest and focus on this area of risk. We believe that being recognised for dealing with this issue effectively could bring a range of benefits and competitive advantage.


**In addition, we would recommend that retailers focus on five key areas:**

- Ensure you are able to demonstrate that identified mitigations, such as protocols, guidance and actions to look after your people, are happening consistently and in the right manner
- Identify and fill any gaps in current implementation
- Examine what else you can do to make a difference and, crucially, involve your employees
- Be clear that this is a key risk for the business and is identified in the risk register to ensure Board oversight is provided, and ensure responsibility for providing reassurance to the Board is led by a senior member of the executive team
- Consider bigger picture solutions to make a difference. This might include the merits of lobbying for new laws, approaches to improve the use of existing laws through modern methods of evidence gathering, collaborations with local retailers and with employees, unions and industry groups

# Harassment in the retail workplace

## 2019 study vs 2021 study

Foot Anstey's 2021 study found there was a 6 percentage point increase in males who had heard language of a sexual, racist, homophobic or otherwise very offensive nature compared to the 2019 study, whereas there was a 4 percentage point decrease in females over the two studies.

**56%** 


of those surveyed in 2021 said that colleagues had carried out unwanted touching or hugging while at work. This is a 3 percentage point increase compared to 2019

**25%** 


of females said they experienced physically aggressive or violent behaviour while at work – a 2 percentage point increase on 2019

**29%** 

of supermarket staff surveyed in 2021 had experienced unwanted touching or hugging – in 2019 it was **25%**

**65%** 

of respondents said (in both the 2019 and 2021 surveys) customers were the ones to carry out physically aggressive or violent behaviour

**10%** 

of supermarket workers said (in 2019) they had experienced inappropriate touching of a sexual nature, **this increased by 4 percentage points** in the 2021 study to **14%**



## Contact us

If you would like to find out more information about anything in this report please get in touch.



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**To find out more visit our website**

**[www.footanstey.com/in-focus/harassment-in-retail](http://www.footanstey.com/in-focus/harassment-in-retail)**

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