



**VIOLENCE AT
WORK -
A SURVEY OF
UNISON
EMPLOYERS
IN SCOTLAND
2016**

October 2016

UNISON Scotland
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Violent Assaults on Public Service Staff in Scotland
Survey 2016

1. INTRODUCTION

Since 2006, UNISON Scotland has carried out an annual survey of assaults to public sector workers by issuing a Freedom of Information (FoI) request to all employers of UNISON members in the public sector. The 2016 survey was carried out from August to October 2016 by e-mail.

Our analysis of the figures received for 2016 shows a total of **41,143** assaults - an increase of **2,684** compared with last year's figure of **38,279**.

Over the last year Local Government assaults have **risen** by **4,399** from **13,206** to **17,605**, In Health there has been a **decrease** of **1,520** from **18,636** in 2015 to **17,116**.

The changes in these figures always come with a warning. Some of the increase will reflect greater awareness and better reporting – partly a result of the campaigning work done by UNISON and our sister trade unions. However, some employers still appear to have very low figures which raises the suspicion of under-reporting. Some employers will have changed their reporting systems for various reasons and the basis of reporting may affect the outcome.

The integration of health and social care, creating health and care partnerships which are made up of both local government and NHS staff, continues and although most workers remain with their original employers, this may change the figures for violent incidents as well.

It is now ten years since our first survey of employers in 2006 identified just over 20,000 violent incidents in the NHS and local government. The figures have steadily increased over this period. **According to our surveys, reported violent assaults on public service workers have more than doubled in ten years.** Every single violent incident suffered by a worker going about their job serving the public remains completely unacceptable. The doubling of reported violent incidents must be addressed directly by employers, workers and government.

We would argue that this shows the problem is clearly getting worse rather than better.

The recording of incidents in the health service has improved with the system known as Datix, which appears to have made reporting more consistent across the territorial health boards.

We have noted in previous surveys that reporting in local authorities has improved in recent years, with more councils being able to produce proper information. However, there are still a few whose information is limited, e.g. they are still

sending in a list of assaults, with no totals, and clearly no co-ordination between separate departments. In addition some have not recorded verbal assaults. Overall monitoring of figures within an authority cannot take place if the statistics are kept in departmental silos and never collated centrally.

2. LEGISLATION

UNISON Scotland campaigned for and welcomed the introduction of the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act (EWA) in 2005 and its subsequent amendments. We wanted to see legislation much wider in scope than the Bill as originally drafted. We favoured a Bill covering not just a limited group of emergency workers, but all public service workers.

It still remains our view that the Bill should have given statutory effect to that guidance, recognising that workers providing a service to the public should be given specific legal protection.

Significant objections to the Bill came from the Law Society and Faculty of Advocates, amongst others, who argued that common law and other statutory provisions covered most of the Bill's provisions. It was even claimed that there would be no successful prosecutions. However, the Act has been used extensively with 2,704 prosecutions to date, as can be seen from the table below.

Over the last few years convictions under the Act have averaged around 300 per year.

People with a charge proved in Scottish Courts for offences under the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005										
	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
EWA 2005 Total	54	200	275	301	281	323	356	334	292	288
EWA Section 1(1)	11	44	40	74	113	136	159	142	126	131
EWA: Section 2(1)	14	74	90	76	37	39	34	36	30	36
EWA: Section 3(1)	-	3	2	4	2	4	1	2	1	-
EWA: Section 5(1)	29	79	143	147	129	144	162	154	135	197

S:1(1) - Assault, obstruct or hinder constable/fire officer/person providing assistance in terms of S:35 or S:36 of the Fire (Scotland) Act 2005/ambulance worker.

S:2(1) - Assault, obstruct or hinder other emergency workers responding to emergency circumstances

S:3(1) - Assault, obstruct or hinder person assisting emergency worker responding to emergency circumstances

S:5(1) - Assault, obstruct or hinder health worker/ambulance worker/assistant to said workers on hospital premises

(Table extracted from a Scottish Government workbook www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00494414.xlsx which was published alongside the Criminal Proceedings in Scotland 2014-15 Statistical Bulletin: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Crime-Justice/PubCriminalProceedings>)

Although the issue of workplace violence has moved higher up the public agenda since the introduction of the EWA and deliberate acts of violence on public service workers have, rightly, been condemned by most members of the public, the prospect of further legislation has stalled over recent years and there appears to be no likelihood of any improvement in the near future. The Scottish Government opposed Hugh Henry's proposed Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill in 2009 which then fell and to date have no plans to introduce similar legislation themselves.

However, the experience of our membership and the results of our surveys tell us that the most vulnerable workers are not necessarily those from the emergency services but that all workers who deal with the public are at risk. Care workers face twice the national average risk of assault and nurses four times. There has also been a huge increase in assaults in schools, both for teaching and support staff. Whilst there has been a focus over the years on assaults to teachers, support staff, such as classroom assistants, pupil support assistants, assistants for special needs pupils often deal with the most difficult pupils in a school and are more likely to experience physical assaults.

The current EWA with its emphasis on 'blue light' services has the consequence of providing protection to predominantly male groups of workers., rather than nurses, care workers and classroom assistants, who are mainly female. This continues to be an equal opportunities issue.

3. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION SURVEY 2016

As in our previous surveys, the 2016 survey was sent to all local authorities and area health boards in Scotland, as well as to other public sector areas in which UNISON organises which are subject to the Freedom of Information legislation, asking for details on the number of assaults on workers during the past year, broken down by job title or department and nature of assault.

In response to the survey, we received data from 27 local authorities, and 12 of the 14 area health boards, ten universities and six NDPBs. We also increased coverage of FE colleges from 13 to 18.

For comparative purposes, the figures from the most recent year reported in the 2015 survey have been counted for those organisations which failed to respond. These were: Police Scotland and Fire Service Scotland; Angus, Clackmannanshire, East Dunbartonshire, Highland and West Lothian councils; and Highland and Western Isles health boards. Moray Council did not provide usable data for this survey.

Police Scotland failed to provide figures for a second year as they said it would prove too costly. They had provided these over the previous eight surveys both as Police Scotland and the predecessor area forces.

Local Government

Local government figures for violent incident reports have risen by **4,399** over the previous year, to **17,605**.

This year, of the 27 that responded, **18** councils had increases in their assault levels, **9** had shown decreases, and those that did not respond were categorised as remaining the same. Over the past year, Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Falkirk, Midlothian, Perth and Kinross, Shetland and Stirling all reported significant increases.

Local authorities of similar population size often seem to have large differences when it comes to reporting violent attacks on their staff.

For example, Orkney and Shetland are the smallest councils by population, each with fewer than 25,000 people, and are broadly similar in many other ways. Yet Shetland had reports of 347 violent incidents in the latest year, compared with only 12 for Orkney.

North Lanarkshire with about 335,000 people and South Lanarkshire with about 315,000 are Scotland's fourth and fifth largest councils by population. Yet North Lanarkshire consistently reports a substantially bigger number of violent incidents each year – ranging from 730 to 861 in the last four surveys - whereas South Lanarkshire has reported substantially fewer, ranging from 347 to 504.

Differences in reporting are also displayed in the ways council characterise violent incidents. The two largest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh reported quite substantial increases in violent incidents over the last year, after dipping sharply in the previous survey. Glasgow, the biggest city, unsurprisingly had the highest number of reports of violence amongst all the local authorities at 2,922. Edinburgh council staff reported 1,417 violent incidents.

Edinburgh categorised its 1,417 incidents in four groups:

- Violence with injury – 836
- Violence with no injury – 293
- Harassment – 25
- Threatening behaviour – 263

Glasgow allocated the 2,922 reported incidents to two categories:

- Verbal assault – 584
- Physical assault – 2338

Meanwhile Dundee categorised 739 reports of violence towards staff into:

- Physical Assaults – 455
- Attack by Animal – Less than 5
- Verbal threats - 27
- Damage to Council Property - 18
- Verbal Aggression - 131
- Damage to Private property - Less than 5
- Brandishing a Weapon – 51
- Threatening Behaviour - 52
- Stalking - Less than 5
- Other - Less than 5

West Dunbartonshire listed the following categories of workers who had faced violent incidents in the last year, which shows that the problem of violence towards staff reaches across many council departments and pay grades:

Head Teacher	Learning Assistant	Support Worker
Care support worker	Team leader	Welfare fund worker
Caretaking Supervisor	Accommodation Officer	Day Care worker
Teacher	Senior support worker	ASB environmental officer
Care worker	Bus/Transport escort	Café assistant
Homelessness worker	Bricklayer	

However, it remains the case that the majority of reported incidents of violence towards staff are faced by workers in education, especially jobs such as classroom assistant and in the caring sector.

For example there were 541 reported incidents of violence towards North Ayrshire council workers. The job titles of the most frequently assaulted workers were:

Classroom Assistant - 236
 Teacher - 142
 Care At Home Assistant – 28
 Early Years Practitioner - 23
 Residential Worker – 15

Health Service

In 2015-16 figures in the NHS decreased by **1,520** over the year to **17,116**. However although the total is down from 18,636 last year, reported incidents of violence against health workers are substantially higher than in 2013-14 when the figure was 15,057 - and fully 30 per cent higher than in 2012-13 when the figure was 13,142.

Six health boards actually showed an increase in their figures, while five had a fall. Ayrshire and Arran, Forth Valley, Lothian, Orkney, Scottish Borders and Shetland were the boards which reported more incidents than last time.

Fife, Grampian and Greater Glasgow and Clyde showed comparatively large falls from the previous year.

Fife reported 1,020 incidents in this survey – down from 1,653 last year – but this was still 12 per cent up on the figure of 911 from our survey in 2013.

Grampian showed the biggest drop – from 4,809 reported incidents last year to 2,881 in this survey. However it is reporting about four or five times the number of violent incidents which it was doing two or three years ago.

The largest board by population area, Greater Glasgow and Clyde, also has the highest number of violent incidents reported this year at 3,609. And again though this is down from last year's peak of 4,466 it is also substantially above the previous two years when there were 2,589 and then 2,590 reports.

The 3,609 incidents reported by the Glasgow board were categorised as follows:

Patient Physical Assault on Staff - 2170

Threat of Physical Violence - 682

Verbal Abuse - 717

Verbal Abuse (Disability) - 4

Verbal Abuse (Homophobic) - 3

Verbal Abuse (Racial) – 31

Verbal Abuse (Religion) - 2

Lanarkshire Health Board which also reported a slight fall from 1,599 last year accounted for its 1,489 violent incidents this year as follows:

“Of the 1,489 incidents recorded, 385 incidents reported ‘verbal abuse’, 652 incidents reported ‘assault’, 374 incidents reported threatening/intimidating behaviour, 65 incidents reported telephone abuse and 13 incidents reported harassment/stalking/victimization.”

This level is almost twice the rate of violent incidents reported by the Lanarkshire board in our 2014 report, which was 787.

The Lanarkshire response suggests that the main driver in the general increase in reported incidents is better reporting:

“All incidents are recorded on our electronic incident reporting system, Datix. As indicated previously, revised sub-category options were implemented from 1 February 2014. This along with improved reporting has resulted in increased numbers over earlier years.”

Police Scotland

Once again Police Scotland failed to respond with information on the grounds it would be too costly. Again we used the previous year's figures for our aggregating purposes.

Fire and Rescue Scotland

Fire and Rescue Scotland also unfortunately failed to provide a response to this survey.

Universities and Colleges

Most universities, with the exception of Queen Margaret, Stirling and West of Scotland universities offered a response this year. However, both Robert Gordon

and St Andrews universities provided what could at best be called obfuscatory responses with no useful information.

There were 10 violent incidents reported by universities in this year's survey – as against last year when there were 15.

The number of colleges providing figures this year has gone up. However, once more, none of the large Glasgow colleges replied. Colleges responses continue to show very low numbers of assaults. UNISON remains concerned that this could be due to under-reporting and further work needs be done on this sector.

Of those colleges that did supply figures, there were 17 assaults reported – compared with the 8 which we found the last survey.

Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs)

Six NDPBs responded and provided figures this year. There were 27 assaults in total – virtually no change from 26 last year. This year the Care Inspectorate noted 13 incidents, compared with none last year. Skills Development Scotland reported 6, down from 14 in the previous survey.

4. COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR – STAFF SURVEY

We know from the direct experience of our members in the community and voluntary sector that violent assaults on workers especially in care jobs are a huge problem. This is made worse partly because it is regarded by many employers and others as just 'part of the job'.

Unfortunately the Freedom of Information legislation which we use for this annual survey does not cover all of the areas in which UNISON has members, e.g. councils' Arms Length Bodies, charities, private care homes, etc. As a result we can not easily obtain accurate data on violent assaults on staff in the community and voluntary sector who are doing vital but frequently underpaid and jobs looking after vulnerable people in our communities. Many of the clients they care for present challenging behaviours and often the workers also face poor levels of support from their employers, even when they report violent incidents.

Earlier this year we ran a pilot survey of workers in the community and voluntary sector focusing on violence against staff. The preliminary results from our pilot survey only underline our longstanding concerns over violence at work in the community and voluntary sector.

Of the members - mainly women - who had experienced violence in the course of their work, 50% had been physically assaulted, 61% had faced threatening behaviour, 56% were verbally abused - and 56% had experienced a combination of all three. These were often frequent and sometimes daily occurrences.

All of these workers had reported at least one violent incident to a manager. Only 56% said their report had been followed up by their employer and only 44% felt the report was taken seriously.

Most worryingly, although most said their employer did actually encourage the reporting of violent incidents - **83% said that their employer regarded the violence as 'part of the job'**.

The lack of support only adds insult to injury when we look at some of the personal testimony of the workers who had been attacked.

A female project worker with a large care charity described her experience thus:

"The majority of people we work with are on the autistic spectrum and many have extreme challenging behaviour. I have been verbally abused, hair pulled, scratched, bitten, punched, kicked, pushed, objects thrown at me and spat on."

When asked how this made her feel, she said:

"Worthless. I reported some of the incidents - only if I was injured. We would be told this is the young person's normal behaviour."

A male support practitioner working with two other large charities described his direct experience of violence:

"People lashing out, threatened when things out of your control don't work out, these things constantly happen in the disability and learning disability sector - usually on a daily basis."

When asked how this made him feel, he replied:

"Awkward, useless, powerless, wondering where the backup - real not verbal - comes from?"

A female support worker in a large care charity said her experience had been:

"Spat on, items thrown at me, swore at, locked in a room."

As a result she had felt *"inadequate, teary, stressed, anxious, unsupported (wasn't the person I was supporting's fault) but they got rewarded for that behaviour so it continued."*

Another female support worker in a different charity gave this graphic description:

"I was speaking to another staff member when the client got up from his chair. Thinking he was going to the toilet I opened the door for him and stood back to allow him to pass. Instead he came towards me and hit me on the face, pushing my glasses and resulted in two black eyes. For the remainder of the shift he was constantly trying to hit out or push me."

How did it make her feel?

"Very insecure and threatened, upset at first and then shocked."

Many staff reported that no follow up action at all was taken, and others commented that even if they were moved from working with a specific client, someone else had to do the job and that training was not even offered.

We now plan to do a full scale survey of members in these areas which will supplement this annual violence at work report and form the basis of a campaign challenge the acceptance of violence in the care sector as 'part of the job' - and ultimately to eliminate it.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusion from this year's violence at work survey is that twice as many violent assaults on public workers are being reported now than when we began looking at this issue ten years ago.

As we noted previously, reporting systems are much improved, but - especially in local government - are still not showing sufficient consistency. But we believe from the evidence of the survey and from the experience of our members that the problem we face is not how to most accurately report violence at work but how to eliminate it altogether.

Once more UNISON Scotland calls for all councils to put the guidelines produced in 2010 by the Scottish Centre for Health Working Lives fully into practice, in order that we can make the level of violent assaults fall across Scotland.

It remains unclear to what extent the general upward trend of reported violent assaults on public workers reflects an actual rising wave of violence - or if it is simply uncovering a hidden level of violence which was already there but previously going unreported.

Either way it is not good news for our members who face these unacceptable assaults in their tens of thousands every year.

UNISON Scotland
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Further information/links:

UNISON Scotland Health and Safety page

<http://www.unison-scotland.org/about-us/health-and-safety/>

UNISON UK Health and Safety page

<https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge/health-and-safety/>

TUC's Work SMART page

<https://worksmart.org.uk/work-rights/health-and-safety>

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