

Foot Anstey Harassment in retail report

September 2025



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27%



**of retail workers
now say that they
have experienced
physically aggressive
or violent behaviour in
their current jobs.**

This figure alone is unequivocal evidence that harassment and violence against retail workers and the level of unacceptable behaviour within stores has become untenable. Many of us have seen retail crime and harassment with our own eyes – shoplifting, abusive language and even violence are no longer rare events in shops across the UK.

Who are the perpetrators?

Most retail crime is committed (often repeatedly) by individuals facing economic hardship or those with a drug or alcohol dependency driven to theft as a means of funding their addiction. A significant proportion of the balance is at the hands of organised criminals stealing to order for re-sale. As well as verbal abuse, these incidents are often accompanied by threats of actual violence.

Overlaid onto this, is lower-level harassment by disgruntled customers, often verbal in nature, but insidious, nonetheless. It is important not to forget that, regrettably, colleague on colleague harassment also features in the mix.

No single solution

What has become clear is that the problem of retail crime and harassment is ultimately underpinned by societal challenges that cannot be solved by the police alone. While they have a key role to play in tackling retail crime and harassment, we know that every stakeholder in the industry must play their part: from retailers to government, the security industry and customers themselves. The last two years have seen that begin to take place and the impact of a more collaborative effort is evidenced in some of the findings in this report.

It is particularly pleasing that this report in turn can begin to show green shoots of improvement. At Foot Anstey, we have been tracking retail workers' experiences of their workplaces since 2019 through a detailed survey of more than 1,300 people working in supermarkets, convenience stores, department stores, petrol stations, market stalls, in online retail and in a whole host of specialist shops throughout the country.

Retailers starting to control what they can control

This year, rather than a continuing cascade of worsening metrics, we are seeing some points of improvement. Fewer now report experiencing abusive and offensive language from customers. Fewer report unwanted touching. There is less stress, anxiety and fewer grievances are being reported.

But this is only the beginning. The overall picture of behaviour in retail environments is still a long way from where it needs to be. More than half of retail workers feel they still need more protection under law. And as we will discover in this report, the experience of unacceptable behaviour is not uniform across all demographics of retail workers. Some need greater help and protection than others.



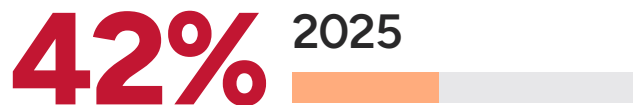
Thoughtless, unkind, and aggressive behaviour continues to threaten the wellbeing and safety of those working in retail, as Foot Anstey's latest research shows. It echoes findings for the Retail Trust's respect retail campaign which found nearly two thirds of retail workers felt stressed and anxious going into work last year due to this abuse.

Retailers are taking the threat to their staff's physical safety very seriously and more of them are now working with us to help protect their wellbeing, with hundreds of people set to take part in free training we're running this autumn. Shop workers, like everyone, deserves to feel happy and safe at work, and to be treated with respect, and the Retail Trust will continue to campaign for shoppers to change their behaviour.

Chris Brook-Carter
Chief Executive
Retail Trust

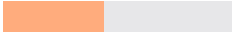
Surveying the retail landscape: green shoots of improvement

Foot Anstey's regular sector surveys allow us to track sentiment among retail workers' experiences of the workplace. The 2025 data for the first time shows a number of positive trends when compared to 2021 and 2023.



The percentage of retail workers experiencing stress and anxiety in relation to unacceptable behaviour in their workplaces has fallen.

2023 44%



2021 45%



The percentage of retail workers who have filed a grievance with their employers in relation to inappropriate behaviour in the workplace has fallen to a very low level.

2023 49%



2021 43%



Are two tiers of retailers emerging?

While this is to be welcomed, there is still a long way to go before the campaign can be called a success. There are still metrics from 2025 that show retail workers are facing issues that no employee should have to deal with in the workplace. For example, while the percentage of workers filing grievances with their employers over inappropriate behaviour has fallen, the majority of those who did file grievances (51%) were unhappy with the outcome.

This, it seems, is a sign that retailers are dividing into two tiers – a large majority who have heard their teams' concerns and implemented changes to act upon them, and a small minority who have failed to do so. Supporting these businesses to help them back in line with rapidly improving 'best practice' should be a priority in the coming year.



The signs of improvement in this year's survey are a demonstration of what the retail industry's stakeholders can achieve if they pull in unison towards a common goal. To increase that cooperation should be the single biggest target for the coming year. It remains the key way to push back the tide of unacceptable behaviour.

Nathan Peacey
Head of Retail & Consumer
Foot Anstey

Staff recognise where retailers are supporting them

Another positive development can be seen in retail workers becoming increasingly aware of where their employers have invested capital, time and effort into supporting their staff with better HR resourcing and systems.

Retail workers all need to feel that their employer is on their side when it comes to their experience of unacceptable behaviour at work. Employees who feel their employers aren't doing enough to support them – or even worse, that their employers don't care – are more likely to be disaffected and ultimately leave. In a tight and expensive labour market, improving staff retention should be high up on the boardroom agenda. Quite apart from the moral imperative to support staff, a failure to address inappropriate behaviour by customers and colleagues hits the bottom line, worsening staff retention rates and driving up recruitment costs and exposes the business to the risk of litigation.

27%



The percentage of retail workers who say their employers do not have enough HR protocols in place to deal with inappropriate behaviour in the workplace has fallen sharply.

2023 42%



2021 41%



24%



The percentage of retail workers who feel that their employers don't care about protecting staff from inappropriate behaviour has also fallen.

2023 35%



2021 36%



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It is clear the Government is beginning to take retail crime and harassment seriously and we are hopeful the Crime and Policing Bill and new duties to prevent sexual harassment will continue this positive progress. However, we must remember that abuse doesn't just take place between customers and workers, but also between colleagues. Instilling a zero-tolerance approach to colleague-on-colleague harassment and identifying potential risk areas to ensure staff feel protected at work – both on the shopfloor and in the staff room – is paramount.

Patrick Howarth
Partner
Foot Anstey

Will the new 'assault on a retail worker' offence and sexual harassment legislation make a difference?

Looking forward, there are hopes that the government will continue to help tackle unacceptable behaviour in retail. Since October 2024, employers have been required to 'take reasonable steps' to prevent sexual harassment of their employees (and which, in accordance with the proposals in the Employment Rights Bill, will be extended to 'all reasonable steps'). This duty is an 'anticipatory' one, meaning that retailers must foresee the possibility of sexual harassment taking place in their businesses and actively make changes to stop them taking place. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has been clear that the duty applies to harassment by not just other employees, but also by customers and suppliers. Further the Employment Rights Bill is proposing to re-introduce employer liability for all types of third-party harassment (not only sexual harassment). As more retailers take those proactive steps, we're hopeful the dial will begin to move.

The Crime and Policing Bill, likely to become law later this year, is another legislative tool with the potential to help call time on retail crime. This bill creates a new offence of assault on a retail worker. Assault in the retail setting can be, but rarely is, prosecuted under a range of different offences, including assault, affray, threatening or abusive behaviour, harassment, wounding, and several others. While there have long been calls for a specific offence of assault on a retail worker to be created, including by trade unions and industry bodies, an inquiry by the Home Affairs Committee in 2021 finally led the government

to set the wheels in motion on new legislation. We believe it should be more widely drafted to criminalise verbal assaults (as in Scotland) but nonetheless view it as positive. While its impact will not start to be seen for several months, we are optimistic that it will drive up reporting of crime and Police response leading to increases in charging, conviction and sentencing which will benefit and protect retail workers to a degree.

Even while the legal landscape for prosecuting perpetrators of retail crime remains patchy, retailers themselves have a role to play in bringing them to life by informing the police when incidents occur. Many managers feel that the reporting process is onerous, but police forces across the country have stressed how vital it is that abuse doesn't go undocumented. In many cases, increased reporting leads to police deploying more resources, which can see a material reduction in crime levels..



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Only 36% of all retail crime is reported to police so it is clear more needs to be done to build confidence amongst convenience store workers that police will respond to their reports. We support the ACS's call for retailers to report all incidents to enable police to act whilst also building an intelligence-based picture of those committing what are, often, repeat crimes..

Katy Bourne OBE and Andy Dunbobbin

APCC's Joint Leads on Business and Retail Crime in response to Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) annual Crime Report



In their shoes: retail worker experiences in 2025

While it's clear that progress is beginning to be made in the battle against unacceptable behaviour in retail, there is equally no question that there is still too much abuse directed at retail workers. Our survey in 2025 is more detailed than ever before on the kinds of inappropriate behaviour workers in the retail sector have to deal with, the reasons for those behaviours occurring, and the effects it has on teams.

Some of the survey's headline figures remain shocking, regardless of any improvements there have been in the past two years. These numbers lay bare the ongoing need for Retailers Against Harassment, our joint product created with the Retail

Trust to support retailers in their efforts to foster safer working environments for their employees. The certification programme combines the skills, advice and combined experience of both our organisations to assist retailers in protecting staff from harassment and supporting them if it happens.

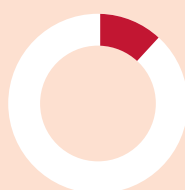
Foot Anstey and the Retail Trust work with participating retailers to review and improve the measures they have put in place to protect workers and deal with harassment. The scheme's 'harassment in retail certification' is then awarded to those retailers who meet the relevant criteria to emphasise the actions it is taking to combat abuse.

27%



of retail workers says that they have experienced **physically aggressive or violent behaviour** at work.

10%



of retail workers say that they have experienced **physical violence** from an angry customer.

16%



of retail workers say they have to deal with an angry customer **at least once a day**.

This rises to:

23% of retail workers in London

21% at independent convenience stores

25% at for workers at petrol stations

De-escalation training for retail workers

At face value hostage negotiators and retail workers have little in common! However, the former are experts at de-escalating high intensity situations. Retailers are learning that equipping their staff with the right skills can help dilute or even avert workplace conflict.

Ask yourself:

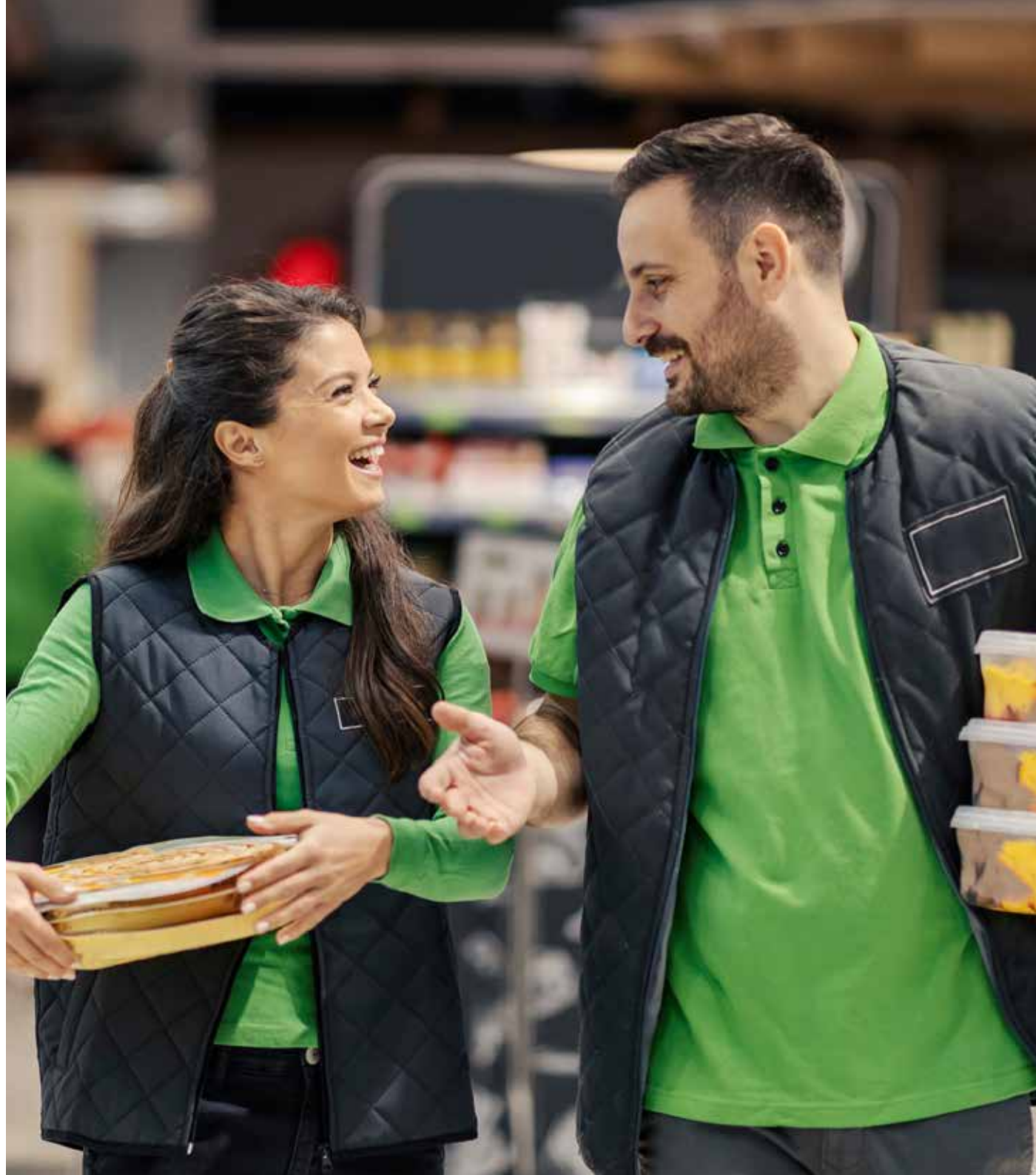
“ Do my staff know the early warning signs of an encounter that may turn violent?

“ Are my managers trained in the art of de-escalation?

“ Are my staff equipped with the training to know how to behave when facing hostile or aggressive behaviour?



If you've answered 'no' to any of the above, contact the Retail Trust, who can provide specialist training and support to staff. retailtrust.org.uk



Breaking down the mental health impact for retail workers

The effects of abuse on retail workers are profound, particularly on mental health. They are also not uniform across all demographics of retail workers.

We must always remember that retail workers are not simply statistics – they are people who must live with their experiences of the workplace. They take them home. They affect their mood in the short term, and their mental health in the long term. While it will never be possible to eliminate every instance of unacceptable behaviour from the retail workplace, these figures must act as a reminder that we all share a responsibility to protect all individuals from

those working in the contact or call centres to those operating at the front line on shop floors and at tills, to ensure they are supported and protected at work.

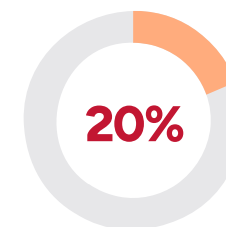
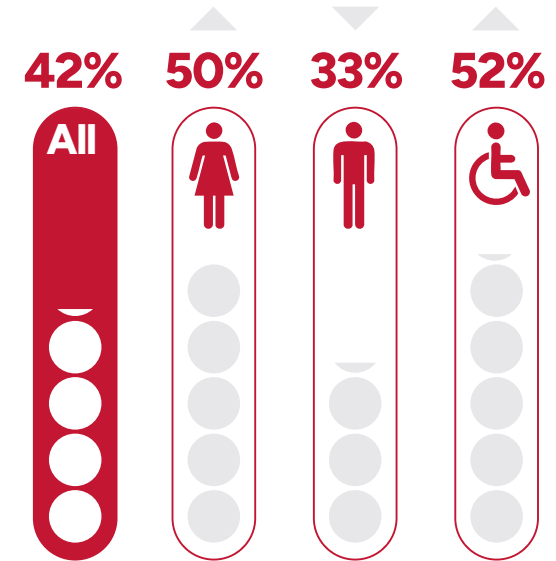
While we have discussed the legislative changes that may have a positive impact on workers in the retail sector, our survey shows that workers remain unconvinced about the legal protections they receive. A majority (51%) of retail workers say that there is not enough protection for them in law. This is highest among workers aged 55+ (65%), and those with disabilities (63%).

In the unfortunate event of them experiencing abuse at work, we also have to be there to support them – whether that is through investigating and prosecuting those responsible, post incident support or through handling grievances with fairness and compassion.

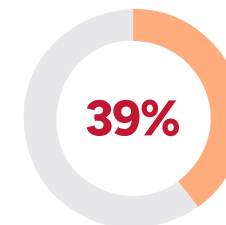
Our survey found that:

42%

of retail workers who experienced any form of unacceptable behaviour in their workplace felt stressed about the issue. This rose to **50%** for women, in contrast to **33%** for men. The highest levels of stress about the problem were experienced by retail workers with disabilities (**52%**).



20% of retail workers who experienced **inappropriate behaviour** felt a loss of self-esteem.



Again, retail workers with disabilities reported being the most affected at 39%.

Protecting the LGBTQ+ community in retail settings

As we have mentioned more than once in this report, the effects of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace are not uniform across all demographics of retail workers. Our survey data makes clear that one demographic consistently reports the most difficult experience at work, across a wide range of inappropriate behaviours: gay and lesbian staff.

These figures should stand as a significant reminder to the entire retail industry that experiences of unacceptable behaviour are not uniform. Protecting teammates from abuse from customers does not necessarily protect them from abuse from colleagues. There is an implicit trust between colleagues in the workplace that makes this kind of abuse particularly harmful.

There can also be power imbalances – such as between senior and junior colleagues – acting as an aggravating factor in its seriousness. It is important that any anti-harassment policy – a foundational piece of any approach to preventing harassment – considers the specific risks of abuse taking place between colleagues, rather than focusing purely on abuse by customers. Taking into account the specific experiences of gay and lesbian retail workers is also important within this approach.

20% 

20% of respondents who identify as gay or lesbian, have experienced physical violence from customers – the highest among any demographic.

58% 

58% of gay and lesbian workers have heard **extremely offensive language** (including homophobic abuse) at work, compared to 36% across all retail workers. 86% of this group experienced this abuse from customers, while 39% experienced it from coworkers.

32% 

32% of gay and lesbian retail workers have experienced **unwanted touching at work**, compared to 18% on average across all retail staff. It is particularly concerning to see that the split between customers and colleagues as perpetrators of this behaviour was equal – recording 66% for both.

22% 

22% of gay and lesbian retail workers have experienced **unwanted sexual touching at work**, compared to 10% of retail workers on average. Colleagues were the most common perpetrators at 79% of those affected, with customers at 57%.

37% 

37% of gay and lesbian retail workers have experienced **aggressive or violent behaviour at work**, compared to 27% on average across all retail workers. 92% of those have experienced this behaviour from customers, while 37% experienced it from colleagues.



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Establishing and maintaining a strong bond of trust between a retailer and its employees is a central pillar of combating the problem of abuse and violence in the workplace. Employees that feel protected and supported are more likely to remain with the business in the long term and contribute to protecting and supporting their colleagues too.

Nathalie Ingles
Partner
Foot Anstey

Trust growing between retailers and their employees

The last four years have seen retailers make good progress on improving their relationships with their employees. Our survey shows:

2025  27%

2023  31%

2021  35%

A fall in the percentage of retail workers who think their employers do not give them enough support in dealing with **inappropriate behaviour at work**.

2025  27%

2023  42%

2021  41%

A fall in the percentage of workers who think there are not enough HR protocols in place to deal with the problem of **unacceptable behaviour**.

2025  24%

2023  35%

2021  36%

A decline in the percentage of retail staff who think their employers don't care about the issue of **unacceptable behaviour in the workplace**.

2025  9%

2023  19%

2021  20%

A reduction in the percentage of retail staff who report that they have **raised a grievance** with their employers.

However, there remains much to be done for retailers to make this bond even stronger. Our survey for 2025 also shows:

45% Only 45% of retail workers say that their employer provides enough **mental health support**. This rises to 51% at department stores and 62% at online retailers, but falls to just 39% at independent convenience stores

34% Only 34% of retail workers are aware of their employer having mandatory training sessions on **sexual harassment**, while only 37% are aware of active encouragement of sexual harassment reporting

56% 56% of retail staff want their employers to communicate a **zero-tolerance policy** on harassment to their customers, while 42% want them to provide clear guidance on how to report harassment

49% Only 49% of retail workers who reported a grievance in relation to **inappropriate workplace behaviour** were happy with the outcome. This falls to just 24% for retail workers with disabilities and 23% for those aged 55+

55% While 55% of retail workers overall believe their employers deal with **harassment grievances** well, the figure stands at 61% for men and 51% for women. This falls to 43% for retail workers with disabilities

Understanding the consumer perspective

It is important to remember that consumers are also victims of the rise in abuse in retail settings. While they are not often directly affected in the same way as retail workers, it can have a significantly negative impact on their experience of a store, and consequently on their likelihood of remaining a customer.

Our survey shows that verbal abuse is the most common form of unacceptable behaviour consumers have seen, with 46% of consumer respondents to our survey saying they have seen customers swearing in a retail environment. 59% say they have heard customers raise their voices in a retail setting.

It is not only retail workers and their employers who are concerned about the level of unacceptable behaviour in their workplaces. Consumers too want to see it addressed. They identify body-worn cameras as a potential answer, with 46% of consumers responding to our survey saying it is their preferred solution to the problem. Body-worn cameras are growing quickly as a method of tackling abuse in retail, with a wide range of retailers having either committed to their use or undertaken trials. We believe that used properly, they can act as both a useful deterrent and a critical source of evidence when seeking prosecution of those who have broken the law.

Use of technology in the fight against retail crime

Using body worn cameras isn't the only tech-based solution retailers are deploying to reduce retail crime. Many retailers are trialling others, including facial recognition, audio headsets and RFID tags.

While these innovations show promise in helping reduce retail crime, retailers must be careful to ensure usage complies with the legal and regulatory regime, such as ensuring usage of facial recognition and body-worn cameras meets their obligations to the Data Protection Act.

For more information on how to ensure you're remaining compliant, speak to our data protection and tech/cyber security expert Kristina Holt.



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of consumers
responding to our
survey identify body-worn
cameras as a potential answer to
unacceptable behaviour.

Young people don't complain – until online later

When assessing consumers' opinions around complaints more broadly, an intriguing generational divide begins to emerge. Our survey of consumers shows: practice should be a priority in the coming year.

Young people (those aged 18-24) find it most difficult to complain about a retail experience, with only **36%** saying they feel comfortable complaining. This rises to **51%** on average across consumers of all ages and **54%** among those aged 65+, who are most comfortable complaining.

Young people, however, are the most comfortable age group when complaining online later about an experience in retail – **31%** of that age group said this was their preferred method of complaint compared to just **12%** on average across all consumers.

On average **47%** of all consumers prefer to complain 'there and then' in the store about a problem, but this falls to just **29%** for those aged 18-14.

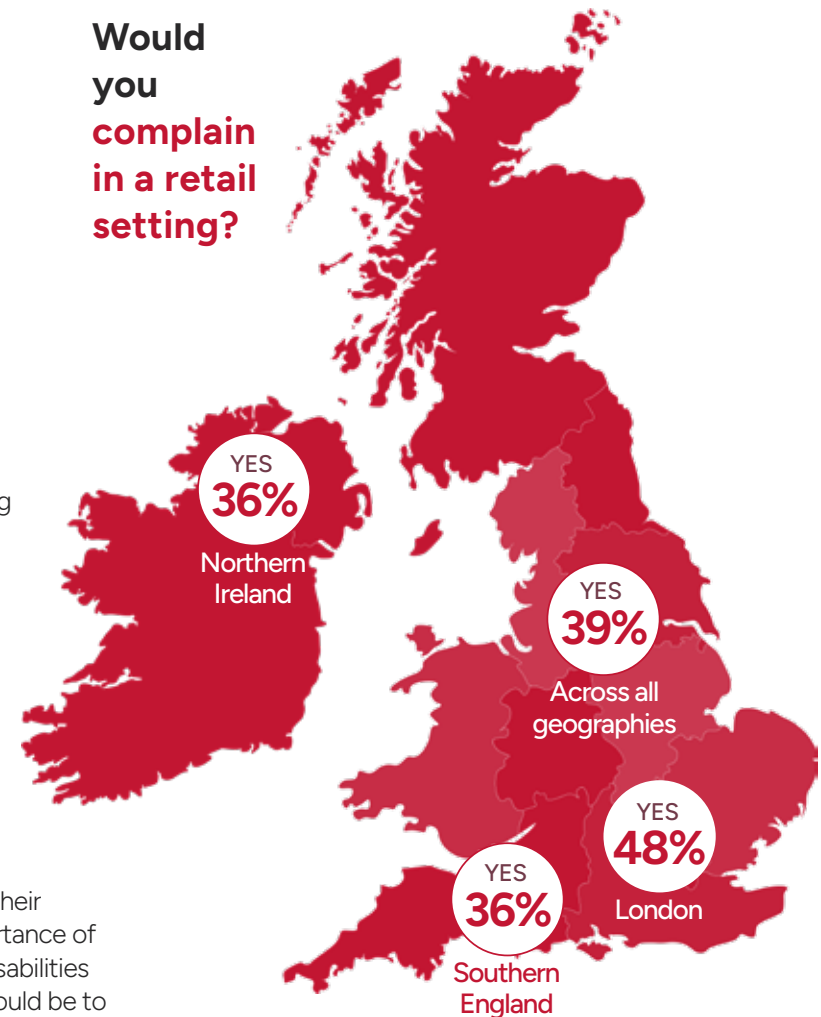
While retailers are likely aware that younger consumers not complaining 'in real time' does not necessarily mean they were happy with their experience, these figures highlight just how important it is for retailers to monitor Google Reviews, Trustpilot pages and complaints inboxes to better understand the views of younger customers.

There are also geographic splits when it comes to consumer complaints. While the idea that people in London have less time and less patience is a

stereotype, it is somewhat borne out by our survey of consumers, which shows that Londoners are more likely than those in any other region to have complained in a retail setting. **48%** of those living in the capital have complained to a retailer compared to an average of **39%** across all geographies. The least likely to have complained are consumers in Southern England and in Northern Ireland at **36%**.

A final note of caution is sounded by consumers on the topic of self-service checkouts. While this topic is well-known and assessed by retailers, it is worth noting that a majority (**53%**) of consumers aged 65+ say that their retail experience has changed for the worse by the introduction of self-service checkouts, compared to an average of **36%** of consumers across all demographics. It is also easy to overlook the needs of consumers with disabilities when analysing the pros and cons of self-checkouts. Our survey shows that **47%** of consumers with disabilities say that self-checkouts have negatively affected their retail experience. This highlights the importance of designing self-checkout terminals with disabilities in mind – are they as accessible as they could be to those with visual impairments, hearing impairments, or those who use wheelchairs?

Would you complain in a retail setting?



36% of young people (those aged 18-24) find it most difficult to complain about a retail experience

Has your retail experience
worsened since the introduction
of self-service checkouts?



of consumers
aged 65+ said
yes



across all
demographics
said yes



of consumers
with disabilities
said yes

Conclusion – picking up the pace of progress

With two years of progress – albeit relatively limited progress – behind us, what might the next two years hold for retailers and their staff when it comes to dealing with inappropriate behaviour?

The government's two flagship policies in this area, the duty to prevent sexual harassment and the new offence of assault against a retail worker, will bed in fully over the coming year. We are cautiously optimistic about the impact they could have. While neither is a 'silver bullet' that will cut abuse of retail workers overnight, both will help embed a zero-tolerance approach to those who behave unacceptably in retail settings. In particular, increased consistency of charging, conviction and sentencing in cases of assault would help retail workers feel safer. Previously, the patchwork of laws protecting them meant those guilty of attacking retail staff might escape justice.

Hopefully, this will be brought to an end by the new law.

Another way of making retail workers safer – and feel safer too – would be to increase the use of body-worn cameras. Lidl rolled them out across all its stores in 2023. Sainsbury's reported it had 8,600 in use by staff last year. Asda, Co-op, Aldi and Tesco have all at least trialled the devices. While this is a positive for retail staff, retailers must be sure that their use of these cameras is compliant with their responsibilities under the Data Protection Act. Shoppers must be aware they are being recorded, there need to be clear policies for how long the recordings are retained and why, and only authorised personnel should have access to the recordings. People whose images are recorded also have the right to access them and request for them to be deleted – so policies and processes need to be in place to deal with those requests in a timely fashion. Undertaking a Data Protection Impact Assessment before rolling out body worn cameras is a recommended foundational step for retailers.

Survey methodology

The data in this report was provided by Survation. The first survey, that of retail workers, questioned 1,316 individuals aged 18+ living in England and Wales and employed in the retail sector. The survey was undertaken online between June 16th and June 25th, 2025. The second survey, that of the general public, questioned 2,011 individuals aged 18+ and resident in the UK, weighted by age, gender, region, educational qualifications and political preferences to represent the population overall. The survey was undertaken online on June 16th and June 17th, 2025. For further information, contact researchteam@survation.com. Survation is a Market Research Society company partner and a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.



The improvements of the last two years are proof of what can be achieved by working together. The challenge is now to deliver that on an even greater scale, drawing in more and smaller businesses. Independent retailers – and their staff – are at risk of being left behind as investment and best practice both advance. For larger businesses, ensuring all functions in the business are working cooperatively can be a challenge. A joined-up approach, led from the c-suite and involving loss prevention, HR, finance and customer experience teams among others, will lead to the best outcomes for retail workers, customers and the business at large.

Nathan Peacey
Head of Retail & Consumer
Foot Anstey

About Foot Anstey

Foot Anstey is a UK top 100 full-service law firm, operating from 11 locations nationwide. Retail is one of our core sectors, with more than 50 lawyers advising clients on every aspect of the sector, from supplier contracts to brand collaborations, franchising, employment, intellectual property, real estate, disputes, events, sponsorship, data protection and risk management.

We have market-leading expertise in advising retailers on dealing with harassment and abuse of their employees, and partner with the Retail Trust on the Retailers Against Harassment Certification to help tackle the problem and protect workers. We are also associate members of the British Retail Consortium.

We help retailers answer the key questions in relation to protecting their staff from abuse, like:

- ◀ **Are body worn cameras the right solution for us? Are we set up to use them in a compliant way?**
- ◀ **Is our grievance process up to standard? Are we handling complaints from our staff as well as we could?**
- ◀ **Are we compliant with the duty to prevent sexual harassment? Do we have the right policies in place?**
- ◀ **Are we doing everything we should to protect our team from harassment not only by customers, but by colleagues too?**

Getting any of these wrong carries significant risk – not only to staff and their safety, but to the reputation of the business and ultimately its bottom line.

If this report has triggered any concerns about risks to your business or staff, don't hesitate to contact the Foot Anstey team.

To stay ahead of retail industry developments, sign up to receive Retail & Consumer insights by emailing: **marcomms@footanstey.com**. Our team produces regular insights on issues affecting the retail sector, including monthly retail and consumer trends reviews and Marketing Matters, the newsletter tracking advertising and marketing issues.

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