



Policy Briefing

9 November 2021

Violence against London Underground, Overground and TfL staff during the Coronavirus pandemic

RMT conducted a survey of members working on London Underground, Overground and Transport for London rail services between 20 October and 5 November. More than 1,000 workers responded to survey. Below are the key results and some first-hand testimony from the front-line of public transport.

76% of public-facing staff and 63% of all staff surveyed have been subjected to violence at work since the pandemic began

- 63% of all workers surveyed across London Underground, Overground and other TfL services report that they have been subjected to workplace violence from passengers since the pandemic began.
- 76% of those employed in public-facing roles, including station staff, drivers and cleaners, report that they have been subjected to workplace violence from passengers since the pandemic began.
- 50% reported that this had happened to them between 2 and 5 times and almost 40% reported that it had happened more than 5 times. One in five reported that it had happened more than 10 times since the pandemic began.
- 56% reported being threatened with physical violence, 87% reported verbal abuse, 14% reported being spat at or targeted with bodily fluids.
- 28% reported being racially harassed and 7% had been sexually assaulted.

"I've been assaulted physically and verbally. I was pushed as a train came into the platform and I am still off work now because of it."

"Myself and a colleague were assaulted at Baker Street Station beginning of this year."

"I was pushed through the barrier and lost consciousness for awhile."

"Threats of assault, including a man trying to kick me and when I went to a place of safety, he tried to kick the door in. This was accompanied by various verbal assaults."

"There have been other attempts at intimidation by passengers and many examples of

verbal assaults.

"I was called Bangladeshi, 'you don't know how to do your job' etc"

"I've been ask to go back to my country, I was asked to speak English, also one lady came to me twice months apart and wished the Covid19 kills me. Just this week she came back because she doesn't want to pay for her journey, she said to me she wished I would drop dead before my retirement."

"Being from an Asian background have been called corona virus"

"Drunk male racially abused Greater Anglia staff staff and then tried to assault members of the public before fighting with LUL staff and BTP".

"I was physically assaulted and injured and racially abuse myself on the station in the early hours on a February morning 2021.

"Been sworn at on several occasions. In once incident, I was threatened with stabbing."

"They tried to pull my face mask off".

"Spitting, threats to spit. General aggression from fare evaders who know there is very little to no revenue protection. This invites youths on to the network who are more likely to abuse staff."

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

- 60% of the respondents said that they believed that workplace violence has worsened since the pandemic.
- When asked why they thought this was, the biggest reasons given were the reduced presence of BTP and police (78%), the fact that no action is taken against perpetrators (75%), the need to remind passengers about Covid safety measures (66%) and cuts to station staffing (60%).
- A massive 82% 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.

"Being sworn at every day and confronted with violence and aggression has become part of the job. We put up with it so we don't escalate it. But it is 10 times worse since Covid. The main trigger is people not socially distancing or not wearing masks. The messages are vague and cause conflict amongst customers who expect us to intervene."

"It's got worse and worse, with worse and worse support from London Underground".

"People are on edge".

"I was physically assaulted on train whilst preventing someone fly-posting anti vaccination posters".

"Lack of enforcement plus the mixed messaging from govt made things worse."

"People think they can do whatever they want and all restrictions are finished."

"You get slated because the company say one thing and everyone does another and you have people having a go because you're not telling people to wear masks"

"It's probably because the public in general are going through a tough time themselves but that's no excuse for their behaviour towards people that are only trying to help them."

"Much more confrontation with asking people to wear masks."

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

- 61% of all transport workers surveyed and 51% of staff in public facing roles were working alone when they were subjected to violence.
- 61% of staff also reported that lone working had become more common since the pandemic began.
- 85% reported that they had not taken time off after the incidents.
- 38% 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, 77% said that their employer offered no further support after the incident, such as counselling or adjustments to working patterns.
- Only 28% of reported incidents were attended by British Transport Police and most workers (69%) believe that BTP's involvement in such incidents has declined over the pandemic.

"Most of the stations in our group are lone working."

"It's not always the case but it's usually on parts of the station that are manned by only one person."

"I am alone 98% of the time".

"Lone working is harder and makes us easier targets".

"We are always short staffed".

"There were other Staff on the Station but not always near me."

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. In addition, this report demonstrates yet another reason why TfL should be funded to invest in staffing.

For years, TfL has been run on a false and failed funding model. Operating grant was removed and operating costs were driven down to make TfL 'self-sufficient' on fare revenue. This led to a de-staffing of the rail and Underground network. Successive administrations in London have viewed staff as a cost to be cut instead of an asset to be nurtured. This myopic approach has created a less safe and secure travelling environment for passengers, even before the Covid-19 crisis. As we can see, it has also created a dangerous working environment for the keyworkers whose heroism has kept London's transport networks running throughout the pandemic.

Rebuilding passenger confidence in public transport will mean mobilising all TfL's existing staff resources and recruiting more. TfL executives understand this very well. It was reported to the TfL Board recently that 'customer concerns focussed on the cleanliness regime, an orderly and organised network, and enforcement of face coverings'. This will mean building back an enhanced cleaning regime and reversing the cuts to the number of cleaners on London Underground's outsourced cleaning contract. As Commissioner Andy Byford said, staff are essential to building passenger confidence through ensuring compliance with the law on the transport network: 'Our staff play a pivotal role in demonstrating best practice in compliance for those using our network by wearing face coverings themselves and, have adapted to their new way of working with true professionalism.'

The cycle of attacks on staff pay, conditions, pensions and jobs must end. Government must fund TfL properly and London's transport executives need to change the way they see staff and see them as an asset to be invested in.