

Managing Retail Work-related Violence

Website: www.police.gov.hk Hotline: 2721 2486

1. Introduction

a) This leaflet contains advice on how to assess and tackle retail related violence, and includes tips to help control the problem.

2. Background

a) Impact of violence on retail staff includes:

i) Physical injury;

ii) Work-related stress;

iii) Fear and anxiety; and

iv) Job dissatisfaction and poor performance.

b) Impact of violence on business includes:

i) Staff absence;

ii) Higher staff turnover;

iii) Increased recruitment and training costs;

iv) Damage to business reputation; and

v) Potential compensation claims.

3. Legal duties

a) Employers must protect the health, safety and welfare of employees, under the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance (Cap. 509). This means protection against:

i) Physical violence – including kicking, spitting, hitting or pushing, as well as use of

weapons;

ii) Verbal abuse - including shouting, swearing or insults, racial or sexual abuse; and

iii) Threats and intimidation.

b) Employers must carry out a risk assessment to identify whether violence is a problem, and develop a plan to improve the situation.

4. Risk assessment

a) Step 1 - Identify threats:

A threat is something that can cause harm, such as violence and aggression, and can be caused by:

i) Disagreements between customers;

ii) Unpredictable behaviour of shoplifters and drug users; and

iii) Verbal abuse.

Asking staff about their experiences and concerns will help identify threats as well as looking back at accident and ill-health records.

b) Step 2 - Identify who might be harmed and how?

People working at opening and closing times, or when dealing with complaints or returned items tend to be more at risk from:

i) Frequent verbal abuse; and

ii) Physical assaults, including weapons.

List groups and individuals who could be harmed by the threats, and also consider customers, guests and members of the public that may be affected too.

Groups may be more at risk and need extra control measures:

i) Young workers and trainees have less experience and training on how to deal with

angry customers, robbery and harassment, and may have difficulty in recognizing dangerous situations;

ii) Temporary workers may have received less training or information on handling violence;

iii) Lone workers who do not have the support of colleagues to deter attackers, or provide immediate help if there is a problem; and

iv) Night/shift workers, including late evening workers, have greater exposure to risks, as more violent incidents occur at night time. Certain days of the week or certain times may also be more hazardous, for example opening, closing or during delivery times.

Factors that can increase the chances of violence occurring include:

i) Handling large amounts of cash;

ii) Face-to-face contact with customers;

iii) Evening or late at night opening; and

iv) Dealing with customer complaints or disputes.

Other factors that may increase the risks include:

i) Selling high-value goods and expensive merchandise;

ii) Selling age-restricted goods, such as cigarettes and alcohol;

iii) Inadequate stock or staff shortages that lead to delays, queues, customer impatience and hostility; and

iv) Store location in high-crime areas, where robbery or assaults are prevalent.

c) Step 3 - Decide on control measures:.

i) Identify existing controls;

ii) Consult staff to obtain their views on whether the controls are effective. Involving staff encourages better controls, such as:

- Procedures to minimise risks;

- Evaluating control measures;

- Sharing experiences to help employees recognise and respond to violence;

and

iii) Identify what additional control measures are required.

d) Step 4 - Implement findings:

i) Action not paperwork protects people; and

ii) Decide who will put the measures needed to keep staff safe in place, how and by when.

e) Step 5 - Review:

Review risk assessments regularly to identify if the risks have changed, or when there has been an incident.

Review control measures by asking staff if they are effective and monitoring incidents.

5. Risk controls

a) Risk controls can be separated into the following areas:

i) Work environment;

ii) Working practices;

iii) Partnerships; and

iv) Training.

b) Two key approaches that can help reduce the risk of violence are:

i) Good customer service; and

ii) Training, such as security awareness, tackling shoplifters, identifying potentially violent persons, and raising awareness of company policies and procedures.

6. Work
environment

Store design and environment can affect the likelihood of crime or violence occurring.

a) Design/layout:

i) Location of cash tills, sales displays, layout and counter design can create blind spots and/or make customers less visible and items more accessible; and

ii) Using high and wide counters or installing mirrors to help see blind spots, plus having procedures for preventing build-up of crowds and queues can mitigate the problem.

b) Visibility and lighting:

i) Use adequate lighting, and keep exits/entrances, and reception areas well lit to deter violent behaviour.

c) CCTV surveillance:

i) CCTV can help act as a deterrent, direct security staff to where they are needed, make staff feel safer and help collect evidence to convict offenders; but

ii) CCTV can be expensive and needs monitoring and maintenance.

d) Security devices:

i) Alarms and locks can decrease the risk, but should be used together with other control measures.

ii) Use good quality workmanship and materials for doors, windows and locks, and alarm systems, but make sure staff know how to use them and respond.

e) Security personnel:

i) Use well-trained security staff to reduce the risk of violence.

ii) The Security and Guarding Services

Industry Authority (SGSIA) under the Security and Guarding Services Ordinance (Cap. 460), formulates criteria and conditions for security company licenses and security personnel permits to ensure security staff are well trained. (www.sb.gov.hk/eng/links/sgsia/index.htm)

7. Working practices

a) Handling cash:

i) Reduce the amount of cash handled, particularly in front of customers; and

ii) Arrange cash collection where possible and avoid set routines and routes.

b) Staffing levels:

i) Make sure adequate staffing levels are deployed to meet customer demands, and mitigate conflict situations particularly during sales, promotions or special events.

c) Late opening hours:

i) Consider increasing staff and/or security measures to strengthen staff safety, such as CCTV, alarms and training.

d) Dealing with customers:

i) Have policies on face-to-face contact with difficult customers, handling verbal abuse and physical attack.

ii) Improve staff and management behaviour and customer service to help defuse aggression.

e) Reporting and recording incidents:

i) Report serious incidents to the police by dialing 999 in an emergency.

ii) Record all incidents including verbal abuse, to help identify problems and trends, and to find out if control measures are effective.

8. Partnerships

a) Working with other retailers is an effective tactic in preventing violence, and the benefits include:

i) Sharing anti-crime and anti-violence good practice, and information;

ii) Pooling expertise;

iii) Identifying underage people buying age restricted goods; and

iv) Warning and alerting other businesses, the police or building control rooms, when known offenders are in the area, or when there is trouble.

b) Partnerships with the police:

i) Encourage police officers to call in and talk to staff to build relationships and give advice;

ii) Talk to the police about specific 'hot spots' or troublemakers to help target resources; and

iii) Arrange visits from Regional Crime Prevention Officers (RCPO) to give specific advice on security issues and local crime problems:

- HKI: 2860 7894- KE: 2726 6243
- KW: 2761 2300- NTN: 3661 3313
- NTS: 3661 1293- MAR: 2803 6179

9. Training

a) Training provides skills to deal with threats, mitigate risks, helps improve staff confidence, and reduces staff fear and anxiety.

b) Training should cover a range of issues, from legal requirements to prevention measures.

10. Support

Victims of aggression and violence will be affected in different ways.

a) Have procedures for prompt medical care including first-aid equipment.

b) Watch out for stress-related symptoms which may not appear until after an incident.

c) After an incident, temporarily remove the person from public contact, give them a different role, organise retraining, and consider changing their work location.

d) Ensure staff and managers know how to support their colleagues, including access to victim support counselling services.