

# Don't give crooks an even break



*The Health & Safety Executive's guidelines on Preventing Violence To Retail Staff might seem like just another set of regulations. But, argues Andrew Don, they are a crucial tool for every business.*

**T**HERE were over 13,500 incidents of assault and robbery in shops in the last financial year, according to the British Retail Consortium's last crime survey.

So great has become frustration with shop crime that in July 1993, Stanley Kalms, boss of the Dixons empire, suggested UK retailers might have to resort to vigilante tactics. Only last year Rochdale newsagent Alan Chadwick was accused of murdering a man who tried to rob his CTN. Luckily all charges against him were dropped.

But protecting yourself and your property is one thing; protecting your staff is another. Newsagents could find themselves in serious trouble if they fail to protect their staff.

Garfield Davies, General Secretary of the shopworkers' union USDAW, said at the launch of the new guidelines: "Despite the appallingly high numbers of at-

tacks, many employers still fail to realise they have a legal and moral duty to do whatever they can to protect their staff...it is in everyone's interest to prevent violence in the workplace."

Section 2 of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 gives employers a duty of care to their staff and the public, and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1992 requires employers to undertake risk assessments, which includes the risk of violence.

According to Preventing Violence to Retail Staff, violence at work and the fear of it can affect anyone. It can result in:

- low staff morale
- high absenteeism and staff turnover
- expensive insurance premiums
- compensation payments
- physical and mental pain
- stress and disability
- fatalities
- loss of profit.

HSE defines violence to staff at work as: "any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened, or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances arising out of the course of his/her employment".

The guidelines say it is important that each reported incident is treated seriously to ensure staff are aware their employers are committed.

Some incidents may take place outside the workplace but may still be related to work, such as an attack on a member of staff by a customer in the street after an incident in the shop.

■ Copies of HS(G) 133 *Preventing Violence To Retail Staff* (ISBN 0 7176 0891 3, are available from: HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO1 6FS, tel: 01787 881165, or from book-sellers, priced £6.95.

## Vital steps to staff safety

- Develop a policy statement – let your staff know what they should do in the case of robbery or other crimes.
- Regularly consult your staff to find out if there is a crime problem.
- Set up formal reporting procedures.
- See if there are aspects of the working environment which might affect the risk of violence, and consider revising procedures if necessary.
- Liaise with the local Crime Prevention Officer (CPO) for advice on how to reduce the risk of violence by workplace layout, surveillance and other means.
- Join retail schemes such as Shop Watch and "network" with neighbouring businesses.
- Train staff on prevention and procedures.
- Not all violence will be part of a pre-

meditated criminal act, such as an armed robbery. Some incidents are a result of frustration, anger, misunderstanding or some other reason.

It is crucial to understand that a violent incident is always a frightening experience. The impact – including anger, mistrust, fear, feelings of isolation and vulnerability, loss of concentration and difficulty with dealing with customers – on your employees' physical and mental health can be severe. They may need support and care from you to help them recover.

You are unlikely to have the resources to implement sophisticated systems, which can often be costly and inappropriate. But concealing tills and providing good visibility by using mirrors and raising the floor behind the counter are practical and relatively easy to achieve.