



Policy Briefing

15 September 2021

Violence against rail, bus and ferry staff during the Coronavirus pandemic

RMT conducted a survey of members working on rail, buses and passenger ferries. More than 5,200 workers responded to the survey over 4 days. Below are the key results and some first-hand testimony from the front-line of public transport.

Almost 60% subjected to violence at work

- 58% of public transport workers report that they have been subjected to workplace violence from passengers since the pandemic began.
- Half of these reported that this had happened to them more than once and one in 5 reported that it had happened more than 10 times since the pandemic began.
- More than half reported being threatened with physical violence, 10% had been physically assaulted, while 16% reported being spat at or targeted with bodily fluids.
- 88% had been verbally abused, 13% reported being racially harassed and 6% had been sexually assaulted.

"I was verbally abused by a passenger for asking them to wear a mask and to keep a 2 metres distance."

"I've experienced being spat at, called a paedophile, threats to be stabbed, members of my family would be raped, called all the names under the sun, pushed, shoved, provoked"

"I was spat on and assaulted with a fire extinguisher let off in my face."

"A passenger tried to grab my face mask off my face."

"I have been verbally abused alongside other colleagues. I have been physically assaulted as well since the start of the pandemic. Something needs to be done, I don't feel safe going to work anymore."

"Threatened to be spat upon by a passenger who claimed to have Covid"

"Verbal abuse about 3/4 times a week. Countless times during service disruptions."

"I suffered 6 assaults in a short space of time include physical violence, threats of violence and abuse and was eventually signed off work with PTSD."

"Sworn at and threatened with bodily harm on daily basis. Spat at twice in last 12 months"

"I've been physically assaulted twice and verbally assaulted four times."

The problems have got worse since the pandemic

Staff attribute this to having to implement Covid safety rules, the lack of any action against perpetrators, lack of support, rising aggression levels and mixed messages to the public

- The majority of respondents (53%) believe that workplace violence has worsened since the pandemic and when asked why they thought this was, the biggest reasons given were the fact that no action is taken against perpetrators (71%), the reduced presence of BTP and police (64%) and the need to remind passengers about Covid safety measures (62%).
- 73% said that they believed that the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions in July 2021 and mixed messaging created by this had led to an increase in violence at work.

"A lot of passengers do not follow government guidelines and keep coming very close to me without wearing a mask. When you politely ask them to keep a distance they become aggressive. Even had a passenger spitting in my face because i asked him not to come close to me, a week later I tested positive for covid."

"I asked a frequent traveller onboard to please wear a face covering...he replied "you've no right to ask or tell me that so go f###k yourself"

"You get threats and abuse when your Company tells you to enforce Mask Wearing, then abuse from Passengers complaining that you not telling people to wear Masks."

"People now get angry about other passengers not wearing masks, they don't want to sit next to people. People's tolerance levels seems to have gone down and we are now dealing with these complaints along with the usual."

"It's a daily occurrence getting verbally assaulted at the moment mainly due to current company staffing levels. (Bus) Drivers are getting abuse left right and centre. Drivers are leaving in droves because management don't care about the amount of stress that we are under."

"In reality we are mostly abused in one form or another daily. More so since Covid 19 where our passengers frustrations are growing daily."

"An increased amount of hostility and verbal abuse has been noticeable"

"The level of verbal abuse I receive has greatly increased since the start of the pandemic"

"People seem to be more aggressive than before the pandemic."

"People pushing through the barriers to avoid paying a fare, as gates were previously open during the initial pandemic, rudeness and swearing with increased aggression,"

"Far more short tempered people that fly off the handle for very trivial reasons and far more aggressively. Also there seem to be a lot more intoxicated people too"

Staff are often working alone when assaulted and feel that there is little support

- 66% of these transport workers were working alone when they were subjected to violence and 56% reported that lone working had become more common since the pandemic began.
- 91% reported that they had not taken time off after the incidents.
- 43% said they hadn't reported the incidents to their managers and when asked why, the most common reasons given were that it was seen to be part of the job or that they believed it wouldn't be taken seriously. Almost a quarter said they had previously reported an incident and no action had been taken.
- Of those who did report the incident, 84% said that their employer offered no further support after the incident, such as counselling or adjustments to working patterns.
- Only 30% of reported incidents were attended by British Transport Police and most workers (67%) believe that BTP's involvement in such incidents has declined over the pandemic.

"Nothing gets done about it is the norm. Police are no use, always disappear when we need them."

"I was assaulted by a member of the public who had assaulted three other staff members in which the police had failed to investigate the previous matters seriously"

"I was happy with my station manager approaching me and supporting me but the company overall I'm not happy with as they don't seem interested in doing anything to tackle this type of problem. They aren't interested just as long as the job gets done and they can carry on raking the money in. There are no preventive measures in place and the police hardly ever show up at all even just as a deterrent."

Summary

These results show that the stresses and strains of the pandemic and the mixed messages in the government's botched handling of the crisis have significantly aggravated an already serious problem.

RMT is fully supportive of Olivia Blake MP's 10-Minute Rule Bill which seeks to make verbal or physical abuse of a public-facing worker a specific offence.