



Abuse Against Frontline Workers

A G4S Academy Briefing Paper
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



- Over the past five years, there has been a surge in violence and abuse targeting frontline workers, including retail shop employees, healthcare professionals, delivery drivers and staff working across the education sector.
- Abuse has accentuated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to London hospitals, abuse directed at frontline healthcare staff has reached dangerous levels, leading to a significant loss in staff, availability of treatment and speed of service.
- NHS officials have reported that the most common triggers for altercations are frustrations over increasing waiting times and anger over the imposition of mandatory COVID-19 policies such as face-coverings and reduced visitor times.
- Although some hospitals have sanctioned offenders for abusive incidents, banning them from hospitals for repeat offences, the scale of the problem remains largely unaddressed and is resulting in large numbers of health workers either being forced to go on sick leave or leaving the profession entirely, further reducing the availability of health care.
- Abuse targeting other frontline workers such as teachers, retail employees and logistics workers has also significantly increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, largely driven by grievances with COVID-19 policies or vaccination mandates, as well as opportunistic theft in the case of delivery drivers.

2 VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE TO FRONTLINE WORKERS

Over the past five years, there has been a surge of violence and abuse targeted towards frontline workers, working in the health, retail, logistic and education sectors. Incidents of abuse and violence have approximately doubled since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with one in six healthcare workers reportedly experiencing abuse on every single shift worked. Abuse since the pandemic has primarily been driven by customers and patients unwillingness to comply with COVID-19 safety regulations.

While frontline workers have little or no control over the causes of frustration among the various threat actors, they are often the ones most exposed to abuse from costumers. Being the link between the customer (patients, students, customers) and the service provider (shops, hospitals, schools) they are generally the ones responsible for enforcing store or state policies, often meaning they are the most available source for disgruntled threat actors to abuse.

Threats of verbal and physical abuse, which have been exacerbated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, pose a moderate to high threat to staff in hospitals across the UK. Such incidents against staff range in severity, method and motivation and can occur via a variety of methods.

Some of the most common triggers of abuse include patients' perception around waiting times and access to adequate treatment, as well as refusal to comply with COVID-19 protocols, such as the use of face-coverings and limits to visitor capacity. Such measures tend to be more strictly enforced in hospitals, often generating tension between staff and patients due to the disconnect between national law and hospital regulations which in certain instances has resulted in confrontation and abuse.

Abuse of frontline health workers tends to be perpetrated by a variety of actors, including patients under the influence of drugs, patients' family members, patients and anti COVID-19 activists, among others. Such abuse ranges in severity, and include verbal abuse, racism, physical abuse, psychological abuse, threatening and incidents involving small weapons. Incidents have also involved obstructing workers from performing their jobs.

Abuse of NHS staff has steadily increased since 2020, with almost 50 percent of all staff reporting that they have been victims of abuse from patients. A survey of 1,016 staff members, commissioned by NHS Charities Together, found that 54 percent believe that levels of abuse have increased from January 2021 to January 2022. Further, 69 percent of NHS staff feel they have "never been under more strain" and 46 percent said the increased workload caused by the Omicron variant and the rollout of the booster programme mean that they feel unable to do their job to the best of their ability.

However, there remain concerns from health authorities that as abuse against NHS workers increases, the frequency of which incidents are reported may also be declining due to a lack of faith in the system to prosecute offenders and an expectation that abuse is becoming normalised within the profession. In 2021, Lewisham and Greenwich NHS trust sanctioned 50 patients, with two of the incidents involving physical violence, which resulted in police prosecutions.

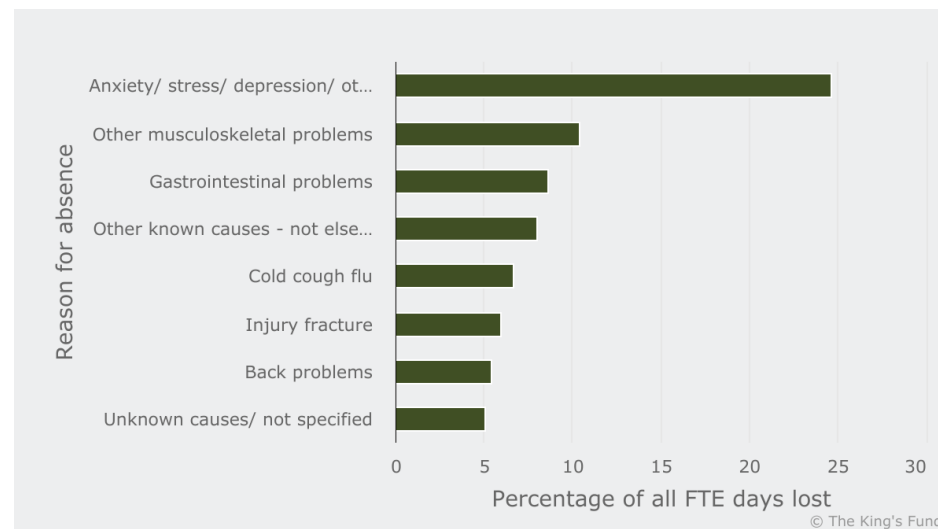


Figure 1: Reasons for absence in NHS facilities. Source: The King's Fund.

3.1 Service Quality and Long Waiting Times are the Main Drivers of Abuse

Grievances with the perceived poor service quality at hospitals and health care facilities generally come from localised incidents that are most often isolated such as frustrated and disgruntled patients and family members, angered by waiting times to access health services. These incidents of abuse predominantly come from localised concerns or incidents triggered by grief or frustration with health care services or healthcare providers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased waiting times for the NHS, contributing to growing frustration among patients and leading to several instances of verbal or physical abuse to NHS staff. It is likely that the cases of abuse are underreported due to increased feelings amongst staff that such incidents are becoming more common. Increased crowdedness of the NHS in particular has been associated with more incidents of violence due to its effect on waiting times and the availability of both care and attention from hospital staff. Several studies also suggest that perceived increased waiting times and perceived load of service staff can drastically affect customer behaviour, making people more likely to abuse or targeted NHS frontline staff as they are the often the first available representative of the hospital to direct complaints and grievances towards.

3.2 COVID-19 Pandemic has Exacerbated Abuse

Misinformation about how COVID-19 operates and spreads has contributed to misplaced anger towards frontline staff. Many healthcare personnel have been attacked or targeted with abuse over fears they can transmit COVID-19, as they have been in close contact with COVID-19 patients. Such attacks have occurred not only at hospitals or their place of work, but also at their homes, on their commute to and from work, and even during funerals of colleagues who died from the virus.

The relaxation of COVID-19 measures across the UK has also contributed to a rise in abuse targeting NHS staff, with measures such as face coverings in hospitals often serving as triggers of abuse from people who refuse to comply with such measures. Security officers working at Calderdale Royal Hospital in Halifax, England have reported incidents of scratching, spitting and biting from visitors. The increase in abuse against NHS staff, combined with the rising work pressures on staff during the pandemic have led to an increasing number of staff either resigning or taking extended periods of leave from work. This has resulted in a reduced number of hospital personnel and in a reduced availability of services, further exacerbating the threat of abuse towards frontline health workers.

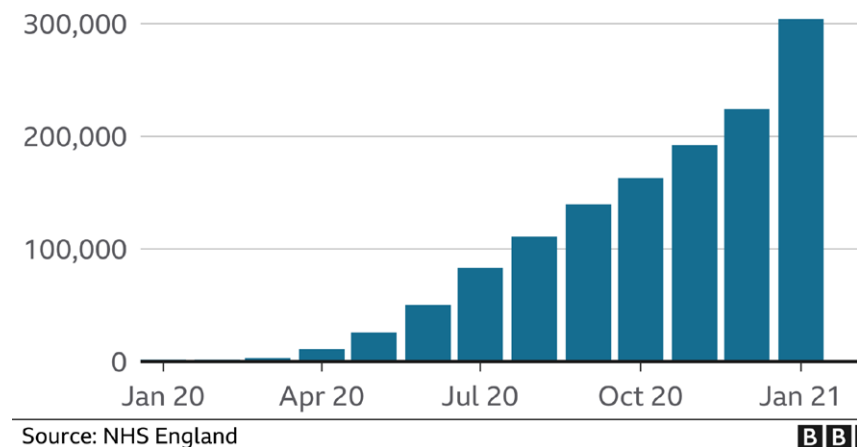
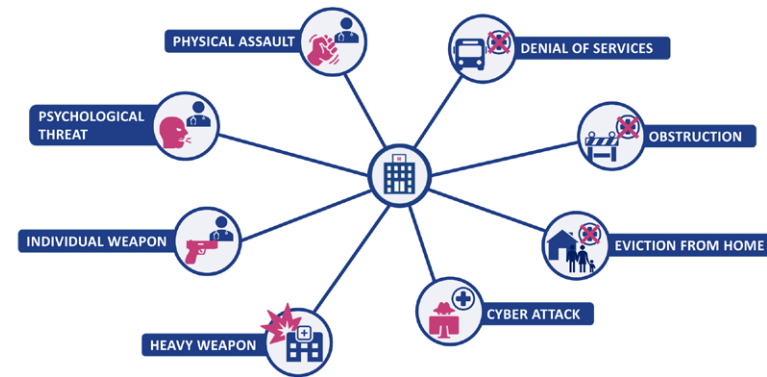


Figure 2: Waiting times across the UK. Source: BBC with data from NHS England.

Amid increasing abuse to health workers, South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust has begun using body cameras to deter violence and aggressive behaviour towards staff. The Trust recorded 1,917 incidents in 2021, including 345 physical assaults, an increase of 38 percent from the previous year.

NHS staff have also reported growing abuse from the anti-vaccination movement in the UK. For example, in Colchester hospital in October 2021, a group of anti-vaccine protesters forcibly entered the facilities, and verbally abused hospital staff. Protesters handed staff reports and leaflets over what the protesters regard as the illegality of COVID-19 vaccinations and the “misinformation” that they allege has been used to support the rollout of vaccinations. Protesters nationwide have used terms such as “Nazis” to describe NHS staff, for participating in what they consider to be a “mass genocide” through vaccines, highlighting the severity of the abuse faced by frontline health workers.

While the frequency of protests targeting hospitals and COVID-19 measures has reduced since the easing of lockdown restrictions, further incidents of abuse on NHS staff, as well as possible instances of breaking into facilities, cannot be discounted. The link of these protesters with far-right groups heightens the threat of violent incidents and more disruptive protest activity as there is precedent for far-right activists to escalate protest activity into direct acts of confrontation against anyone they perceive to be against their message, as seen during protests activity in hospitals where the protesters have forcibly entered facilities.



Note: this infographic aims to portray the different types of attacks identified through secondary sources or the reports on the Surveillance System for Attacks on Health Care (SSA). This is not an exhaustive list of all types of attacks under WHO's definition of Attacks on Health Care.

Figure 3: Types of attacks against healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic reported globally. Source: WHO.

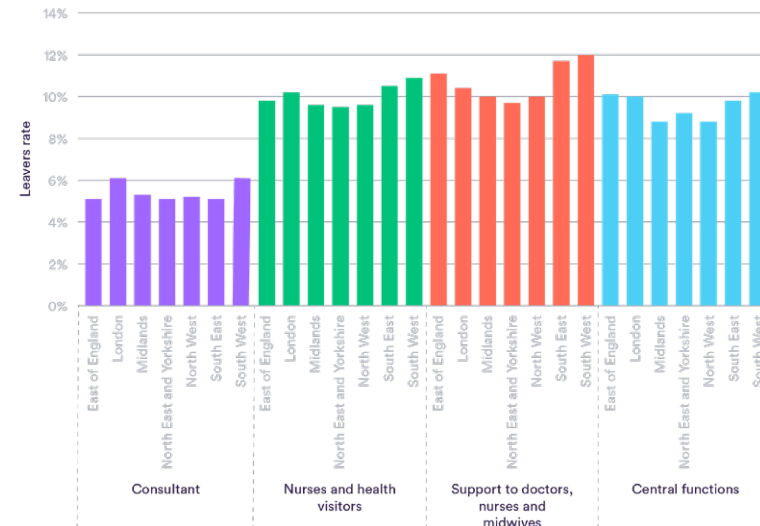


Figure 4: Percentage rates of NHS workers leaving their roles. Source: The Nuffield Trust.

Recent security incidents at hospitals across the UK.
Source: G4S Risk Consulting.

Date	Description	Threat Type	Impact
14 March 2022	A patient spat on a member of staff from a hospital in Cornwall, when he was asked to wear a face covering.	Violence	Moderate
7 March 2022	Volunteers and members of staff at Bournemouth and Poole hospitals have been getting abuse from some visitors who do not want to wear face coverings.	Violence	Moderate
18 January 2021	A person assaulted a nurse at Homerton hospital in East London.	Violence	High
November 2021	Nurse stabbed in the arm inside A&E in Lewisham hospital.	Violence	High
2020-2021	1,296 incidents of abuse were reported against NHS staff in Merseyside.	Crime-Abuse towards staff	High
13 May 2020	A patient on a COVID-19 ward in Arrowe Park hospital intentionally coughed at a nurse and was charged with assault. The patient did not have the virus.	Civil Unrest/ Crime	Moderate

3.3 Crime

The theft of equipment and other hospital property represents a high threat to hospitals and a potential for indirect impact to front line workers. The purpose and intentional structure of hospitals, designed as public buildings, can make it difficult to safeguard property and equipment as the presence of valuable equipment as well as drugs and other supplies make hospitals attractive targets for opportunistic criminals.

A common tactic used from 2012 by criminal actors in the UK has been to gain access to wards under false pretences and then to steal resources and supplies while inside, which could potentially result in altercations or harming of staff during these incidents. At Arrowe Hospital, Merseyside, in 2012, several criminals wearing fake NHS badges successfully stole eight hospital beds and a foetal aid monitor worth several thousand pounds. Similar incidents have occurred in East Sussex hospitals where criminals stole GBP 6,000 worth of medical equipment during the course of several days.

More recently in 2020, local criminals targeted hospital car parks in Merseyside in order to steal catalytic converters from the cars of staff and patients inside the hospital. Hospital car parks represent attractive targets for thieves, as they are relatively easy to access and often do not have CCTV facilities. While these incidents did not result in physical abuse to personnel, the scenario in which staff are harmed by armed or violent criminals cannot be discounted.

The theft of front line worker personal property may also represent a growing threat. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, several hospitals have been targeted in incidents of theft. For example, in March 2020, thieves broke into Barnet hospital and stole a cash machine. While these incidents target valuable items inside hospitals, such as ATMs, medical equipment and drugs, as opposed to targeting individual frontline healthcare workers, such incidents can result in incidental violence against hospital staff.

Frontline workers in the retail sector face a variety of threats and abuse. Workers can be targeted over disputes related to the enforcement of shop policies such as COVID-19 protocols and other regulations such as age restrictions on certain products.

According to the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), a major trade union for retail sector staff, over 90 percent of retail staff across the UK were assaulted, threatened or abused between August 2020 and August 2021. USDAW has encouraged shop workers to report incidents of abuse, after preliminary results from nearly 2,000 retail staff show that throughout 2021, 92 percent have experienced verbal abuse, 70 percent were threatened by a customer and 14 percent were assaulted. One in five victims have never reported an incident to their employer; including 5 percent who had been assaulted, indicating that accurate levels of abuse against retail staff are likely to be significantly higher due to this underreporting.

The UK government has also been urged by various retail unions to adopt Scotland's new legislation to protect retail workers. In August 2021, Scotland introduced a new act, which offers increased protection to Scottish retail workers by making assaulting or abusing retail staff a stand-alone offence. New offences have been created for situations where a retail worker is assaulted, threatened or abused while engaged in their work, increasing prosecution options for the victim and the organisation. For example, committing this offence while a retail worker is enforcing a statutory age restriction also constitutes an aggravation with any breaches resulting in a fine and potentially escalating to a prison sentence. However, in June 2021, UK government ministers rejected calls for installing new legislation to protect retail workers and other frontline staff, arguing that the current legislation provided enough protection against those incidents.

4.1 Store polices and COVID-19 measures

During the pandemic, incidents of verbal and physical abuse against retail workers increased. Abuse, largely motivated by mandatory policies on numbers of people allowed in shops, limits on the purchasing of essentials and the general strains faced by individuals during the pandemic all led to an increase in altercations at shops nationwide.

In the US, altercations driven by customers unwilling to comply with COVID-19 regulations, have resulted in casualties. In May 2021, a security guard working at the store Family Dollar in Kentucky was shot and killed after refusing to let a customer into the store without a mask. The guard got into an argument because he asked the customer to follow orders mandated by the state. Allegedly, the shopper's husband and son came back to the store and shot the security guard. Similarly, in May 2020, an employee at Waffle House in Colorado was shot by a customer, after the latter was told to leave for not wearing a mask. In the UK, while the incidents rarely involve firearms or small weapons, there have been documented frequent incidents of verbal abuse, racism, as well as coughing and spitting on staff nationwide.

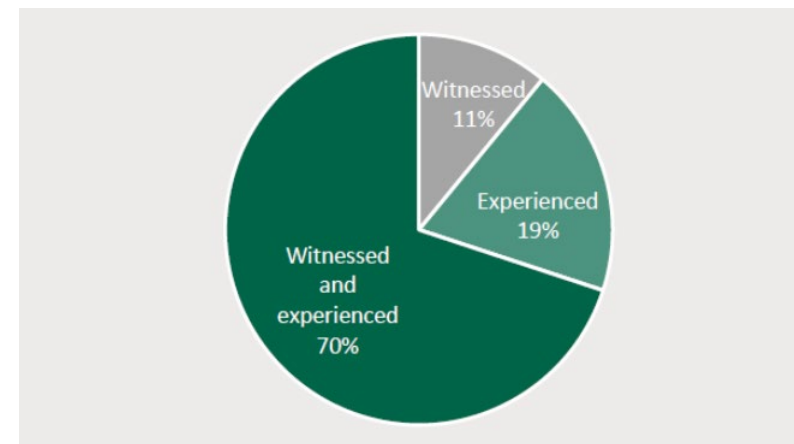


Figure 5: Percentage rates of NHS workers leaving their roles. Source: The Nuffield Trust.

Several incidents of abuse against supermarket staff are often carried out by people under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Customers often become aggressive and frustrated when workers try to enforce the stores and companies safety policies, primarily age regulations for products such as alcohol and tobacco. Altercations between customers and retail staff are often triggered by offence at the request for proof of identity or by attempts from customers to steal age-restricted products.

Violent incidents can have a detrimental effect on the mental health of employees and could disrupt personal lives outside of their working environment, causing significant psychological stress, welfare issues and leading to people quitting their roles in the retail industry. According to University of Oxford research published in the British Journal of Clinical Psychology, exposure to violent criminal incidents often contribute to suffering from long-term illnesses, such as depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

4.2 Abuse related to protest activity

There have been several recent incidents in which environmental protesters have targeted retail premises, although these incidents rarely directly target retail staff. For example, in August 2021, protesters belonging to Extinction Rebellion (XR) glued themselves to the premises of Selfridges on Oxford Street, London in order to protest what they view as the fashion industry's dependence on fossil fuels and the poor human rights conditions overseas that are required to support their businesses. These events often result in vandalism and criminal damage to the buildings. While these incidents are not yet directly targeted staff, verbal abuse and violent behaviour against staff cannot be discounted potentially as part of more disruptive and violent tactics used by large protest organisations.

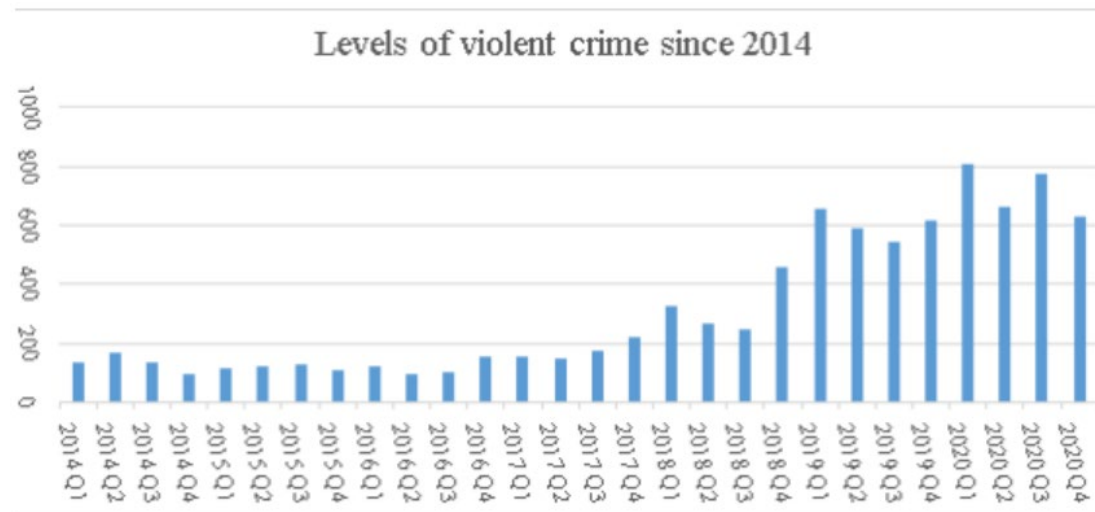


Figure 6: Levels of violent crime at co-op shops nationwide. Source: HMG.

Frontline delivery drivers and postal workers have also been targets of physical and verbal abuse, particularly since the start of the pandemic in 2020. Delivery drivers, such as those working for companies like Deliveroo and JustEat, have reported an increase of abuse, primarily racial abuse and sexual harassment. The role of the COVID-19 pandemic on heightening the importance of delivery workers during lockdown has also increased the risks that they face on a daily basis, many of which are hard to mitigate against, as they tend to occur in private, residential areas like customer houses and on quiet residential streets.

The perpetrators of abuse against delivery drivers are likely to be either opportunistic criminals or customers. Delivery drivers, particularly those transporting valuable packages from online shopping are vulnerable to being targeted by petty criminals who may seek to steal either vehicles or parcels from them, potentially using force. Drivers can also receive abuse from disgruntled customers based on delivery grievances or motivated by prejudices.

Sexual abuse and harassment, primarily targeting female delivery drivers, is also a persistent threat. Female delivery drivers, most often food or takeaway drivers, have reported an increase in sexual harassment incidents at the point of delivery. In some instances, the customer has followed the driver after making their delivery. Several incidents have been reported where drivers have been harassed by naked customers or received explicit sexual demands and inappropriate comments; however, it is highly likely that a large portion of incidents that occur and are not reported. This threat has been worsened by a popular delivery company policy of allowing customers to take a picture of the delivery to prove it was received properly and at the right time. This has resulted in incidents of customers taking pictures of the faces of mostly female drivers, invading their privacy.

Crime levels against delivery drivers vary nationwide; however, the overall rate has increased since 2020 in the wake of the pandemic. For example, in the West Midlands there were almost 300 attacks on delivery drivers between October 2020 and January 2021, an increase of more than 50 percent. Attacks range in severity from theft of parcels left by drivers to targeted attacks against delivery vehicles left unattended. There have also been occasional assaults against drivers to steal vehicle keys and personal items such as phones and tablets as drivers move between their vehicle and their delivery location. Police

have stated that the majority of crime against delivery workers is opportunistic and petty in nature but that it is plausible that it may have wider connections to organised crime due to the often valuable contents of parcels. Generally, police report that acts of theft turn violent when the assailant is confronted by the driver, triggering an altercation.

UK Police have also stated that the theft of delivery driver vehicles is becoming an attractive method for petty criminals to acquire a disposable and easily anonymised vehicle that can then be used for committing other crimes. Criminals can steal a van and then use it to commit other thefts, increasing the threat to the wider community.

There is also precedent for thieves to use more sophisticated capabilities to target delivery drivers including the use of electronic trackers, which criminals have fitted to vans and other delivery vehicles, without the driver's knowledge, to allow thieves to follow the location of the vehicle and target it when it is unattended. Several delivery workers have stated that they have previously left keys inside their vans in order to reduce the time taken between deliveries, often made under stringent time constraints from employers. As a result, thieves have tracked the vehicle and waited until it was left unattended with the key inside before attacking and stealing either the contents, the vehicle or both.

Incidents of targeted violence against drivers are rare as the majority of incidents tend to be motivated by petty theft as opposed to violent crime. However, incidents of violence have been reported. In April 2020, a delivery driver in north Cardiff was targeted by a group of thieves who assaulted him and then stole his van after forcibly taking his keys which contained approximately 100 parcels. In August 2019, a group of thieves with knives targeted a food delivery driver in Bristol. Although rare, it is likely that as national reliance on delivery drivers continues to remain elevated, incidents of violence will increase if further safeguards are not put in place and workers are not explicitly encouraged to report these incidents without fear of consequences for their employment.

A survey by the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), carried out in April 2021, indicated that approximately 6 percent of teachers reported being subjected to physical violence by pupils in the past year; a further 10 percent reported that they had received threats of physical violence from students, while 38 percent had been subjected to verbal abuse from pupils. Only around 42 percent said their school had dealt with their issues in a satisfactory manner. The Independent has also found that nearly one in four teachers were physically attacked by pupils at least once a week in 2020 and 2021, an increase from previous years before the pandemic. Nine in ten teachers say they have suffered physical or verbal abuse from pupils in the last year and that this has driven more than 50 percent of teachers to seriously consider resigning. A common new tactic by students has been to verbally abuse teachers over their teaching methods as well as taunts and mockery uploaded onto social media using video footage from teacher's lessons.

Teachers have been increasingly exposed to verbal abuse, criticism and relentless contact from parents via social media and emails. The transition to remote learning during lockdown left teachers increasingly under pressure to provide 24 hour support to pupils via email and other technologies, driving a rise in parents contacting staff, in some cases to berate or criticise teachers.

Independent research by Teacher Tapp, a surveying app for teachers, found that 39 percent of primary teachers and 26 percent of secondary teachers say that they have been subjected to verbal abuse by a parent or carer during the last academic year, highlighting the persistently high levels of abuse and threat that frontline teachers are exposed to.

Teachers have also suffered verbal abuse by anti-vaccine protesters. In September 2021, when the government began offering the vaccine to 12 to 15 year olds at schools nationwide, anti-vaccine activists targeted schools and disrupted access to several schools, as well as intimidating students and teachers. Areas which have been particularly affected by targeted demonstrations at schools include Bradford, Bracknell, Kent, Leeds, Hertfordshire and Dorset, where anti-vaccine sentiment remains highest. Amid increased threat to teachers and parents, in February 2022, the government announced an amendment to a new policing bill which will help local councils install buffer zones around schools to stop children being targeted by anti-vaccination protests.



In a recent survey by the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) union, almost eight out of ten schools said that they had been targeted by anti-vaccine protesters, with approximately 420 schools targeted across the UK overall. The majority of this activity has been through emails threatening legal action; however, the ASCL said that in several cases staff had been threatened with physical harm and on other occasions, protesters had gained access to school sites. The majority of the disruptive anti-vaccine protests appear to have been organised by a small number of online groups active on the encrypted messaging service like Telegram, indicating that the activists are concerned with protecting their privacy and will likely continue to organise disruptive activity via private messaging services.

Anti-vaccine protests targeting schools in Liverpool and in London in late 2021 resulted in several minor injuries to students and teachers caught up in the event. Protests in Gateshead also saw activists forcibly showing teachers and children disturbing images of dead children to demonstrate against the vaccine. As a result, teachers and other frontline education workers have raised concerns that both they and their pupils feel afraid and intimidated to go to school during these protests and that government regulation is needed to mitigate this threat. While there is no evidence of direct violent attacks on teachers by anti-vaccine activists and protests have reduced in frequency, several teachers reported receiving explicit threats of attacks for their decisions to voice support for the vaccination of students at their schools, highlighting the persistent threat faced by teachers.



Figure 7: Anti-vaccine activists protest outside a school in Bournemouth. Source: Google.

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