Managing workplace violence and aggression in NZ retail

A practical guide for health and safety professionals and store management

2025

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Disclaimer: This document is intended to provide general information and guidance on managing violent and aggressive behaviour (VAB) in the workplace and is not intended to address specific circumstances of any individual or entity in New Zealand It is based on research and practices as understood at the time of publication. This guidance was used with the assistance of AI tools, using best practice that are referenced in this document. Advice or guidance provided by ShopCare does not constitute legal advice. ShopCare does not accept any responsibility or liability, whether in contract, equity, or tort, including negligence, or under any other legal principle, for any direct or indirect losses or damage. You are free to copy, distribute and adapt this material, as long as you attribute it to ShopCare Charitable Trust.

Introduction

Workplace violence and aggression have become a critical issue in New Zealand retail, with the Retail NZ Crime Report 2024[1] showing that 39.1% of retail workers reported exposure (as a victim or witness) to at least one incident of offensive behaviour over a 12-month period. The report also highlights that physical violence and assault at retail locations increased by 2.6%, to 4,122 incidents year on year. These figures almost certainly underestimate the true scale since many incidents go unreported.

Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015, employers have clear legal obligations to provide a safe workplace "so far as is reasonably practicable." This includes protecting your workers from violence and aggression, whether it comes from customers, suppliers, or colleagues.

Understanding workplace violence in retail

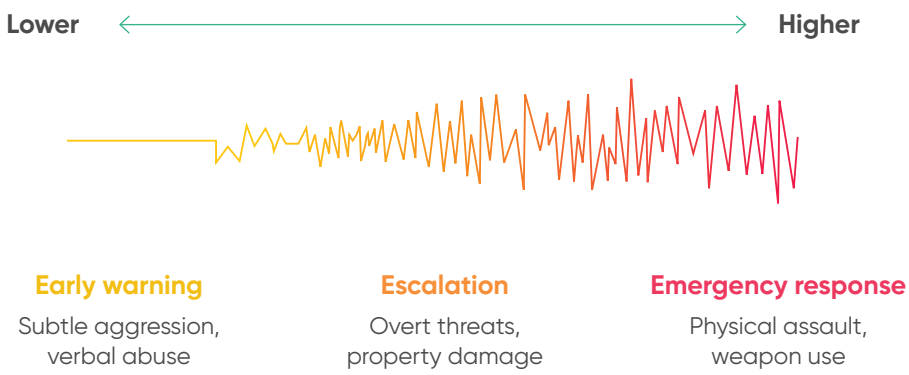
Workplace violence includes any incident where someone is abused, threatened, or assaulted while at work. In retail settings, this ranges from verbal abuse and threats to physical assault. Whether this behaviour is deliberate or unintentional, it creates health and safety risks for workers.

ShopCare research shows staff encounters with shoplifters account for approximately 25% of incidents, while enforcing age-restricted sales legislation represents another 22%. Dealing with intoxicated customers contributes to around 21% of incidents. When combined, alcohol and drug-related situations represent nearly half of all retail violence episodes[2].

The problem extends far beyond immediate physical harm. Workers who experience violence often suffer from anxiety and emotional burnout and may withdraw from their roles or leave employment entirely. For businesses, violent events can bring added costs, from lost productivity and higher security expenses to workers' compensation claims, and potential legal risks if adequate protections aren't in place.

Unfortunately, many incidents never get reported because workers consider violence "part of the job," fear nothing will be done, worry about being blamed, or find reporting processes too complex and time consuming. This under-reporting masks the true extent of the problem and prevents effective intervention.

Violence levels range from subtle to life threatening actions.



[1] Retail NZ Crime Report 2024 https://retail.kiwi/insights-media/retail-crime-insights/

[2] O'Connor, T., & Leader, I. (2024). Customer violence and abuse in retail: A literature review. ShopCare Keep It Civil Research. https://shopcare.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/ShopCare_Keep-It-Civil_Research_V2.pdf

It's important to note that aggression and violence of any kind are unacceptable, regardless of the perceived level of severity. Continual exposure for frontline workers to "lower" forms of aggression can have a high and lasting impact on staff. A US company that specialises in engaging workers surveyed 21,000 US frontline workers in 2025, and found[3] that staff who experience ongoing lower forms of aggression at work are:

- 1.3x more likely to be actively job hunting.
- 1.9x more likely to feel unsafe at work.
- 1.5x more likely to feel undervalued by their organisation.
- 2.2x more likely to report that stress is harming their physical health.
- 1.8x more likely to say stress has hurt their productivity for more than three days in the past week.

It also found that 53% of frontline workers reported encountering verbally threatening, abusive or unruly customers; for retail workers, it was 63%.

For the purposes of this guidance, frontline workers are any workers that are customer facing.

Your legal obligations

New Zealand's work health and safety legislation establishes clear duties for managing workplace violence. As a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU), you must ensure worker health and safety so far as reasonably practicable. This includes:

- Providing safe working environments.
- Consulting with workers about health and safety matters.
- Implementing systematic risk management processes.

Your obligations extend beyond immediate employees to include contractors, volunteers, customers, and visitors. The Health and Safety at Work Act's definition of health refers to both physical and psychological well-being, making workplace violence prevention a comprehensive requirement.

Workers also have a responsibility to take reasonable care of their own safety and that of others and cooperate with safety instructions. In situations involving serious and imminent risk, workers have the right to refuse unsafe work practices as long as they notify their employer as soon as possible.

You're required to consult with your workers and health and safety representatives when identifying risks, deciding how to prevent them, planning training, or making changes in the workplace. This consultation must be meaningful and influence your decision-making processes.

[3] Perceptyx. (2025, February 4). New research reveals the toll of the unruly customer on frontline workers [Press release]. GlobeNewswire. https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2025/02/04/3020395/0/en/New-Research-Reveals-the-Toll-of-the-Unruly-Customer-on-Frontline-Workers.html

Assessing your risks

Effective violence prevention begins with a thorough risk assessment. Start by examining your physical environment, work practices, and customer interactions to identify potential violence triggers and areas of vulnerability.

Physical environment

Consider things such as:

- Visibility throughout your premises.
- Quality of lighting inside and outside.
- Worker movement restrictions.
- Secure retreat areas.
- Entry control measures.

Check whether valuable items are adequately secured and whether your layout creates blind spots where incidents might occur without being observed.

Work practices

Work practices that increase risk include:

- Significant cash handling.
- Working alone, especially during evenings or nights.
- Serving alcohol or age-restricted products.
- Enforcing policies that customers might resist.

Customer service roles involving enforcement of unpopular rules or delivery of unwelcome news create vulnerabilities.

Customer interactions

Customer interaction risks arise when serving individuals who may be distressed, angry, or intoxicated, particularly during peak periods with long waiting times, and when addressing complex complaints or disputes. Understanding your customer demographics and local community characteristics helps identify specific risk patterns.

Relevant information

Gather information from multiple sources including incident reports, workers' compensation claims, staff feedback, security footage reviews, and customer complaints. It's good practice to speak directly with workers who have experienced a violent incident to understand their perspectives on risk factors and prevention.

Organisational policies as risk factors

Research[4,5], shows that organisational policies, procedures, and business practices can significantly contribute to customer frustration and aggressive responses. As a person conducting a business or undertaking (PCBU), you have a legal and ethical responsibility to regularly review whether any of your operational practices are creating unnecessary friction that may provoke adverse customer reactions. This assessment must be ongoing and systematic.

When implementing controls to reduce aggression triggered by your business practices, prioritise the hierarchy of controls. Elimination, substitution, and engineering controls are the most effective, followed by administrative controls and personal protective measures. By examining how your business operates, and being willing to modify policies and procedures that unnecessarily trigger customer frustration, you reduce the likelihood of violence and the burden placed on frontline kaimahi/workers who are often left managing situations that your organisation may have unintentionally created.

The following four factors outline how certain business practices, policies, and customer interactions can trigger aggressive behaviour. Each factor includes practical considerations for assessment and improvement.

Policy and practice friction points[6]

Some operational policies are more likely to trigger aggression or verbal abuse. Common friction points include:

- Enforcing age-restricted sales.
- Communicating price increases.
- Applying refund policies.
- Managing long queue times.
- Dealing with intoxicated customers.

When customers see these practices as arbitrary or inconsistently applied, the likelihood of frontline workers dealing with aggression and abuse increases. Identify which policies or practices create friction points in your operation, assess whether they can be amended, adjusted, or removed, communicate the reasons for them clearly (including as part of your sales process), and ensure they are applied consistently across all customers.

[4,6] Mortimer, G. (2024). Four reasons customer aggression is growing. Queensland University of Technology Research. Retrieved from https://www.qut.edu.au/news/realfocus/four-reasons-customer-aggression-is-growing-and-possible-solutions

[5] Ok, S., & Lee, G. (2020). Effects of customer entitlement on employee emotion regulation, conceding service behaviour, and burnout: The moderating role of customer sovereignty belief. European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology, 30(1), 88–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2020.1797680

Displaced aggression from external stressors[7]

Customers may arrive already stressed or frustrated due to unrelated factors such as work pressure, traffic, or personal issues. When they then encounter a policy barrier or service issue, this pre-existing anger can be redirected at staff. This "displaced aggression" means frontline workers become outlets for frustration that originated elsewhere. Consider whether your policies allow for:

- Reasonable flexibility.
- Alternative solutions.
- Clear and simple escalation pathways.

Providing frontline workers with options to empower them can help de-escalate situations and prevent frustration from escalating into aggression.

Technology without human escalation[8]

Automated systems such as QR code ordering, self-checkout, and chatbots can be useful, but they may reduce opportunities for customers to seek help when something goes wrong. If the technology fails or requires unfamiliar processes, and customers cannot negotiate or receive empathy from a person, frustration builds quickly - especially if customers only learn late in the process that human support is actually available.

Use hybrid approaches wherever possible. Technology should support service, not replace it. Make sure customers can access immediate human help when they become confused or frustrated.

Vulnerability of low-status staff [9,10]

Aggression disproportionately targets vulnerable frontline workers who have no or limited authority to modify policies. These staff members become the visible face of unpopular rules they did not create. Protect your vulnerable workers by:

- Ensuring supervisor visibility during difficult interactions.
- Providing de-escalation training.
- Implementing clear zero-tolerance abuse policies.
- Having safe protocols for withdrawing from hostile situations.

Spread responsibility for enforcing challenging policies rather than leaving frontline staff to manage them alone.

[7,8,10] Mortimer, G. (2024). Four reasons customer aggression is growing. Queensland University of Technology Research. Retrieved from https://www.qut.edu.au/news/realfocus/four-reasons-customer-aggression-is-growing-and-possible-solutions

[9] Fisk, G. M., & Neville, L. B. (2011). Effects of customer entitlement on service workers' physical and psychological well-being: A study of waitstaff employees. Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 16(4), 391–405. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023042

Eliminating and modifying risks

You should look to remove high-risk activities wherever possible. For example, some businesses may be able to operate cashless during vulnerable periods. Where elimination isn't possible, you can look to modify high-risk activities such as avoiding single-person shifts during vulnerable hours, relocating age-restricted products, or items which could be weaponised such as knives, behind secure counters, and considering delivery-only options for high-risk items.

Implementing control measures

Control measures should follow the established hierarchy of effectiveness. Start by eliminating risks where possible, then consider engineering controls, administrative controls, and finally personal protective equipment. The following diagram is from SafeWork Australia and shows what applying a hierarchy of controls looks like.

HIERARCHY OF CONTROLS FOR MANAGING THE RISK OF HARMFUL WORKPLACE BEHAVIOURS

PRIMARY MEASURES
Preventing or reducing the likelihood of exposure

TARGET THE SYSTEMS OF WORK

ELIMINATION

- Exclusion of workers or other persons from a worksite or work activity who behave in ways that pose a risk to others (aggression, violence or other harmful behaviours).

SUBSTITUTION

- Design of work to minimise the risk of role conflict, role ambiguity & high work demands.
- Re-deployment of workers to other roles where poor job-person fit is identified.
- Rigorous selection of prospective workers to screen out those of poor character & those with overly 'hands-off', autocratic & authoritarian management or leadership styles.

ISOLATION & ENGINEERING

- Physical spaces or barriers between workers or others who pose as threats to physical safety.

SECONDARY MEASURES
Reduce the risk of harm

TARGET THE WORKER

ADMINISTRATIVE

- Reinforcement of expected values & behaviours throughout key points in the employment lifecycle through the consistent & proportionate application of rewards for desired behaviours & sanctions or consequences for harmful behaviours.
- Worker awareness of their legal protections against harmful workplace behaviours (where relevant, under the WHS Act (SA) 2012, the Equal Opportunity Act (SA) 1984, or the Fair Work Act 2009).
- Clauses in collective agreements, employment contracts & performance agreements prohibiting harmful behaviour.
- Recurrent communication of policies relevant to workplace behaviours.
- Psychosocial risk assessments that include a focus on known risk factors for harmful behaviours (role conflict, role ambiguity & high work demands).
- Transparent written procedures for internal & external avenues for reporting, internal & external options for support, procedures for investigating complaints, options for formal & informal dispute resolution & the full range of sanction options.
- Complaint handling procedures that require complainants & complaint respondents to be given reasonable information about the process & outcome of complaints (informational & procedural justice).
- Transparent information on rights & obligations for complainants & complaint respondents & review of action procedures.
- Educating & training managers in conflict resolution & managing performance & conduct.
- Specific protocols for supporting workers exposed to sexual & physical assault (where a moderate to high risk exists).
- Systems to track complaints & monitor trends.

TERTIARY MEASURES
Individual level measures that treat or compensate for harm or last lines of defence against harm

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE RESOURCES

- Formal & informal emotional & other support for complainants, complaint respondents and others adversely affected by harmful behaviours (interpersonal justice).

SafeWork SA

Figure 1: SafeWork SA. (2025, September 27). Managing the risk of exposure to harmful behaviours. https://safework.sa.gov.au/workplaces/psychosocial-hazards/managing-the-risk-of-exposure-to-harmful-behaviours

Physical security measures

Engineering controls provide reliable protection without depending on human behaviour. Improvements to prioritise include:

- Upgrading lighting inside and outside the premises.
- Removing or securing items that could become projectiles or weapons.
- Ensuring clear sightlines throughout service areas.
- Creating safe retreat areas for workers.

Medium-term investments might include:

- Security screens or barriers between workers and customers.
- Comprehensive CCTV systems with good coverage and recording capability.
- Duress alarms connected to security services or police.
- Intercom systems for internal communication.
- Access control for staff areas.

High-risk environments may require:

- Security guards during vulnerable periods.
- Controlled entry systems.
- Anti-jump screens at service counters.
- Secure glass in windows and displays.
- Separate entrances for customers and staff.

Safe work systems

Develop clear procedures for opening and closing operations, particularly during vulnerable times. This includes:

- Using two-person teams when possible.
- Positioning vehicles for quick departure if needed.
- Checking surroundings before unlocking the premises.
- Immediately securing access after entry or exit.

Establish protocols for workers operating alone, including:

- Regular supervisor check-ins.
- Panic button or duress alarm access.
- Mobile phone availability for emergencies.
- Predetermined safe areas.
- Clear guidelines on when to refuse service.

Create customer service protocols covering:

- Return and exchange policies.
- Age verification procedures.
- Complaint and dispute handling.
- Queue and wait time management.
- Interactions with intoxicated customers.

These protocols should be clear, consistently applied, and communicated to all relevant staff.

Training and competency development

Training should complement rather than replace other control measures. Focus on helping workers recognise warning signs of escalating aggression, develop de-escalation skills, understand emergency procedures, and know how to access support when needed.

Essential training topics include:

- Recognising body language and verbal cues indicating potential violence.
- Staying calm under pressure while using active listening techniques.
- Knowing when to disengage from difficult situations.
- Understanding proper emergency response procedures including alarm activation and police contact.

Supervisors and managers need additional training in incident response priorities, when to involve external assistance, evidence preservation, worker support provision, and basic investigation techniques. This training should be practical, using real scenarios from your workplace, and include regular refresher sessions.

As a charity dedicated to health and safety for retail, warehousing, manufacturing and transport, we have created a series of free online training modules around violence and aggressive behaviour[11]. These ShopCare training modules[12] offer practical guidance to support the psychosocial aspects of staff dealing with violence and aggressive behaviour.

To access this free resource, visit our training page at: **shopcare.org.nz/training**

[11] ShopCare. (n.d.). Violent & aggressive behaviour. https://shopcare.org.nz/workstreams/violent-and-aggressive-behaviour/

[12] shopcare.org.nz/training

Workplace policies

A comprehensive workplace violence policy establishes clear expectations and procedures for prevention and response. The policy should communicate zero tolerance for violence while outlining roles and responsibilities across all organisational levels.

Essential policy elements include:

- A clear statement that violence and aggression are unacceptable from any source.
- Specific responsibilities for management, supervisors, and workers detailed procedures for incident response and reporting.
- Information about available support services.

The policy must be written in simple, accessible language that workers from any cultural and linguistic background can understand. Display the policy prominently and ensure all workers understand their rights and obligations under it.

Policy enforcement requires consistent application and regular review to ensure it is in line with current risk profiles and legislative requirements. The policy should integrate with broader health and safety management systems and align with organisational values and culture.

Responding to incidents

Effective incident response requires pre-established protocols addressing immediate safety priorities. During incidents, focus first on ensuring everyone's safety, getting help if needed from police or security services, using de-escalation techniques where safe to do so, and removing people from danger if necessary. Avoid pursuing offenders or taking actions that increase risk to yourself or others.

After immediate danger passes, check whether anyone needs medical attention, secure the area and preserve evidence. If possible, report the incident immediately to appropriate authorities, provide support to affected workers, and document everything while the details are fresh in your memory.

New Zealand law requires immediate notification to WorkSafe for incidents resulting in death or specific serious injuries[13]. For all incidents, document what happened, who was involved, including workers and witnesses, when and where the incident occurred, any injuries or damage sustained, and immediate actions taken.

Additionally, in New Zealand, retailers can report to a retail crime prevention platform called Auror[14]. This platform alerts retailers where the incident occurred and police are also able to access information lodged on the system[15].

[13] WorkSafe New Zealand. (n.d.). Notify WorkSafe. https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/notifications/notify-worksafe/

[14] Auror. (n.d.). Auror: Retail crime intelligence platform. https://www.auror.co/

[15] New Zealand Police Association. (2024, July 1). Fighting back with an Auror of confidence. https://www.policeassn.org.nz/news/fighting-back-with-an-auror-of-confidence

Supporting affected workers requires both immediate and ongoing assistance. Immediate support includes:

- Medical attention if needed.
- Practical help such as transport or family contact.
- Time off to recover.
- Assurance they won't be blamed.
- Clear information about next steps.

Ongoing support may include:

- Counselling service access.
- Modified duties during recovery.
- Regular wellbeing check-ins.
- Involvement in prevention planning.
- Respect for privacy.

Investigate all incidents to understand what happened and why, identify system failures or gaps, develop prevention strategies, improve response procedures, and support affected workers.

Key investigation questions include whether the incident could have been prevented, whether existing controls were adequate, whether procedures worked as intended, what might prevent similar incidents, and what workers need to feel safer.

Building positive culture

Leadership commitment to violence prevention must be visible and consistent. Set clear expectations that violence is unacceptable, consistently enforce policies, invest in prevention measures, support workers who report incidents, and take all reports seriously regardless of perceived severity.

Model appropriate behaviour by treating everyone with respect, staying calm under pressure, following safety procedures, actively seeking worker input on safety issues, and acknowledging good safety practices when you observe them.

Make incident reporting easy and accessible through multiple options including verbal, written, and anonymous reporting. Ensure procedures are clear and well-understood, provide prompt responses to reports, give regular feedback on actions taken, and protect workers from retaliation for making reports.

Attitudes that normalise violence as "part of the job" should be challenged and barriers to reporting should be addressed. Supervisors should take reports seriously, following up on all incidents, and celebrating improvements in team culture. It's good practice to include violence prevention in regular team meetings, ask for improvement ideas, share relevant incident information and trends, and learn from near misses and successful de-escalations. This is because regular worker participation in safety discussions helps identify emerging risks and evaluate prevention effectiveness.

Working with external partners

Build relationships with local police before you need their assistance by introducing yourself to community officers. This will enable you to share information about your risk profile, understand their response priorities and procedures, discuss prevention strategies they recommend, and clarify when to call for help.

Consider crime prevention through environmental design by getting police input on security measures, understanding local crime patterns, participating in business watch programs, and sharing information about repeat offenders where legally appropriate.

You can also learn from other retailers by joining industry associations, sharing experiences with similar businesses, participating in safety initiatives, learning about new technologies and approaches, and advocating collectively for better support and resources.

Broader community issues that contribute to violence can be addressed by supporting programs that focus on poverty and mental health, participating in local safety initiatives, building relationships with social services, and considering how your business can contribute to overall community wellbeing. Some examples of these are below:

The Ambassador program[16]

The town ambassador programme is a practical initiative designed to increase visibility, reduce violent and aggressive behaviour, and build public confidence by placing trained ambassadors on the ground to support local businesses and engage with the community.

Crowded Places Strategy (NZ)[17]

The Crowded Places Strategy was developed by the New Zealand Government in response to the Christchurch mosque tragedy in 2019 and the Royal Commission of Inquiry's recommendations. Its purpose is to help owners and operators of crowded places, such as sports and events venues, transport hubs or places we shop, protect the people who work in, use, and visit these spaces without compromising their enjoyment or everyday use.

The strategy focuses on four key areas:

- Building strong relationships.
- Sharing information.
- Implementing protective security.
- Increasing resilience.

By raising awareness and encouraging practical steps (including the ESCAPE. HIDE. TELL framework), it equips organisations to deter, detect, delay, and respond effectively to threats.

[16] ShopCare. (2025, July). ShopCare Ambassador Programme 2025. https://shopcare.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/ShopCare-Ambassador-programme-2025.pdf

[17] NZ Police Crowded Places Strategy. https://www.police.govt.nz/advice-services/protecting-crowded-places-attack/crowded-places-strategy

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We are working for you – to make your workplace safer and to ensure your team get home safely at the end of their shift.

Where do you start?

Begin immediately by:

- Conducting a basic workplace walk-through to identify obvious risks.
- Talking with workers about their safety concerns.
- Reviewing recent incidents for patterns.
- Checking that emergency contact information is current.
- Ensuring all workers know how to get help in emergencies.

Within the first month:

- Complete a formal risk assessment.
- Develop or update your violence prevention policy.
- Implement immediate physical security improvements such as lighting upgrades.
- Provide basic de-escalation training to all workers.
- Establish clear incident reporting procedures.

Over the following three to six months:

- Put identified controls in place.
- Develop a comprehensive training program covering all relevant topics.
- Create detailed response procedures for various scenarios.
- Build working relationships with local police.
- Establish ongoing worker consultation processes.

Maintain ongoing commitments to regular team meetings about safety, monthly incident reviews and analysis, annual policy updates based on experience, risk assessment reviews, and continuous improvement based on worker feedback and changing circumstances.

Monitoring and continuous improvement

Track key indicators including incident numbers and severity, types of incidents occurring, high-risk times and locations, worker feedback on safety measures, and effectiveness of control measures.

Conduct regular reviews, including incident analysis, policy reviews, annual assessments, post-incident evaluations, and worker safety surveys.

Identify what's working well, including which prevention strategies are most effective, where incidents have decreased, what workers find most helpful, and which training has made a measurable difference. Also identify what needs attention, including where incidents continue occurring, what new risks have emerged, where workers still feel unsafe, and what feedback you haven't yet acted upon.

Stay current with industry trends and best practices, update procedures based on experience, invest in beneficial new technologies when appropriate, maintain and test security equipment regularly, and keep training fresh and relevant to emerging risks.

Getting support

For immediate emergencies requiring police response, call 111.

For health and safety guidance and incident notification requirements, contact WorkSafe New Zealand on 0800 030 040 or visit worksafe.govt.nz.

Support services for affected workers include employee assistance programs if available, Victim Support on 0800 842 846, and the mental health crisis line on 1737.

Industry resources include:

- ShopCare at shopcare.org.nz
- Retail NZ at retail.kiwi
- First Union at firstunion.org.nz

Conclusion

Violence and aggression in retail workplaces is neither acceptable nor inevitable. Through systematic risk management, effective prevention strategies, and appropriate incident response, you can create significantly safer environments for your workers and customers.

However, success requires ongoing commitment rather than one-time fixes. Start with immediate improvements you can implement, then build comprehensive systems over time. Involve your workers throughout the process, learn from every incident, and maintain focus on continuous improvement.

Remember that taking worker safety concerns seriously, acting promptly on identified risks, and creating workplace cultures where everyone feels valued and protected is not just about legal compliance. It's about creating workplaces where people can do their jobs safely and with dignity.

You and your staff deserve workplaces free from violence and aggression. With systematic effort and ongoing commitment, you can provide a solid foundation for productive, sustainable retail operations.

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Transforming health, safety and wellbeing outcomes for the New Zealand retail sector and its supply chain.

ShopCare provides guidance, training, and collective expertise to help the entire retail ecosystem create healthier, happier, and safer working environments for all kaimahi/workers.

We provide free resources for retailers and supply chain companies of all sizes, from sole operators right through to large retail chains.

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