

# Violence against shop workers and scam claims: Legal implications and practical advice

22 July 2025  Jonathan Tardif

The retail sector in the UK is facing an alarming rise in violence and abuse against shop workers, coupled with a sharp increase in scam claims by shoplifters.

An annual [survey by the British Retail Consortium \(BRC\)](#) in 2024 found that incidents involving abuse have surged by 50% in a year, up from 870 per day to around 1,300 per day.

Even more worrying is the fact that almost 9,000 of the incidents identified by the BRC survey resulted in physical injury. This troubling trend, which has risen sharply again in 2025, not only endangers the well-being of employees but also poses substantial legal and financial risks for retailers.

This article examines those key risks and provides practical advice for [retailers](#) on how best to avoid legal claims while at the same time protecting staff.

## The latest scam: Defamation claims

A particularly concerning development is the emergence of a scam where customers pretend to steal items but, when challenged by staff, then bring defamation claims against the retailer alleging that the wrongful accusations have harmed their reputation.

This tactic has led to significant settlement payouts by retailers not wanting to risk potentially costly litigation, exacerbating the financial strain on businesses already grappling with increased costs and declining footfall in a difficult economy.

## What are the key risks under English law and how can they be managed?

To help navigate these challenges, it is crucial for retailers to understand the various legal claims and causes of action that can arise where a customer is challenged over the theft of items. These include:

### 1. Defamation

This type of claim involves the making of false statements to third parties that result in harm to an individual's reputation. In the context of retail, a customer may claim to be the victim of defamation if they believe they were wrongfully accused of theft in a public place, typically a busy store or shopping centre.

To help mitigate the risk of such claims, retailers must ensure first and foremost that any accusations are based on solid evidence so that they can invoke the defence of truth in the allegation that was made.

Such evidence includes clear CCTV footage of the customer's movements throughout and for as long as they were in the store with a clear view of them taking goods without payment. Direct accounts from store staff who had a clear view of exactly what did and did not happen are also key evidence to support the allegation.

Witness accounts should be obtained as soon as practicable after the incident, but ideally straightaway, to ensure that they are both accurate and comprehensive.

## 2. Assault and battery

If a confrontation between staff and a customer escalates to physical contact, the customer may bring a claim for assault or battery (the latter being where more serious injury is sustained whereas the former only requires non-consensual contact).

Retailers should train staff to handle such situations calmly and in a manner which avoids any form of physical interactions wherever possible. It should rarely be appropriate for a member of staff to try to apprehend a customer physically – that sort of action is best left to the police as it only serves to escalate an already tense situation.

## 3. False imprisonment

This occurs when a person is unlawfully detained instore against their will and without proper justification. Retailers should be extremely cautious when trying to deny a customer the right to leave the store and must ensure that any attempt to keep the customer inside the store is legally justified.

Factors such as mistaken identity, inadequate staff training and failure to follow established protocols can heighten the risk of a claim of false imprisonment. Cases where customers are locked in a room to prevent them from leaving the store are also highly likely to give rise to a claim of false imprisonment unless that step was reasonably necessary to help prevent a clear and obvious risk of injury to third parties.

## 4. Negligence

It is important to remember that retailers owe a general duty of care towards their customers while they are instore. If a customer is injured during an altercation with a member of staff who is accusing them of stealing, the customer may bring a negligence claim.

Again, retailers should implement safety protocols to prevent such incidents and claims from arising.

# Further practical advice for retailers

To help minimise the risk of legal claims and ensure the safety of both staff and customers, retailers should adopt the following strategies:

## Clear policies and procedures

Do not let staff approach these high-risk situations thinking they need to decide for themselves how best to handle them. Establish and implement clear policies for dealing with suspected theft. Ensure that staff understand the legal requirements for detaining a customer and the importance of gathering evidence before making accusations.

The clearer the evidence of shoplifting is when the customer is challenged, the less likely the customer is to make a legal claim. Ensure that a rolling programme of policy updates is in place to capture anyone who has joined since the policies were last rolled out or updated. Policies are also a useful part of a retailer's defence if a claim is made.

## Training and awareness

Be clear about which roles within your staff team are most likely to encounter suspected shoplifters and train them accordingly. Regularly train your staff on how to handle confrontations with customers, again ensuring that new starters are not overlooked.

Stress the importance of de-escalation techniques and the legal implications of the different actions that might be taken to challenge a suspected shoplifter.

## Use of technology

Invest in security measures such as CCTV and body-worn cameras. These often provide crucial contemporaneous evidence in the event of a dispute between a suspected shoplifter and the retailer. These measures help deter both shoplifting and fraudulent claims. Ensure that appropriate signage is in place to let customers know that CCTV is in operation.

## Customer communication

Clearly communicate store policies to customers, including the consequences of theft and the procedures staff will follow if theft is suspected. This transparency can help prevent misunderstandings and reduce the likelihood of confrontations.

## Legal awareness

Regularly consult with legal professionals to stay updated on the latest legal developments and ensure that your policies and procedures comply with current laws.

## Conclusion

The rise in violence against shop workers and the emergence of new scams only serve to highlight the need for retailers to be ever-more vigilant and proactive. By understanding the relevant areas of English law and implementing practical measures, retailers can protect their staff, minimise legal and financial risks, and maintain a safe shopping environment for everyone.

## Contact



**Jonathan Tardif**

Partner

[jonathan.tardif@brownejacobson.com](mailto:jonathan.tardif@brownejacobson.com)

+44 (0)115 908 4803

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