



Work-related violence and aggression in retail

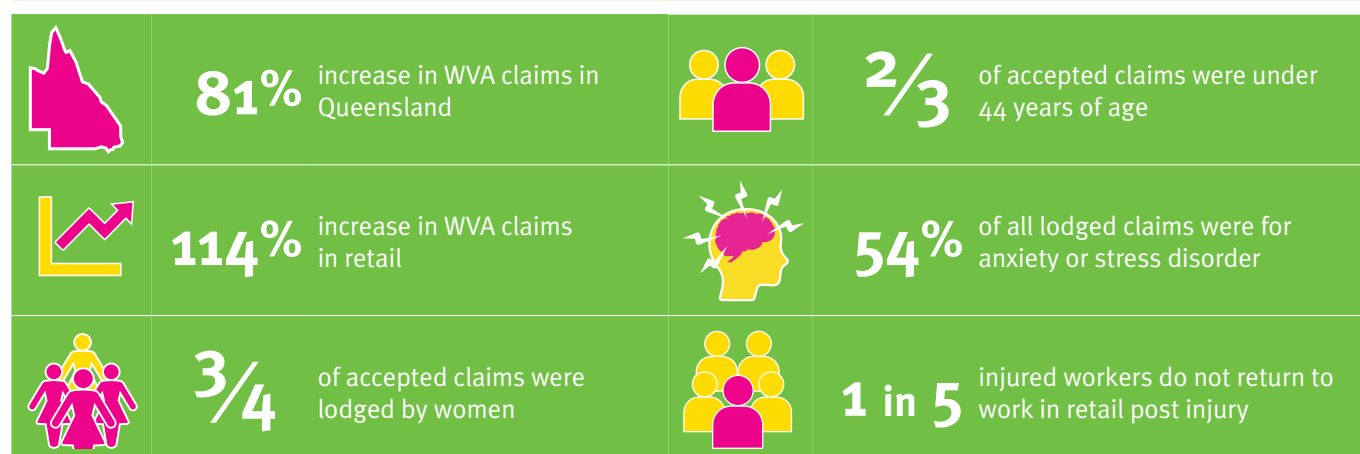
Work-related violence and aggression (WVA) is common in industries where people work with the public or external customers. It is often associated with armed robbery and acts of violence and aggression or other crimes. It can cause serious physical or psychological injury, and sometimes can be fatal. Retail industry workers have an increased risk of WVA.

There are other consequences from WVA including economic and social costs to the worker, their family, their business, and the wider community. Like all work health and safety risks, WVA risks must be managed.

Retail industry claims for WVA injuries have more than doubled over the past 5 years, predominantly affecting women aged below 44 years of age.

Under-reporting of WVA incidents in the retail industry points to a larger problem than these statistics demonstrate.

In the last five years



Source:

- Queensland Scheme Analysis database (QSA) – Queensland scheme-wide database, claims data provided by insurers and database maintained by Office of Industrial Relations. Data as at 31 January 2021

Legal duty

[Work health and safety laws](#) are designed to ensure the health and safety of workers and others in the workplace. ‘Health’ includes physical and psychological health.

The *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* (the Act) places the primary health and safety duty on the business owner or employer—this is referred to in the Act as a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU). The PCBU has the primary duty of care to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the health and safety of workers and other people is not put at risk from WVA.

This includes ensuring:

- the provision and maintenance of a work environment without risks to health and safety
- the provision and maintenance of safe systems of work
- the provision of any information, training and instruction or supervision necessary to protect workers from risks to their health and safety arising from work.

In short, PCBUs must manage risks from WVA. If it is not reasonably practicable to eliminate them, they must be minimised.

Workers have duties too. They must take reasonable care of their own health and safety and ensure their actions and omissions do not adversely affect the health and safety of others. They must comply with any reasonable instruction and co-operate with any reasonable policy or procedure given to them by the PCBU that relates to managing the risks to health and safety from WVA.

What is work-related violence and aggression?

Work-related violence and aggression refers to any incident or behaviour in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. WVA covers a range of actions and behaviours that create a risk to health and safety. This may include:

- physical assault such as biting, scratching, hitting, kicking, pushing, grabbing, or throwing objects
- intentionally coughing or spitting on someone
- sexual assault or any other form of indecent physical contact
- harassment or aggressive behaviour that creates a fear of violence and aggression, such as stalking, sexual harassment, verbal threats and abuse, or yelling and swearing
- hazing or initiation practices for new or young workers
- gendered violence and aggression including sexual harassment (gendered violence and aggression is any behaviour directed at or affecting any person because of their sex, gender or sexual orientation, or because they do not adhere to socially prescribed gender roles, that creates a risk to health and safety)
- violence or aggression from a family or domestic relationship when this occurs at work.

In retail, violence and aggression is generally perpetrated from someone outside the workplace and is usually associated with robbery or other crimes or from disgruntled or aggressive customers.

It can be:

- physical or psychological harm
- in person, such as verbal or via gestures or threats
- through written correspondence, electronic means or online (such as via social media platforms or text messages)
- one-off or repeated incidents
- lower level behaviour such as name-calling
- physical assault and other criminal offences.

Who is at risk of work-related violence and aggression and what are the consequences?

Although all retail workers are at risk of WVA, this can be heightened for new, young workers and women. Workers providing services to distressed or angry persons are at increased risk. This may involve work that involves handling cash, drugs or valuables, or working alone or at night, such as grocery outlets, pharmacies and service stations. WVA can harm both the person it is directed at and anyone witnessing it.

Victims and their families can suffer the personal costs of emotional trauma from WVA incidents. It can contribute to both psychological harm and physical injury and illness to victims and witnesses. Even lower level but frequent aggression exposure, such as name calling, can have a lasting effect on workers' health.

WVA can lead to:

- feelings of isolation, social isolation, or family dislocation
- loss of confidence and withdrawal
- physical injuries as a result of assault
- stress, depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- illness such as cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, immune deficiency, and gastrointestinal disorders e.g., as a result of stress
- misuse of alcohol and other drugs
- suicidal thoughts.

Workers or their health and safety representatives (HSR) have a right to refuse to carry out or stop work if there is a reasonable concern that the worker will be exposed to a serious risk to their health and safety from an immediate or imminent hazard.

Why is work-related violence and aggression under-reported?

Sometimes workers may be deterred from reporting WVA because:

- there is normalisation that the risk of WVA from customers and members of the public has to be tolerated
- embarrassment or difficulty in talking about the emotions they might have felt as a result of being poorly treated
- workers may not categorise their experiences as serious enough to be reported
- there is a fear of being blamed or that it may expose them to additional harm, discrimination, or disadvantage (such as losing their job or negative impacts to their reputation or career)
- workers do not understand or know their workplace rights, what behaviour should be reported or how to report it, particularly if workers are culturally or linguistically diverse
- the reporting process in place is too time-consuming and/or complex
- there is a perception that nothing will happen if the incident is reported
- they would rather forget about it
- the injury happened to someone else
- fear of retribution e.g. workers shifts or hours may be reduced due to speaking up.

How can work-related violence and aggression be prevented?

WVA can be prevented in the retail industry by using the following approaches:

1. Undertake a risk assessment

Identify the hazard

Look for indicators of WVA at your work. You should:

- talk to workers directly or consider using anonymous surveys, such as the [People at Work](#) psychosocial risk assessment tool
- consider the environment, such as workers working in isolation, at night or in high crime areas
- consider work tasks, such as workers handling valuable or restricted items such as cash or drugs
- consider systems and procedures, such as



service methods that escalate frustration, anger, misunderstanding or conflict e.g. insufficient or untrained staff, stock shortages, waiting times, customer service, refund and returns policies, delivery times or processing times not meeting customer expectations?

- consider customer types such as distressed, angry or intoxicated people
- refer to industry standards and guidelines which may highlight risk factors for the retail industry
- review relevant records such as incident and injury records, first aid reports, workers' compensation claims and absenteeism rates.

Assess the risk

After identifying the hazards, assess the risks in consultation with your workers.



- How likely it is that an act of WVA will occur?
- Could it cause injury, illness or death?
- Do particular tasks increase or decrease the severity of potential harm?
- Could a small event of aggressive or violent behaviour escalate to a much larger event with more serious consequences?
- Have there been previous incidents of WVA in the workplace? Or surrounding businesses?
- Do control measures exist and are they adequate?

Effectively control the risk

PCBU's must first attempt to eliminate the identified WVA hazard. If elimination is not possible, it is vital to minimise the risk so far as is reasonably practicable. Preventing and responding to WVA will usually require multiple control measures, such as environmental controls and having safe systems of work.



Environmental controls

The likelihood of WVA and how workers can respond to incidents is affected by the physical work environment. The following control measures may provide workers with the highest protection:



- Limit the amount of cash, valuables and medicines held on the premises and implement cash handling procedures for example, electronic funds transfer only, locked drop safes, carry small amounts of cash, vary banking times and display 'limited cash held' signs.

- Increase security measures such as security personnel, video surveillance or duress alarms.
- Avoid the need for workers to work in isolation and provide sufficient workers during periods of high customer attendance.
- Ensure access to the premises is appropriately controlled when people work alone or at night e.g. service window for night transactions and systems like pay-at-the-pump.
- Separate workers from the public with fixed or removable barriers such as high counters or screens.
- Arrange furniture and partitions to allow good visibility of service areas and avoid restrictive movement.
- Refuse service to customers or clients who expose workers to WVA.
- Provide alternative methods of customer service to eliminate face-to-face interactions e.g., online or click-and-collect services.
- Ensure internal and external lighting that provides good visibility.
- Ensure there are no areas where workers could become trapped.
- Install communication and alarm systems and ensure they are regularly maintained and tested.
- Provide workers and others with a safe place to retreat.

Safe systems of work

Work culture, behaviour standards, policies, and procedures that you implement to prevent WVA can address inappropriate behaviour early and ideally before it escalates. This may include:



- procedures for monitoring workers when they are working alone or away from the workplace e.g. a supervisor checks in regularly throughout the shift
- cash and drug handling procedures including preventing the build-up of cash in tills
- rostering sufficient workers during peak times to reduce waiting times
- processes to escalate issues including using duress alarms
- signs at the workplace such as zero tolerance of WVA, security cameras in use or limited cash on premises
- training in how to deal with difficult customers, conflict resolution and de-escalating aggressive behaviour
- personal safety for staff outside the workplace such as not wearing a uniform or identifying nametag or identifying the workplace on their personal social media profiles

- customer facing signage advising zero-tolerance of WVA at the workplace
- provide information as soon as possible on the availability of services and products, processing delays or waiting times.

Ensure work systems and procedures are well understood by all workers (e.g., through training, providing policies electronically or on noticeboards) and implemented consistently across all areas of the business and all levels of worker, including casuals and labour-hire.

2. Demonstrate strong and committed safety leadership

To develop a positive safety culture in your business, you need to show strong safety leadership, influencing others to adopt health and safety as an important work goal and leading by example. It is important to foster a positive and respectful work culture where violence (including gendered violence) and aggression is not tolerated.

Leadership teams demonstrate a commitment to a culture where WVA is not accepted as part of the job by:

- setting health and safety objectives and accountabilities
- ensuring effective health and safe systems of work are in place to identify and control risk
- allocating resources to the prevention and management of WVA
- developing and promoting policy and key initiatives
- encouraging and empowering workers to speak up if they are feeling unsafe or experience WVA
- consulting with and supporting workers
- monitoring and reporting on performance outcomes and acting on issues and opportunities for improvement.

3. Provide effective consultation

Consult with workers and health and safety representatives (HSRs) when:

- identifying WVA risks in the workplace (consider the use of a survey e.g. People at Work)
- making decisions about ways to control WVA risks
- making decisions about WVA information and training
- proposing change that may affect the health and safety of work
- investigating WVA incidents.

4. Respond appropriately to incidents

Immediately after an incident, ensure that everyone is safe and provide first aid or urgent medical attention where necessary.

In the event of a WVA incident:

- encourage workers to report aggressive or violent behaviour formally, informally, anonymously or confidentially
- provide practical, emotional, and social support to individuals affected
- provide a supportive, consistent, and confidential response to reports of WVA
- consult, co-operate and co-ordinate with other business operators in the area to identify and control risks and resolve issues as they arise
- monitor the worker for symptoms of physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural distress (particularly if they persist longer than four weeks)
- investigate what led to WVA and review control measures and make any changes necessary to reduce the risk.

PCBUs must also manage the risk of internal work-related violence and aggression between colleagues.

In some circumstances, where a crime may have occurred, you may be required to [report the incident](#) to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland and to Queensland Police .

Further resources

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (worksafe.qld.gov.au)

- [Work Health and Safety Act 2011](#)
- [Work Health and Safety Regulation 2011](#)
- [Work health and safety consultation, co-operation and co-ordination Code of Practice 2021](#)
- [How to manage work health and safety risks Code of Practice 2021](#)
- [Managing the work environment and facilities Code of Practice 2021](#)
- [Preventing and responding to work-related violence guide](#)
- [People at Work](#) – Psychological risk assessment tool
- [Violence and Aggression Incident Investigation Tool](#) – a tool that can help support a systematic investigation following a violence incident.
- [Workplace package for domestic and family violence](#) – a package containing useful materials to strengthen support for employees affected by domestic and family violence (DFV) at your place of work.

Safe Work Australia (safeworkaustralia.gov.au)

- [Work-related psychological health and safety: A systematic approach to meeting your duties](#)
- [Principles of good work design: A work health and safety handbook](#)
- [Preventing workplace violence and aggression – National guidance material](#)
- [Guide for Handling and Transporting Cash](#)



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