

KEEP US

SAFE

**THE RISE OF
ASSAULTS ON
JUSTICE SECTOR
WORKERS**





Introduction

For years, Community members working in the privatised justice sector have been subject to verbal and physical assaults at work. In many cases, the offenders faced no consequences for their actions, de-facto decriminalising assaults of our members and other workers across the sector.

Despite a slight reduction in the level of assaults in 2020, which was largely due to Coronavirus related restrictions, the number of incidents our members face at work remains unacceptable.

Now, as Coronavirus restrictions are coming to an end and violence levels expected to rise again to pre-pandemic levels, we are calling on employers and the Government to take urgent action to end assaults in the justice sector.

About Community

Community trade union represents more workers in privatised justice services than any other union. Our members work across the justice, custodial and immigration sector including in private prisons, young offender institutions, secure training centres, courts and prisoner escorting, and electronic monitoring services. Our members work for a range of companies and organisations in the sector including Serco, Sodexo, GeoAmey, Mitie and Capita EMS.



The evidence

Verbal assaults on justice sector workers

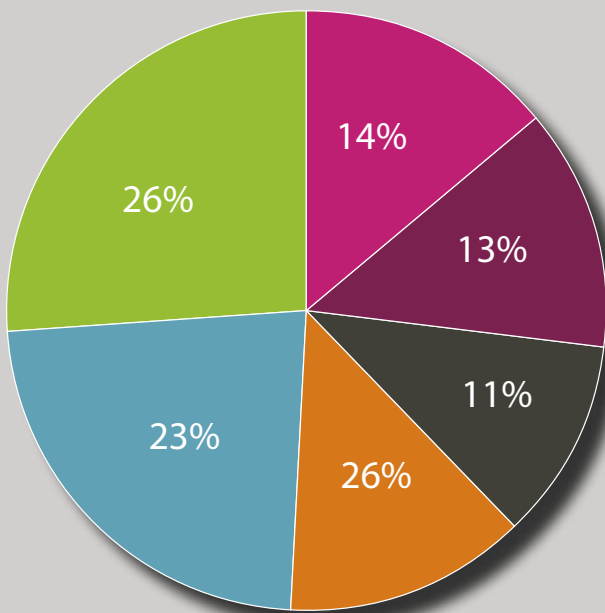
In a survey Community¹ conducted for justice sector workers in June this year the vast majority of respondents (86%) said that they have been verbally abused in the past year.

Over a quarter reported that they have been abused on a daily basis (26%), and another third stating that they have been verbally abused weekly (23%) and on a monthly basis (13%).



The level of verbal assaults in the justice sector can vary significantly from swearing to threats of physical assaults and intimidation.

In the workplace, how often have you been a victim of verbal abuse in the last 12 months?



- Never
- 1-2 times
- 2-3 times
- Montly
- Weekly
- Daily

“Male custody calling me all the names under the sun,saying what they would like to do to me, and my family...”

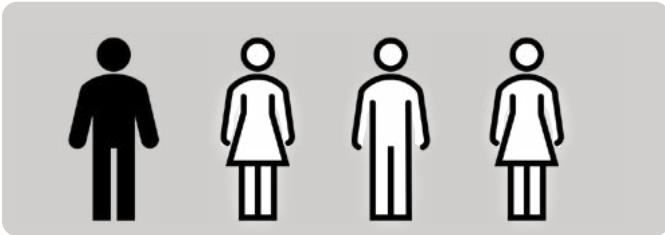
(A female Courts and Prisoner Escorting Officer)

¹ Find full data from our June 2021 survey on page 8.



Physical assaults on justice sector workers

According to Community’s survey, one in four justice sector workers have been assaulted at work at least once in the past year, and one in ten have been assaulted twice or more. 9% reported that they have been assaulted on a monthly basis during the past year.



One in four have been assaulted at work at least once in the past year.

Some testimonies exposed the lack of support from employers, including in vulnerable situations outside the workplace:

“Tasked to take a returnee [overseas]. On arrival at the immigration centre the returnee became violent and was put in a belt. The returnee had a medical issue and leaked [urine] from his behind which we had to sit in. The returnee produced a razor and I was cut twice whilst taking the blade off him. The company refused us time... to get our clothes clean and told us we would be disciplined if we didn’t return as planned.”

(A male overseas Escort Services Officer)

The Ministry of Justice’s **own records** show assaults on prison staff in England and Wales increased by over a staggering 247% since 2010, with over 7,979 assaults on staff taking place in 2020 alone. That equates to 21 prison officers being physically assaulted every day.

Indeed, numerous responses to our survey demonstrated that in the justice sector violence has been part of the job for years:

“Being spat at, punched, kicked, called names, sworn at, almost on a daily basis for the past 23 years.”

(A male Courts and Prisoner Escorting Officer)

Some victims of violence shared troubling testimonies of attacks they have experienced:

“April 2019 I had a metal flask wrapped around my head in the [Care and Separation Unit] which resulted in a broken cheekbone. October 2020 I was punched twice to the face after a prisoner tried to assault another member of staff. December 2020 a prisoner assaulted me with 11 batteries in a sock.”

(A male Public Sector Prison Officer)

“During a controlled removal of prisoner in full riot gear I was bitten on my forearm requiring blood tests over 3 months.”

(A male Private Prison Officer)

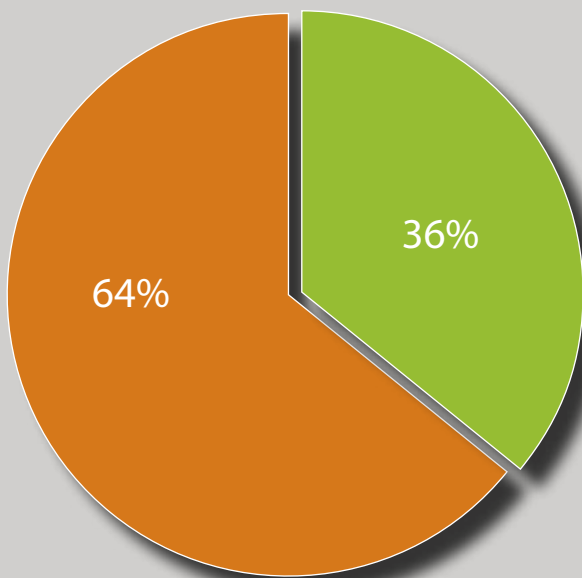
“Whilst trying to restrain prisoners legs he managed to kick out and I was kicked in the sternum.”

(A female Courts and Prisoner Escorting Officer)



The survey clearly identified that the vast majority of people reported incidents of assaults (87%). However, just over a third of those who raised the matter with their employers said that something was done as a result. Asked about the level of support they received from employers after reporting an incident, members' average rating was 2.67 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not supportive at all and 5 being very supportive. Despite the support offered by employers, a staggering 64% of members said that their report about abuse at work did not lead to any consequence for the offender.

If you have reported to your employer about an incident, was anything done as a result?



■ Yes
■ No

Members' testimonies were also clear that there is little to no expectation that their report on an incident would result with any meaningful action.

“Police don't do anything if we report [an] assault as they say it's part of our job.”

(A male Courts and Prisoner Escorting Officer)

Coronavirus regime impact on work-related violence

36% stated that they experienced no change in the level of work-related violence, and 29% said assaults have been worse during the past year. 35% said that the level of work-related violence they experienced during the past year was in fact lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Those who reported a decline in incidents attributed it to the following factors:

Private prisons

- Prisoners were spending more time in their cells than before the pandemic
- Reduction in number of physical visits leading to less illicit items entering the prison

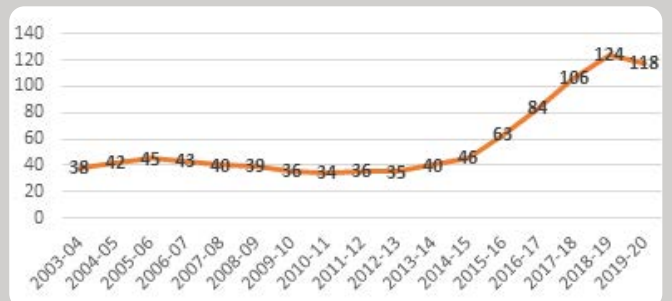
Courts and prisoner escorting officers

- Video link from police custody to courts reduced risk
- Less prisoners going through the courts

Overseas escort services

- Decline in number of overseas removals

Assaults on staff per 1,000 prisoners



Mal. Safety in custody, December 2020, table 3.1

According to data from the Ministry of Justice, assaults on staff have slightly decreased in 2020 across England and Wales.



Staffing levels and retention

Members repeatedly mentioned low staffing level as a key factor when it comes to health and safety at work.

According to official figures, the prison system alone has lost a cumulative of more than **86,000 years of prison officer experience since 2010**. Working in the justice sector has become increasingly unattractive for those who might have looked to get into the sector and to those already within it.



High levels of violence, including assaults on staff, cutbacks and low benefits has resulted in the sector becoming severely under-staffed.

Cumulative length of service of all prison officers



HC Deb, 13 April 2021, cW



Conclusion and recommendations

The evidence collected from our members working in the sector and from the Ministry of Justice's own data show that workers across the justice sector are subjected to unacceptable level of abuse, with their workplaces failing to meet basic health and safety standards.

The Government must work with staff, employers and unions to develop a clear and measurable plan to reduce assaults on staff year on year. This plan should include the following policies across the sector:

1. Assaulting staff must lead to tough responses

Most staff who have been subjected to assault report it to their employer, yet the majority are dissatisfied with the outcome, in some cases no action is taken at all. This situation is unacceptable and both employers and the Government must ensure staff members subjected to assaults receive proper support and the offender faces consequences for their actions. This must include police action when prison and immigration officers are assaulted.

2. Improve health and safety across the sector

Our members across the justice sector are clear about the support systems they need to make work safer for them: from effective mental health provision for officers who experienced traumatising events during their service to proper physical health care that looks after long-serving officers as well as new recruits.

3. Provide officers the equipment they need

Key to ensure officers in the justice sector can do their work in safety, is providing them with the right equipment. This includes body worn cameras for Courts and Prisoner Escorting officers and higher grade personal protective equipment such as stab vests for officers working in electronic monitoring.

4. Increase staffing levels and retain experienced staff

Low staffing levels and lone-working have a direct impact on officers' ability to do their work safely. This is not merely an issue of the number of officers working across the sector, this is also about the years of experience they have. We know that more experienced officers are better at dealing with difficult situations and deescalating tensions. Government must set a plan for retaining long-standing officers in the sector.

5. Show the same respect for all officers

It is a simple principle – officers doing the same kind of job should be shown the same respect, whether they are working with a private provider or in the public justice system. The Government must ensure all justice sector staff – including those that work in privatised justice estates – are nominated for the same medals and awards.



Key stats from Community's June 2021 Survey

Demographics

Area of work	Replies	Percentage
Other	3	2%
Electronic monitoring services	4	2%
Secure immigration centres	5	3%
Overseas escort services	14	9%
Courts & prisoner escorting	62	38%
Private prisons	74	46%
Total	162	

Age	Replies	Percentage
40-59	105	60%
26-39	47	27%
60+	21	12%
20-25	3	2%
Total	176	

Abuse at work

In the workplace, how often have you been a victim of physical violence in the last 12 months?	Replies	Percentage
Never	95	54%
1-2 times	44	25%
2-3 times	20	11%
Monthly	11	6%
Weekly	5	3%
Other	1	1%
Total	176	

In the workplace, how often have you been a victim of verbal abuse in the last 12 months?	Replies	Percentage
Never	24	14%
1-2 times	22	13%
2-3 times	20	11%
Monthly	23	13%
Weekly	40	23%
Daily	46	26%
Other	1	1%
Total	176	



Pandemic impact

In your experience, during the pandemic has work-related violence and abuse become...	Replies	Percentage
Much worse	24	14%
Worse	27	15%
Not as bad	30	17%
Much less	31	18%
About the same	64	36%
Total	176	

Reporting of incidents

If you have experienced abuse or violence, have you reported the incident to your employer?	Replies	Percentage
Yes	117	87%
No	18	13%
Total	135	

If you have reported to your employer about an incident, was anything done as a result?	Replies	Percentage
Yes	40	36%
No	70	64%
Total	110	

To learn more about this report and share your experience please get in touch with Community's Research, Policy and Politics Unit at RPPU@community-tu.org



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