



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

October 2012

**UNISON Scotland**  
**Health & Safety Conference**  
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**Violent Assaults on Public Service Staff in Scotland**  
**Follow up Survey 2012**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Since 2006, UNISON Scotland has carried out an annual survey of assaults to public sector workers by issuing a Freedom of Information request to all employers of UNISON members in the public sector. The 2012 survey was carried out from August to October 2012.

Our analysis of the figures received for 2012 shows a total figure of **34,739**, an increase of **6,964** in the level of assaults compared with last year's figures. This can partly be explained by an increase of over **8,375** in the number of assaults recorded for police officers and staff, where substantial figures were not recorded last year. However, over the year Local Government assaults have **increased** by **2,257** to **14,274**, but in health there has been a further **decrease** of **967**, from **11,941** in 2011 to **10,974** this year.

Our first survey in 2006 identified just over 20,000 violent incidents that year in the NHS and local government, and the figures have increased since that time and remain unacceptable. This may of course partly reflect greater awareness and better reporting, however, it is clear the problem is not going away.

The recording of incidents in the health service continues to improve, with their computer programme which appears to have made reporting much easier, although, there is not as much breakdown into job categories or additional information given.

Reporting in local authorities has greatly improved over the last couple of years, with more councils being able to produce proper information. However, there are still one or two whose information is limited, e.g. a list of assaults, with no totals. This clearly indicates that whilst we are starting to get our message across, many local authorities still do not collate adequate statistics on violence and cannot, therefore, have a strategy for combating the level of assaults on their workers. The reasons given for some late submission of figures were to do with receiving statistics from different departments, indicating that there is still no central collation everywhere, although this is much less than last year. Overall monitoring of figures within an authority cannot take place if the statistics are kept in departmental silos and never collated centrally.

In addition, there is still a reluctance on the part of some employers and even some staff, to acknowledge assaults by "looked after people", e.g. children, elderly people, or those with learning disabilities, as there are in some instances perceptions that these types of assaults are just part of the job and have to be tolerated. One employer in local government referred to "unintended" physical violence.

The work that UNISON had instigated with the STUC, the Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives and representatives of Scottish local authorities to develop best practice guidelines came to an end when guidelines for local government were published in February 2010, entitled “*Managing occupational violence in the workplace*”. These guidelines are now acknowledged by several councils and many have produced or are in the process of drafting new policies, based on the Guidelines.

## 2. LEGISLATION

UNISON Scotland campaigned for and welcomed the introduction of the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act (EWA) in 2005. We wanted to see legislation much wider in scope than the Bill as originally drafted. We favoured a Bill covering all public service workers and 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.

Following the introduction of the EWA UNISON Scotland continued to widen the scope of the provisions to incorporate a wider group of public service workers. In January 2005, the Scottish Government promulgated a Modification Order that extended the Act to a limited number of additional health staff. Whilst welcoming the extension we argued that this was only a limited provision that did not cover the main groups of staff at risk of violence and resulted in a two-tier level of protection for staff. To date there has been no movement in the Scottish Government’s position.

There were significant objections to the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Bill including the Law Society and Faculty of Advocates who argued that the 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 over 1110 prosecutions to date. The latest figures available show that in 2010/11 there were 324 convictions under the Emergency Workers Act

Persons with a charge proved in Scottish courts under the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005 <sup>(1)</sup> , by category of offence, 2005-06 - 2008-09						
Charge	2005-06	2006-07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Emergency workers (Scotland) Act 2005 Section 1(1)	11	44	40	74	113	136
Emergency workers (Scotland) Act 2005 Section 2(1)	14	74	90	76	37	39
Emergency workers (Scotland) Act 2005 Section 3(1)	0	3	2	4	2	4
Emergency workers (Scotland) Act 2005 Section 5(1)	29	79	143	147	128	145
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>324</b>

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

Since the introduction of the EWA, the issue of workplace violence moved higher up the public agenda and deliberate acts of violence on public service workers was, rightly, condemned by most members of the public. However, the prospect of

further legislation has stalled over recent years and there appears no likelihood of any movement in the near future.

UNISON Scotland supported Hugh Henry's Protection of Workers (Scotland) Bill in 2009 and continued to support its passage through Parliament. The proposed Bill built on the Emergency Workers Act but widened it to cover more public sector workers and some private sector workers who provide a service to the public, such as shop workers.

The STUC mounted a campaign in support of the measures contained in the Bill and UNISON fully participated in this. We contacted all branches and Health & Safety stewards to advise them of the campaign seeking as much support for it as possible. We also ran an e-mail campaign telling members to contact their MSPs and urge support.

However, despite our efforts and the support of mainly Labour MSPs the Bill fell at its first stage and was not, therefore, able to continue through its Parliamentary stages.

The current Scottish Government's Legislation Programme does not include any measures to give public service workers further protection from violence when going about their normal business.

The experience of our membership and the results of crime surveys inform us that the most vulnerable workers are not necessarily emergency services workers – 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 non-teaching staff. A recent report on 'Behaviour in Scottish Schools' found that 35% of secondary heads and teachers had experienced abuse or violence over the past year, mainly verbal, according to the report. The report mainly targeted teaching staff, however, 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 is an equal opportunities issue.

### **3. MANAGING OCCUPATIONAL VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE**

Again for this year's survey, we asked specific questions to councils to ascertain which of them were using the above guidelines and to what extent they were incorporating them into new arrangements or policies for dealing with violence in the workplace.

In their responses 24 councils and ALEO/Joint bodies advised that they used the guidelines. Some of the others were currently reviewing their policies and intended to incorporate the elements of the guidelines they considered relevant into them. Those who had participated in the working group that set up the guidelines were in the main further ahead with their plans. Some of those who were using the guidelines were introducing lone working policies and personal safety systems for their staff. Some of the councils who did not use the guidelines

believed that their current policies were adequate and did not see the need to change them.

Some of the ALEOs and joint bodies who responded had not heard of the guidelines, although some, in particular Joint Valuation Boards attached to certain councils said that they used the policies of their local council.

#### **4. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION SURVEY**

As in our previous surveys, the 2012 survey was sent to all local authorities and health boards in Scotland, as well as to other public sector areas in which UNISON organises, including police, fire services, universities and colleges, NDPBs, etc, asking for details on the number of assaults on workers during the past year, broken down by job title or department. Although not covered by the Freedom of Information legislation, we asked some Arms Length Associated Organisations (ALEOs) if they would give us information on assaults to their staff and we were pleased to note that several did so, including City Building and CORDIA in Glasgow, and the Glasgow Housing Association, who all recorded incidences of violence towards their staff. ALEOs are companies or trusts set up by Councils to deliver a wide range of activities such as leisure services, economic development and property maintenance. They are 'arm's-length' because the council retains a degree of control or influence, usually through a funding agreement, and 'external' because they have a separate identity to the council. There have been attempts to extend the Freedom of Information legislation to include them but unfortunately, this has not been successful. We also sent our questionnaire to local government associated bodies, e.g. Joint Valuation Boards, and Fire and Rescue services, which are all subject to the Freedom of Information requirements.

In response to the survey, we received data from 27 local authorities, 12 of the 14 area health boards, six of the Special Health Boards, all eight police forces, and most universities and colleges responded. The local authority and health boards who did not respond all said that they had not received the original letter. A reminder has been sent out to those who did not reply in the required time. For comparative purposes, the figures from last year have been counted for those councils and health boards that did not respond in time.

##### **Local Government**

Local government figures have increased quite considerably by 2,257 over the previous year, from 12,017 to 14,274. This year, nine councils had cut their assault levels, but these were matched by 17 others who had shown increases, with 6 showing large increases. Considerable improvements to collating figures had been made, with some preparing yearly reports for councillors to consider and make recommendations. Education continues to have the highest levels of assault, on both teachers and support staff, particularly classroom assistants, and special needs assistants, but also including, instructors, janitors, and admin staff. Social care also continued to have high figures, especially in residential and home care settings.

Again councils were asked if they could indicate the levels of assaults on classroom assistants and other support staff who often deal with pupils who are excluded from their main classes. We had had anecdotal accounts of increases in assaults on these staff and wanted to confirm this with hard evidence. This year, there were more who broke their figures down to indicate non-teaching staff or classroom assistants/pupil support assistants, etc. This indicated a total of 3,758 in the figures given. Differences with reporting systems could mean that this total could have

been a lot higher, as some only gave classroom assistants, not other non-teaching staff, and some didn't break down at all.

As in previous years, Glasgow had the highest number of assaults, with an increase of 333 over last year. This was despite the fact that several departments had now left their direct employment and were not, therefore, counted for the survey. The fact that the figures have still increased is a cause for concern. Of the figures given, North Ayrshire had a large increase to 1062, making them the second highest. City of Edinburgh's figures had fallen minimally to 959, staying at third highest.

In many councils the standard of reporting had improved, but this unfortunately had taken away some of the more detailed information seen in previous surveys where it was often possible to follow progress in dealing with individual assaults and get a flavour of the types of assaults which had occurred. The methods of reporting are still not consistent, however, making it difficult to make comparisons.

In local government much continues to be made of the fact that many of the assaults are caused by children with special needs, or elderly people with dementia. There continues to be an assumption that because some people have a reduced capacity, assaults are therefore, part of the job. One council referred to intentional and unintentional abuse. UNISON is aware that some people have illnesses which can lead them to kick out at staff for various reasons, however, this does not excuse employers, as there are many precautions and safeguards that can be implemented to protect their staff, which some have done, as is reflected in their figures.

### **Health Service**

For the first time, this year, the NHS had less assaults than local government, as its figures fell by 967 over the year to 10,974. Five of the Boards responding had cut their figures, and five had increased their figures, two quite considerably. Unfortunately, neither Greater Glasgow or Lothian had responded.

Most boards are now recording centrally, following the amalgamation of the NHS trusts into Area Health Boards but most did not break down into divisions as they had previously done. Again, the majority of assaults were on nursing staff, both in acute hospitals and in the community and mental health settings.

Among the Special Health Boards, NHS 24's figures showed a slight increase in incidences of phone rage. UNISON and the Scottish Government carried out research into phone rage and produced a protocol which is now part of the work of the Scottish Centre for Healthy Working Lives. NHS 24 has introduced a series of rest rooms where staff can go to take time out following abusive or difficult calls. Unfortunately there was no response from Scottish Ambulance.

The State Hospital's figures had decreased considerably by 628 to only 136 over the year.

In August, The Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland produced new guidance 'Zero tolerance; measured response' which were drawn up after consultation with mental health workers, patients, charities, carers, police and HR Managers. The guidelines emphasised the need for proper planning to ensure the safety of both staff and patients. The guidelines stressed that any victim of an assault will always have the right to call the police, but believe that prevention is key and better communications can help with this.

### **Police and Fire services**

The figures for 2011/12 showed an alarming number of assaults, with 9,261 assaults on police officers and police staff, an increase of over 8,000 on the 2009/10 figures,, although not all forces responded last year. The largest figures were 4,380 in Northern Constabulary and 3,872 in Strathclyde. Most of these assaults were on police officers however, there were several assaults recorded on police staff, such as special constables, police custody support officers, community wardens and traffic wardens many of whom are categorised as police staff.

Fire services were again included in the survey, and 6 out of 7 responded this year, increasing the total to 199 assaults, from 101 in 2010/11 although as with the police, most were fire-fighters.

### **Universities and Colleges**

Again, there were very few incidents in Universities and Colleges and these were mainly to one or two security staff.

### **NDPBs/Miscellaneous**

There were 22 incidents to NDPB staff recorded during the year with 10 verbal assaults in the Care Inspectorate and 11 on staff from Skills Development Scotland, with customer-facing staff.

In the Miscellaneous category there were only 2 incidents, to visitor staff in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The main conclusion to be drawn from this report are the unacceptably increasing numbers of assaults on public sector staff.

The reporting systems, particularly in local government have improved considerably, but still show no consistency. We need to urge all councils to put the guidelines produced by the working party into practice, in the hope that the level of assaults can fall across Scotland. It was also pleasing to note the high responses from both police and fire services, although each of these services will be merging into the new Police Force for Scotland and Fire Service for Scotland, so reporting may change in next year's survey. We must press for a differentiation, however, between officers and staff in both services.

As we continue to stress, however, whatever the figures, and however they are collated, it is still clear that there is an unacceptably high level of violence being perpetrated against public facing staff in Scotland.

UNISON Scotland believes that attacks on any staff delivering public services should be treated under the law as serious assaults.

## **Further information**

UNISON Scotland Health & Safety pages

<http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/safety/abouts.html>

UNISON Health & Safety Site – Anti -Violence Campaign

[http://www.unison.org.uk/safety/pages\\_view.asp?did=6077](http://www.unison.org.uk/safety/pages_view.asp?did=6077)

It's not part of the job: UNISON's guide to tackling violence at Work.

<http://www.unison.org.uk/file/4096.pdf>

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