



Customer Violence and Abuse in Retail: a literature review

Tony O'Connor, Point Associates
Ian Leader, Dot Two Dot

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Executive Summary

This paper synthesises literature and key points from stakeholder interviews about the drivers of violent and aggressive behaviour (VAB) perpetrated by customers in retail stores. Its purpose is to inform exploratory and design work to be delivered by the wider "Keep it Safe, Keep it Civil" project in New Zealand.

Customer violence and aggression in retail includes behaviour that may be hostile, intimidating, or threatening. These behaviours can include screaming and yelling, swearing, using racist language, making threats, spitting, pushing, shoving, throwing items and making false accusations. VAB perpetrated with the intent of committing a crime, such as shoplifting or burglary, is out of scope.

VAB in retail can have far-reaching and consequences for retailers, shop workers and customers. Retailers have a desire and responsibility to protect against it.

New Zealand is no different from other countries such as Australia, USA and the UK where multiple indicators irrefutably demonstrate that the frequency and severity of VAB incidents in the retail sector have been increasing significantly in recent years. The most comprehensive data available in New Zealand showed there had been an 11% increase in "serious behaviours" across major retailers, although in supermarkets the increase was 19%. These numbers are most likely an under-estimate given that retailers and staff do not report all incidents.

Drivers of VAB in retail include:¹

- Pathological social norms, such as customer superiority and entitlement - "the customer is always right".
- Customers responding aggressively to staff enforcing rules, such as rules relating to age-restricted and addictive substances.
- The perceived low social status of retail workers, which leaves them more vulnerable to being treated poorly
- Financial hardship
- Customer misuse of drugs and alcohol.
- Perpetrators assuming they will get away with it.
- Workplace ambivalence, including "it's part of the job" and/or "it's not a big deal".

Given the prevalence and growing incidence of VAB and the harm it causes, it is more commonly being framed as a public health crisis. Taking a public health approach requires seeing VAB as preventable, and an issue that requires a multi-faceted intervention across several levels: the individual (or would-be perpetrator), social (or family and community) and institutional (or policy and regulation).

¹ These points are not justifications. We do not condone or excuse any VAB in retail.

Given this, retailers, sector peak-bodies, communities and government need to work together to tackle the root causes of violence in people's lifestyles and choices, their peer-groups and families, social norms, and policy and legislation.

This paper concludes with a recommendation that retailers, sector-bodies and stakeholders start working towards creating a prevention strategy. There is a substantial though currently incomplete body of evidence to inform such a strategy – although this does not mean work should not start now.

Important evidence gaps are for comprehensive data on how much VAB is occurring in NZ retail, by whom, against, whom, and where. Further, while some drivers of customer VAB are understood, there is an incomplete understanding about customer journeys that end in them perpetrating VAB against retail workers.

The literature provides a theoretically-based framework for identifying and addressing drivers of customer VAB and the kinds of interventions that are likely to be needed. It also describes a process for developing a well-evidenced, actionable strategy. Developing and implementing such a strategy will require dedicated, well-resourced leadership over the longer term, involving retailers, sector bodies and stakeholders who have advisory, regulatory and enforcement powers.

Context

This literature review provides an overview of the drivers of retail customer violence and aggression and what is being done, any may be done, to address it. The drivers have been identified in the reports and published literature and in interviews with stakeholders who have extensive knowledge about and experience in the retail sector.²

The retail sector employs about 200,000 people, accounting for 9.6% of all New Zealand's jobs, spread over almost 28,000 retail businesses (Poynter and Kyle, 2021). Acts of VAB against frontline retail staff have become increasingly common in recent years in New Zealand and overseas. Consequences include staff anxiety and emotional burnout, injury, withdrawal, disengagement, absenteeism and turnover (Bellamkonda and Sheel, 2023). It also costs firms large sums both in lost revenue and overhead costs to implement measures to battle such behaviours (Fombelle et al, 2020). Employers can be liable for compensation claims if they fail to reduce the risk of staff being exposed to violence given that health and safety laws in New Zealand are designed to ensure the health and safety (both physical and mental) of workers and others in the workplace (Worksafe 2024). Employers' liability insurance covers the costs associated with personal injury claims as well as the cost of defending them. Employers face exposure to personal injury claims from employees in a variety of situations, including:

- Injury caused by stress
- Depression, anxiety or mental anguish
- Disease or infection caused by air conditioning systems or passive smoking
- Bystander claims caused by witnessing a traumatic injury or fatality
- Nervous shock or fright
- Heart attack or stroke caused by stress
- Disease arising from circumstances where the employer has failed to provide a safe workplace

To date, major retailers and industry bodies have been working largely independently to address VAB (Poynter and Kyle, 2021). Now there is growing interest in establishing a coordinated approach to prevent VAB happening in the first place.

² These stakeholders wish to remain anonymous..

Literature review method

Point & Associates were commissioned to conduct this literature review. Point shared early drafts with Dot Two Dot for discussion and development. Dot Two Dot interviewed sector, employees, representatives and stakeholders and shared key insights to help ground this review in current thinking and experience. Dot Two Dot also asked the interviewees to share publications and reports that should be included in the review.

Point used Google Scholar to search for publications that met the following criteria:

- Written in English language
- Qualitative and quantitative studies
- NZ-based and international studies
- Peer-reviewed studies
- Studies self-published by academic, government and non-government agencies
- Literature published since 2014. This is to help us focus on sourcing the most recent research on the topic. Core/foundational texts published before this date were included.

Searches were performed using the following combination of keywords: Retail workers, violence, abuse, retail customer abuse. Key papers cited in relevant publications were included. Papers referenced in this paper are listed in the appendix.

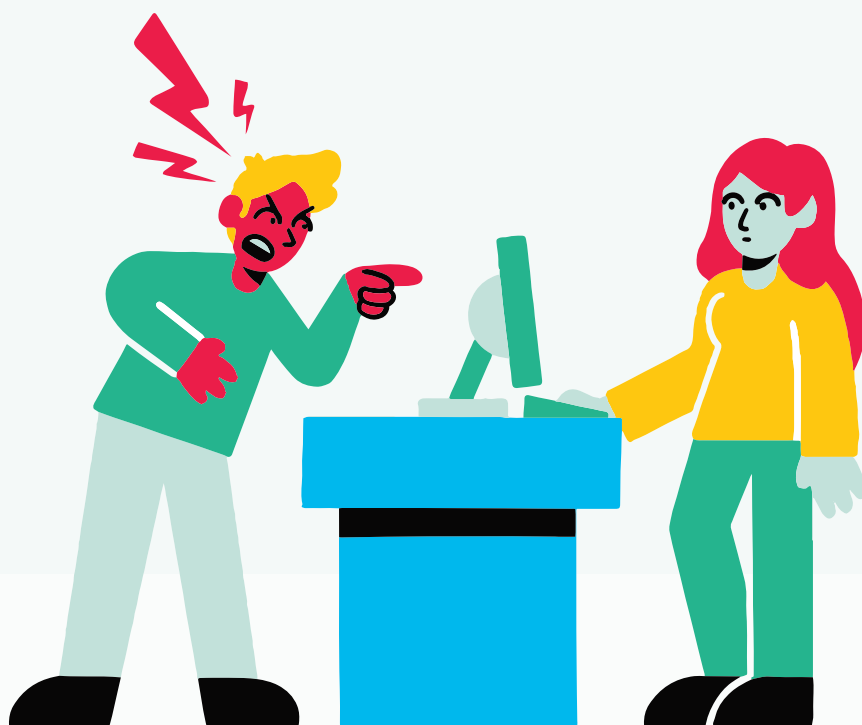
The literature about retail customer VAB sees it as "a multi-dimensional construct", such as VAB committed with criminal intent, and VAB that is committed without criminal intent. Given criminal intent is out of scope, we excluded information about criminal VAB where possible, but sticking to this distinction was sometimes not possible or even helpful, given that, for example, many instances of customer VAB are a consequence of staff challenging or interrupting shoplifters (Taylor 2019:21). These shoplifters may not have entered the store with the intention to be violent or abusive to staff.

There are likely to be valuable learning opportunities by extending the literature review (and interviews) into hospitality and other acts of VAB, such as road rage.

Defining violence and aggression

Customer violence and aggression in retail can include screaming and yelling, swearing, using racist language, making threats, spitting, pushing, shoving and throwing items. Those are direct acts of VAB. Customers may also use aggression "indirectly", such as by posting exaggerated or false reviews about staff, their workplaces or employers online. This summary is like that of Poynter and Kyle (2021:4) based on discussions and interviews with many New Zealand retail sector stakeholders. It is important to note that VAB can be directed at shop workers and other customers (Fombelle et al, 2020).

VAB is defined in different ways in the literature. This means different types of VAB can be treated separately in different reports and papers. The various definitions infer degree of severity. For instance, "aggression" includes "hostile" verbal and non-verbal behaviours, including physical contact (Mortimer et al 2023). This is like "violence" which "can inflict physical and/or psychological harm" (Ferron and Kovacs, 2019). "Incivility", on the other hand, "refers to "low-intensity deviant behaviour", such as "rudeness, being discourteous or disrespectful" (Mortimer et al 2023). Even so, "incivility" is sometimes considered alongside "violence" (e.g., Mortimer et al, 2023). Other writers report on customer "mistreatment" (Bellamkonda and Sheel 2023) and "misbehaviour" (Booyens et al 2022). Papers using any of these terms were included in this review.



Incidence

Although the literature review did not find data about incidents of customer VAB directed at other customers, one key informant described a volatile argument between a mother and daughter that required a security presence and intervention.

In the UK, the most common scenarios resulting in VAB stem from workers encountering shoplifters (25% of incidents) and workers enforcing legislation relating to the sale of age-restricted goods and other prohibited sales (22%). Again in the UK, it's been estimated that dealing with people under the influence of alcohol or drugs accounted for 21% of incidents in 2018. Customers and people loitering in or around stores under the influence of alcohol/drugs accounted for 10% of incidents. Taken together, enforcing age-restricted sales, refusing alcohol sales and dealing with people under the influence of alcohol or drugs accounted for 43% of incidents in 2018. Other factors leading to VAB include goods out of stock and other service issues Taylor, 2019).

Auror is a major reporting tool for retail incidents in New Zealand. It is used by the Police's National Retail Investigation Support Unit. As at 2021, about 80% of enterprise retailers used it including all major supermarket brands, all major petrol station brands, all major hardware brands and the largest general wholesalers, accounting for about 1,500 stores. Auror data showed there had been an 11% increase in "serious behaviours" (aggressive or physically abusive behaviour or brandishing a weapon) in the year to May 2021. For the grocery sector, the increase was 19% (Poynter and Kyle 2021). Further evidence also shows that in the 12 months prior to March 2024 retailers in New Zealand experienced at least 52,000 instances of violence and aggressive behaviour with a total 37% of that 52,000 unrelated to stealing, and simply being violent or aggressive in a retail environment.

Worryingly, these statistics are not an accurate account of the extent of violence and abuse in retail. Retailers have said they do not report all incidents of VAB for several reasons, including the time it takes to file a report, and because smaller stores do not have the required system in place (Poynter and Kyle 2021:7 and 11).

Surveys have also been used to get a sense of the scale of the problem. In 2023, Retail NZ reported 92% of retailers have experienced some form of retail crime over the past 12 months, in comparison with 81% when we last surveyed in 2017" (Retail NZ, 2023a). A First Union survey of its members in 2021 found that 70% of respondents had suffered customer assaults, abuse or aggression.³ In a 2019 survey by SDA Australia, which is the peak Union body for retail employees, more than 88% of surveyed members experienced verbal abuse from a customer in the past year (National Retail Association, 2020).

Taylor (2019:44) has reported that a survey of 1,095 adults in the UK showed that while most respondents (55%) disagreed with the statement 'Retail crime is a victimless crime because big companies are insured against their losses', almost a quarter (24%) agreed. Although it might be retail businesses that suffer the financial consequences of retail crime, it is individual shop workers – not their employers – who directly experience crimes that take place in the shops.

Drivers of VAB

The literature shows that understanding why customers perpetrate VAB in retail requires thinking broadly. Historically, the roots of customer violence or aggression tended to be identified in their interaction with retail workers or their employers' failures (Beverland et al, 2010; Cortina et al, 2018). These researchers were not entirely wrong, as evidenced by a "large volume of research on human aggression documenting that environmental stressors often result in angry emotions and aggressive interactions" (DeCelles et al, 2019). More recently, researchers show there are other significant drivers of customer VAB (e.g., Fombelle et al, 2020; Taylor, 2019). Taken together, the literature shows that personal factors and wider organisational and socio-cultural contextual factors usually interact in customer-perpetrated VAB. Simply put⁴, drivers are evident at these levels:

Personal

Throughout childhood, individuals develop ways to store, organise and process information about their environment. This is essential for children to understand the situations they find themselves in, their interactions with others, and the complexities of day-to-day living, and how they should respond. These learnt ways of thinking can lead to pro-social or anti-social communication and behaviour. They may also persist into adulthood, although they can change (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).

"Early exposure to child abuse or neglect, family turmoil, neighborhood violence, extreme poverty, racial discrimination, or other hardships can prime biological systems to become hyper-responsive to adversity" (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016:6). The more a child is exposed to violence or the more their capacity to developing effective executive function⁵, the more likely it is the affected child will use violence themselves, including as an adult (ibid).

While children growing up in abusive and emotionally deprived environments can develop violent tendencies, so can children who are indulged. Both indulgent and neglectful parenting may lead to narcissistic personality traits which are associated with senses of superiority and entitlement. These personality types can be apparent in people who have grown up in poverty and in more well-to-do families. People with these personality traits are more likely to be violent and aggressive towards others (Mehta, 2016; Lambe et al, 2016).

Sector stakeholder interviews suggest violent and abusive behaviour types in retail vary according to customer age, circumstance and location. However, there do appear to be some common elements across all demographics and socioeconomic circumstances as outlined below in no particular order.

³ The time period was not reported, e.g. within the last 12 months.

⁴ A thorough synthesise is well beyond the scope of this review.

⁵ "Executive function: means the ability to retain and use new information, flexibly adjust to different situations, and control impulsive behaviour. is supported by the development of the prefrontal cortex (the front third of the brain) from infancy through late adolescence and into early adulthood. A significant part of the formative development of the prefrontal cortex occurs during early childhood, as critical connections are forged between this region and other parts of the brain that it controls. This circuitry continues its development and becomes more efficient during adolescence and the early adult years although, it can be severely impacted by chronic exposure to family violence and other trauma, e.g., sustained poverty, or alcohol and drug use (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016:6).

Cost of Living

Customers experiencing or concerned about the cost of living and financial difficulty are more likely to perpetrate VAB in retail. These people may be hungry, short of money and stressed about paying their rent, mortgage, bills, school fees, etc or a combination thereof. Pride and shame about their situation can also be a significant aggravating factor, as can the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

Instant Gratification

Customer expectations are that the purchase, delivery, repair, replacement or customer service enquiry will be effected immediately, mirroring the immediacy of online retail and social media. Many interviewees described the significant lack of patience or tolerance for the time required to conduct due process is a rapidly growing issue for retailers.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Customers experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing, from diagnosed conditions to being under stress, have been highlighted as contributing factors to violent and aggressive behaviours.

The incident of customer to customer violence referenced above was the result of a mental health episode experienced by the daughter which was exacerbated by a cascade of system failures in her mother's day resulting in the "mum having a meltdown" in the shop. Once the highly experienced security team had calmed the situation, it was revealed that the daughter had had a mental health episode at school and been sent home. Mum had to collect her daughter because it was the carer's day off which disrupted her routine including doing the family's weekly shop. As Mum had used their last taxi voucher to collect the daughter from school, she was highly stressed about having to get home on the bus with a week's supply of groceries and an unwell and uncooperative teenage daughter.⁶

Social

If a person has friends or peers who are violent, this increases that person's propensity towards violence (Taylor, 2019:43). The more violence and justification of violence there is in a person's community, the more likely it is that they will use violence themselves (Zimmerman, 2001). If a significant or admired person tolerates or uses violence, people who look up to that person are more likely to be violent. The more significant and admired the person is, the more influential they are. These persons could hold official or voluntary roles in the community (e.g., manager, teacher, coach, actor, singer). They could also be fictional characters in entertainment or online. Social norms that do not encourage pro-social behaviour can have serious negative consequences, such as lower compliance for rules and laws (Fombelle et al, 2020).

A common theme from the key informant interviews was a lack of customer empathy or connection with employees or even the shopping centre or district. Interviewees described interactions as being highly transactional with very little human connection and many drew parallels with behaviours better associated with online retail and social media. Anecdotally, there appears to be a marked difference in these attitudes and behaviours between rural/regional and metropolitan areas with customers in rural/regional areas more likely to be more personable and pleasant with employees in a retail setting..

⁶ A happy ending: To ease the mum's high levels of stress, upon understanding what had happened, the situation was resolved by the Town Centre Manager providing a taxi to take mum, daughter and the shopping home.

Institutional

Systemic discrimination, deprivation and limited access to support for learning, employment, mental health, addiction, homelessness, and so on, are major contributors to violent behaviour (Taylor, 2019). Legislation affecting retail and (lack of) sector and organisation support for retail workers can put retail staff at more or less risk of violence. Therefore, government policy and legislation, and other institutionalised rules and historically embedded ways of doing things, need to be assessed when exploring the drivers of violence.

Drivers of VAB in retail

Fombelle et al (2020) found that "little research" has addressed the antecedents of retail customer VAB. They contend an "obvious starting point for more research in this area would be to develop a better understanding of the complete customer journey. This journey takes a customer from a goal-oriented shopping trip (pre-core experience) to a failed encounter (core experience) and, ultimately, lashing out at employees in response to their experience (post-core experience)." We concur mapping out such a process with retail sector representatives and any available evidence would be a worthwhile process, especially if these journeys can meaningfully differentiate between customer types, retail environments and types of abuse.

The literature describes a range of factors driving abuse in retail, as noted below.

It's ok to look down on retail workers

Researchers have written extensively about "customer sovereignty". This links to the saying, "the customer is always right". These notions drive a customer perception that they are superior to retail workers. Customers may use aggression when their sense of entitlement is not met, for example when a request they believe they are entitled to is declined (Fombelle et al 2020).

There is also a well-documented perception that retail service work is a low-status occupation, which may exacerbate customer aggression (Hampson and Junor, 2005). Furthermore, customers are more likely to use aggressive behaviour against retail workers with lower social status, such as younger workers and gender or ethnic minorities (Leidner 1993; Brown et al, 2020; Cooper et al, 2022).

These issues have been noted by Retail NZ as a common-place perception that "It's okay to look down on retail workers" (2023b). This is illustrated by an interviewee being insulted by a well-dressed, wealthy looking supermarket customer who called her an "incompetent f..k". The interviewee was working at the checkouts and bagged the customer's purchases in a way she disliked, because, she said, her food might get squashed. She didn't say anything to the customer, partly because she was so shocked, and partly because she wanted to finish the transaction as quickly as possible to put an end to having to deal with her. When the customer left, she went to the bathroom and cried. She briefly mentioned this to her supervisor in passing but didn't formally report it because she didn't feel it was worth it.

On reflection, she thinks being younger (16) made her an easy target – she doubts the customer would have spoken like that to an older, more senior staff member who would have been more likely to say something back.

A common theme from the key informant interviews was an apparent lack of empathy or connection with retail staff. Customer perceptions seem to ignore that there is a 'person' behind the counter who has feelings and a life beyond their job. Interestingly, three separate initiatives to help connect customers with the people who work in retail stores were raised through the interview process. One was a website profiling local retailers and their backstory, and the other two facilitated direct connections between local retailers and young people. All three initiatives appear to be highly effective in changing customer attitudes and beliefs about their local retailers, and especially so in changing the sometimes fraught dynamic between young people and retailers.

“I will get away with it”

Retail NZ (2013b) contends that some customers who use violence or aggressive behaviour think they will get away with it. In some cases, they are right. Because, as illustrated by the anecdote above, frontline staff do not always report customer VAB.

The literature shows that female and gender-diverse staff (Cooper et al, 2022; Mills and Owens, 2021), and younger staff (Brown et al, 2020), are less likely to speak up or ask for help if they experience VAB. These staff are more likely to assume their experience won't be taken seriously (Brown et al, 2020; Cooper et al, 2022; Mills and Owens, 2021). In New Zealand, a First Union survey in 2021 found that about 40% of workers received the support they needed following an aggressive incident (Poynter and Kyle, 2021:9). Poynter and Kyle found that in New Zealand “many stores believed these events [i.e., violent and aggressive incidents] are generally not a police priority” (2021:14). In the UK: “Police budget cuts to Britain's police forces have stretched resources to breaking. It is not surprising, then, that the police detection rate for crime affecting shops and their workers is just 1 in 500.11” (Taylor 2019:13).

As mentioned above, key informants from national retail companies have indicated that there can be a marked difference in VAB between customers in rural or provincial areas and customers in major cities and regional centres. Anecdotally it was felt that customers in rural and provincial areas are less likely to be as violent or aggressive because the customer is likely to be known to the staff member and their family, and “word gets around...”.

Displaced aggression

Angry individuals who were unable to retaliate against the actual provocation of their anger, may direct their anger toward an innocent individual or an easier target.

Unfortunately for retail workers, they are just enforcing rules. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, retailers in New Zealand noticed a significant increase in violence perpetrated by customers. The Association of Convenience Stores has reported that two-thirds of retailers (65%) had experienced Covid-related threats, with the most common causes of abuse being: reminding customers to wear face coverings and social distancing measures (cited in Poynter and Kyle, 2021:11).

Customers may also direct aggressive behaviours toward an employee, instead of the company itself when, for instance, the customer perceives the company has an unreasonable exchange or refund policy (Mortimer et al, 2023). Interviewees have signalled that customer confusion of the Consumer Guarantees Act has also been signalled as a major trigger for violent and aggressive behaviours. Locally, stakeholders have reported that counter staff can be abused for processes over which they have no control such as delayed deliveries and timeframes for arranging a repair. These staff can also be affected by violent or abusive behaviour of customers of another retailer co-located in their premises.

Workplace pressures and ambivalence

Researchers looking at retail-sector relationships and workplace practices in Australia have found that staff reporting of customer VAB “has been overlooked by management, prompting a need for ... better support from employers” (Cooper et al 2022, p6). While Cooper and team’s research was about the Australian retail sector, the wider literature suggests this issue is apparent in other countries, including New Zealand (Poynter and Kyle 2021). Reporting on a study based on Scotland, researchers found that “customer misbehaviour is commonly thought of as ‘part of the job’ and therefore ‘not a big deal’, which meant some staff would not report some incidents of customer abuse (Booyens et al, 2022). Worryingly, staff ambivalence can be compounded by managerial ambivalence: “Managers, largely, expected workers to tolerate abusive behaviours from customers and do not take reports of incidents seriously” (Ibid.). Under-reporting customer abuse can mean retailers do not have visibility of how common the problem is and the impacts it has on staff.

Stakeholders told us some retail staff can be more deferential to managers than others, especially staff who are young, female and of Asian ethnicities. If their managers expect, or advise, their staff to not react or respond to demeaning or insulting customers they are likely to do as expected. Unfortunately, some shoppers know this and can take advantage of these deferential workers which leaves them at risk of exposure to repeated abuse.

The Public Health Approach

The "public health approach" is a well-evidenced and developed approach to tackling violence.

A public health approach treats violence as an infection that can be cured. In particular, it attempts to harness policies that address social determinants of violence in order to limit its occurrence and stop it from spreading. (Taylor, 2019:42)

The public health-inspired framework identifies the various levels and kinds of activity that is needed to address violence. Where it is not possible to prevent violence from the outset, interventions should be designed to mitigate escalation.

The public health framework:

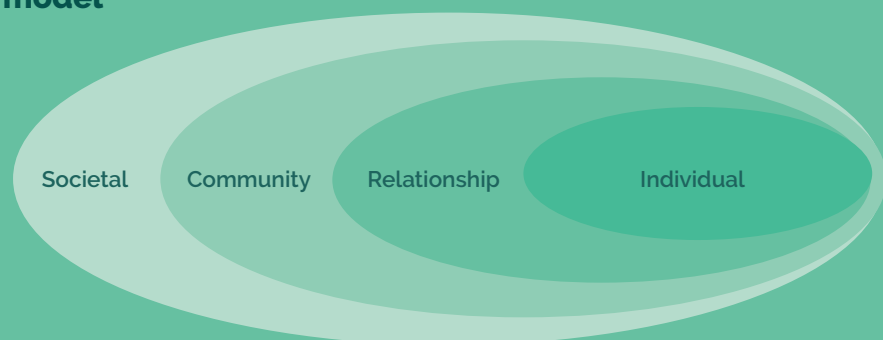
- Focuses on the root causes of violence, not only the symptoms.
- Addresses the underlying factors that are well-established correlates of violence, which are similar to the drivers of anti-social behaviour and crime.

A public health approach to tackling violence necessitates looking at violence not as isolated incidents, or solely as a police enforcement problem. Instead, this approach looks at violence as a preventable consequence of a range of factors, such as adverse early-life experiences and harmful social or community experiences and influences.

The PHA is built upon a "socio-ecological" model, as illustrated below.

The social-ecological model

The social-ecological model illustrates the complex interplay between individual, relationship, community and societal factors. It is based on evidence that no single factor can fully explain why some people and groups are at higher risk of violence, while others are more protected from it.



The model has individual, relationship, community and societal levels. These levels help focus attention on the multitude of factors contributing to VAB, from the immediate reasons why an individual may be violent or abusive towards a shop assistant, through to government policy or legislation that may have contributed to that incident. The model is not meant to imply that each level is discrete. Each level influences, and is influenced by, the other levels, as discussed in the section "Drivers of VAB", above. The key point of the socio-ecological model is the need to think about personal and environmental drivers of VAB and how each affects the other, including when it comes to design interventions. For the sake of clarity, we have reduced the four levels in the model to three: "Personal", "Social", and "Institutional".

Personal-level interventions

Interventions at this level may include providing education, training and enhancing life skills for people who have used violence. It is likely that different kinds of education, training and life skills enhancements will be needed, given that Poynter and Kyle (2021:19) have found that variations in customer types have made it difficult for the sector to address customer VAB.

Kovalenko et al (2020) report there are many kinds of violence prevention programmes, including some targeted at bullying and antisocial behaviour. Kovalenko and team reviewed the evidence about what works and for whom and found that there is limited evaluation of these programmes' effectiveness. Most studies included in their review found "small effects on violence reduction and victimization" (ibid.).⁷

Social-level interventions

At this level, prevention strategies could include community-based prevention programmes, early-intervention mentoring and promoting pro-social and respectful healthy relationships. At this level, interventions also address the social and physical environment – for example improving the culture, processes and policies within school, workplace and other community settings. There are two complementary and mutually reinforcing ways to approach this work. The first is to change the environments in which adults live, work, and access services—for example, by reducing the ways in which systems and services may overload and deplete people's self-regulation skills, especially for people facing adversity, such as financial stress; minimizing stigma; and addressing basic needs to relieve some of the key stressors in people's lives. The second is to provide individuals with coaching or training in specific self-regulatory and executive function skills, such as strategies for assessing stressful situations and considering alternatives (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016: 8). Working at this level requires collective action by retailers, security professionals, local community groups, local government, sector-bodies, and other stakeholders.

⁷ They also report on "critical gaps in evaluation research in this area" and they made "recommendations on how to optimize the effectiveness of future programs".

“Social interventions to prevent or disincentivize customers from engaging in deviant behaviours in retailing can be a powerful prevention tool” (Fombelle et al 2020). Most individuals like to see themselves as trustworthy and cooperative. Social norms can be reinforced by providing evidence for broad compliance and strengthening community involvement. It is not just signage or messaging alone that is effective in curbing deviant behaviour, but rather how it evokes and instils social norms in others. There are two types of social norms that lead to different behavioural responses:

- Descriptive norms: these refer to what individuals normally do. Descriptive normative messages are appropriate for reminding individuals that an activity is widely approved and accepted.
- Injunctive norms: these refer to what individuals ought to do to gain social rewards and avoid punishments. Injunctive normative messages (e.g., “the theft of wood is strongly disapproved”) are more effective at preventing theft than descriptive normative messages (i.e., “that such theft occurs frequently”). Injunctive normative messages should be used to stress that an activity is deviant and disapproved by society.

Fombelle et al (2019) report that “customer deviance can be curbed by attempting to reduce the deviant customer’s perception of anonymity, thus increasing punishment certainty and better activating social norms”. “Humanizing” the interaction between retailer and customer is key. Retailers who create a bond with their customers, show that they care about them, and treat them fairly, can make customers feel less motivated to behave in a deviant way” (ibid.) Establishing rapport means customers could be less inclined to use VAB.

Stakeholders told us they have had some success with roaming “Ambassadors” in shopping malls or main streets. These Ambassadors are approachable, observant and sociable people. They may, for instance, see a person looking agitated, grinding their teeth, slapping rubbish bins as they walk by. They will acknowledge the person with a friendly greeting, “hey there, how are you doing?”, which can snap them out of their state of mind and lift their mood. Ambassadors may also observe someone looking as though they might cause trouble in a store; again, their “intervention” would be a friendly acknowledgement and interaction which, in the stakeholders’ estimations, has helped prevent shoplifting or VAB in stores. A further example of a successful “social” intervention is town centre that was having repeated trouble with “hangry”⁸ young people has benefited greatly from a collaboration between a community group and library. The community group started a “Kai for Kids” initiative which proved popular with young people who were often accompanied by family members. Accordingly, the initiative was reframed to become a “Kai for Whanau”. Relieving hunger has helped improve people’s mood and retailers and librarians’ experiences in the town centre.

Another important social intervention is group-based promotion of pro-social behaviour embedded in communities. An example of this is “SafeMan SafeFamily”, which is a “peer-led, professionally supported” community of men with the shared goal of becoming violence-free.⁹ These men have used violence against their loved ones, and many have also used violence against members of the public. SMSF peers support and learn from each other to ‘Uncover’ the reasons why they use violence, ‘Discover’ what they can do about it, and ‘Recover’ from using violence by putting those learnings into practice. Their shared goal is to become violence free so they, their families and communities can become safe.

⁸ An angry mood brought on by hunger.

⁹ www.safemansafefamily.org.nz

An extensive evaluation has shown that SafeMan SafeFamily can indeed help men become violence-free (O'Connor et al, 2023). SafeMan SafeFamily was created within the context of, and continues to learn from and inform, a range of other stopping violence campaigns and initiatives across Aotearoa, such as the highly successful "It's Not Okay" campaign. Some of these campaigns have been developed over several decades (see Ministry of Social Development, 2024). "The It's not OK campaign aims to create conditions that support attitude and behaviour change to reduce family violence in Aotearoa. Since its launch in 2007, the campaign's strategies, messages and calls to action have evolved in response to new research and evaluation findings" (ibid.)

The "Cure Violence" intervention is a programme that has been adopted and adapted in communities around the world (Cure Violence Global, 2021). It is quite different to a criminal-justice response in that it focuses on addressing causes to try to prevent violence from happening in the first place. The CV programme is based on the public health approach, which is described in this report. While Cure Violence programmes are evidently useful (ibid.), scholars have cautioned that the programme focuses attention on "curing" pathological behaviours and social norms (in the retail context a pathological social norm is "consumer sovereignty", discussed above). Mitton (2019) notes that focusing on pathological behaviours and social norms draws attention away from the "broader context of economic and social structures" relevant to fully understanding the drivers of the problem and the necessary interventions. As well as looking at pathological customer behaviours and norms, retailers are likely to benefit from also considering their own workforces' capability and readiness to stop customer abuse (see "Workforce ambivalence", above).

Institutional interventions

This level refers to broad societal factors that create a climate in which violence is encouraged or inhibited. This includes economic and social policies and legislation affecting the retail environment and the conditions in which people live, including the use of violence as a solution to problems, and the availability of addictive substances and illicit drugs.

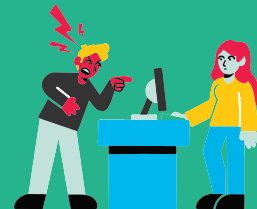
In 2023, Retail NZ noted they will use information they have gathered from the sector "... when working with local and central Government, Police, retailers, and their employees, to help reduce the crime rates faced by the retail sector." (Retail NZ, 2023b)". While criminal intent is out of scope of this review and the wider project it is informing, Retail NZ's position suggests there may be growing interest in the sector to address customer violent and abusive behaviour. In 2021, Poynter and Kyle found "there is currently little concerted effort amongst New Zealand retailers to work together to address violent and aggressive behaviour, let alone coordination with other organisations [or] stakeholders that have a role to play in addressing the problem" (2021:19).

Earlier in this paper we noted that legislation has been identified as a driver of crime, such as retailers needing to enforce mandated COVID mask wearing and administering age-restricted, addictive substances. Researchers have noted that organisations can struggle to effectively and safely implement legislative requirements, especially smaller organisations (Ferron and Kovacs, 2019). This suggests retailers may be able to benefit from additional government and sector peak-body guidance on how to adjust to and implement mandated requirements in a way that prevents customer VAB.

The Public Health Approach process

Developing a strategy to reduce violence against shop workers

Define the problem ▶ Identify risk and protective factors ▶ Design strategies from evidence-based practice ▶ Implementation and evaluation



Defining the problem

The first fundamental principle of any approach to reducing violence is that any intervention is based on the systematic collection and analysis of data about the magnitude, scope, characteristics, consequences and location of incidents. In other words, the first step in preventing violence is to understand the 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'how' associated with it. This review suggests current data may under-report the incidence of customer violence in retail. Similarly, very little is understood about the causes of customer VAB.

Identify risk and protective factors

With good data, it is easier to clearly define the problem, such as which kinds of retail environments, geographic locations and communities are experiencing particularly heightened levels of violence and abuse towards shop workers.

Once the problem is better understood, it is important to identify what factors protect people and communities or put them at risk of experiencing or perpetrating violence. In terms of violence against shop workers, immediate antecedents of incidents have been identified as: encountering shoplifters, enforcing legislation relating to the sale of age-restricted goods and other prohibited sales, and so on. However, as noted above, in addition to the immediate context, violence is the product of multiple levels of influence.

Use evidence to design the intervention

A credible evidence base is an essential part of a public health approach to violence prevention. Findings from the literature and data from well conducted surveys, interviews and focus groups are useful for informing the design of prevention programmes. Partner agencies should have a shared understanding about what the evidence is and what it says.

Violence prevention strategies generally falls into three categories: primary, secondary and tertiary. In the context of VAB used without criminal intent, primary prevention initiatives are likely to be most relevant.

- Primary prevention: Primary prevention strategies are directed at stopping problems before they materialise. They focus on both social and situational factors.
 - Social prevention addresses factors that influence an individual's likelihood of using violence.
 - Situational prevention addresses the environment (for example, advising people of in-store safety measures and enhanced guardianship such as employing security guards).
- Secondary prevention: These strategies are aimed at changing the life path of individuals at high risk of using violence. There might be several indicators of this, including displays of antisocial behaviour, poor or no school attendance, or increasing levels of alcohol or substance abuse. The idea of secondary prevention is that through early interventions, individuals and groups can be directed towards more pro-social behaviours and values.
- Tertiary prevention: These focus on the operation of the criminal justice system and deals with offending after it has happened. The primary focus is on intervention in the lives of known offenders to minimise the risk of them using VAB again. Examples include individual deterrence through community-based sanctions and treatment interventions.

Implementation and evaluation

Evidence-based interventions build on previous knowledge, are informed by a theoretical model (risk/protective factors), address multiple factors, and are guided by formative evaluation of pilot projects/interventions.

As part of implementation, it is important to evaluate programmes and initiatives to ensure that they are achieving their objectives, and to the level anticipated. Once this has been done, they can be adopted more broadly and adjusted according to the particulars of the new implementation context. The root causes of violence and verbal abuse are complex; what works in one context might not be suitable or effective in another.

Dissemination techniques to promote widespread adoption of effective strategies include training, networking, technical assistance and evaluation.

Conclusion

This paper provides a synthesis of literature and anecdotal evidence about drivers of customer violence and aggression in retail. The purpose is to inform exploratory and design work by the "Keep it Safe, Keep it Civil" project.

It is difficult to put a precise number to VAB in retail because the established systems are not universally used, and some workers do not report the violence or abuse they have suffered. Even so, surveys and reporting show that most retailers and retail workers are impacted by violent or aggressive customers each year.

While it may be easy to pinpoint the cause of a customer's VAB to a difficult instore encounter, the literature clearly shows the many drivers of customer violence lie elsewhere. The review has identified a multitude of factors including personal disposition and lifestyle factors, social norms and institutionalised drivers of customer violence.

- A customer may (mistakenly) think their violence is justified.
 - The customer may have narcissistic personality traits, e.g., a sense of superiority and entitlement. These are linked to higher rates of violence towards others.
 - The customer may feel a sense of belonging to a violent peer-group, both of which are linked to higher rates of using violence against others.
- A customer's violence may be impulsive.
 - The customer may lack self-control or the ability to regulate their emotions due to neurological deficit, intoxication, or developmental delay stemming.
- A customer may be hungry or need products but cannot afford it.
 - A customer may be deeply ashamed of what they have done – or intended to do – and resort to VAB when challenged.

Other drivers of violence are embedded in unhealthy socio-cultural norms:

- Customer sovereignty – the widely held belief or expectation that "the customer is always right" and are entitled to have their expectations met.
- Low status-shield – retail workers are considered an easier target than higher-status occupations because they are seen as unskilled. Furthermore, frontline staff tend to be from lower status sociodemographic groups: young, female and ethnic-minority.
- Drugs and alcohol – a tendency towards violence is exacerbated when customers are under the influence which is normal amongst, even celebrated by, many.

VAB perpetrated against retail workers may be about institutionalised matters workers can do nothing about, such as a policy disallowing an exchange or refund, supply chain issues leading to something being out of stock, or an age-restriction on a sale. There is little information readily available about which parts of the customer journey are most likely to cause VAB and the costs (human and financial) associated with these, which are of course likely to vary between businesses and business types.

Customers with a tendency to violence are emboldened when they feel they can “get away with it”. Perpetrators may see retail workers as powerless and unable to protect themselves. Frontline retail workers can be put at risk when they do not have the supports or training they need to handle restricted products, e.g., over-the-counter medicines, vape, tobacco and alcohol. This is particularly problematic when customers have addictions or other mental wellbeing needs and lack the health or social service support they need.

Given this review, we recommend that retailers, sector-bodies and stakeholders start working towards a prevention strategy. Developing and implementing such a strategy will require dedicated, well-resourced leadership over the longer term, involving retailers, security firms, peak-bodies, unions, and stakeholders with advisory, regulatory and enforcement powers.

There is a substantial though currently incomplete body of evidence to inform such a strategy, but important evidence gaps remain, such as how much VAB is occurring in NZ retail, by whom, against, whom, and where. Further, while some drivers of customer VAB are understood, there is an incomplete understanding about the journeys of different customer types that end in different forms of VAB. Understanding customer journeys better will deepen understanding of precursors and immediate causes of violence and how to intervene earlier.



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Ngā mihi

info@shopcare.org.nz | shopcare.org.nz



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