Abuse and Violence Against Small Businesses

Matt Hopkins looks at violence directed at people working in small businesses, patterns of victimisation and directions for future research.

Owning or working in a small business can be a dangerous occupation. The British Crime Survey, 2000 reported that 17 per cent of all violent incidents in England and Wales in 1999 occurred in or around the workplace (Kershaw *et al*, 2000) and Mirrlees-Black *et al* (1998) estimated that there were 1.2 million incidents of violence at work in 1997. Whilst these findings are of interest, it is evident that little research has focused upon abuse and violence against businesses. This is somewhat surprising considering that the problem has received widespread media attention. Both national and local newspapers have regularly reported violent and racially motivated incidents within the contexts of businesses and CCTV footage of serious incidents of violence against businesses have often been shown on popular TV programmes such as Crimewatch UK. Much of this would consist of robbery against businesses, though possibly the most famous victim is a shopkeeper from Lancaster who was subjected to years of racially motivated abuse. His story has been highlighted in both national newspapers and on TV documentaries. The focus of this article is abuse and violence by outsiders directed at an employee within a business rather than incidents between employees or those that would be defined as robbery.

Patterns of abuse and violence against businesses

The academic research that has considered crimes against businesses shows that businesses experience high rates of abuse and violence, these incidents are often racially motivated, and they can have a serious impact upon the future behaviour of the victim. The 1994 Commercial Victimisation Survey (Mirrlees-Black & Ross, 1995) considered crime against 1,666 retail and 1,259 manufacturing premises and reported that 20 per cent of retailers and seven per cent of manufacturers experienced a violent crime over a period of 12 months. In addition to this the 1999 British Retail Consortium 'Retail Crime Costs' survey reported that there were over 84,000 incidents of physical violence, threats and abuse against retail premises in 1999.

Whilst these rates appear to be high, comparing them with rates of abuse and violence against individuals reported in the British Crime Survey (BCS) is difficult due to the way incidents are recorded. (This is because the BRC counts numbers of incidents through business outlets; the CVS against premises and the BCS measures the prevalence of violence per person.) However, some comparison can be made with the BCS when considering data from a study of assaults against 448 employees in a national retail outlet (Beck *et al*, 1994). The prevalence of violence against employees was recorded and it was found that 11 per cent had been victims within the previous year. If this is compared to the 2000 British Crime Survey where it was reported that 4.2 per cent of the sample were victims of any violent crime in 1999, the evidence suggests that employees in businesses have a higher risk of experiencing violence than individuals outside of the workplace. (It is acknowledged here that it is difficult to compare these two samples because of the different size of the respective samples.)

Though the previous research clearly identifies that some employees have high risks of experiencing abuse and violence, the focus has predominantly been on retail outlets. The research that has considered the risks experienced by businesses in other sectors has shown they can also experience high rates of abuse and violence. For example, in a survey of over 800 businesses across the retail, service, wholesale and manufacturing sectors in Leicester, the highest rates of violence were found in the service sector (Hopkins, 2000). Here there were an average of 25 incidents a year per 100 businesses, compared to 23 for retail businesses, two for wholesale businesses and less than one for manufacturers. Employees within businesses such as public houses, fast food outlets and bookmakers were at highest risk of becoming victims.

Here it has been identified that some types of businesses generate high rates of abuse and violence. However, there are a number of other concerns relating to incidents of abuse and violence that also need to be noted. One particular concern is the extent of racially motivated incidents against businesses. In a study of 240 Asian-run shops, Ekblom & Simon (1988) identified that 44 per cent of respondents felt they had been victim of a racially motivated assault and 35 per cent of racial verbal abuse at some time. Whilst these rates are significantly high, little study has considered the potential impact of incidents of this nature on victims. Hopkins (2000) does explore the impact of abuse and violence against employees (though not racially motivated). Here it was found that victims were more likely to exclude and watch out for 'certain types' of people entering the premises than non-victims, they would refuse to be left alone on the premises at certain times of day and they would often have something available to use in self defence if attacked (43 per cent of repeat victims of abuse/violence kept a weapon such as a baseball bat behind the counter).

Directions for future research

In this brief review it has been established that some businesses sectors have high rates of abuse and violence, some businesses are likely to experience racially motivated abuse and violence, and incidents can have a clear impact upon employees. However, the previous research is rather limited and it is evident that there are a number of areas that require further exploration. These are considered below.

Julie Grogan

References:

Beck, A. Gill, M. & Willis, A. (1994) 'Violence in Retailing: Physical and Verbal Victimisation of Staff'. In Gill, M. *Crime at Work: Studies in Security and Crime Prevention*. Leicester: Perpetuity Press.

Ekblom, P. & Simon, F. (1988) Crime and Racial Harassment in Asian-run Small Shops. *Police Research Group Crime Prevention Paper,* Series No.15. London: Home Office.

Hopkins, M. (2000), '*A Study of Abuse and Violence against Small Businesses'* Unpublished PhD thesis: Nottingham Trent University.

Kershaw, C., Budd, T., Kinshott, G., Mattinson, J., Mayhew, P., and Myhill, A. (2000), The British Crime Survey, 2000. *Home Office Statistical Bulletin* 18/00. London: Home Office.

Mirrlees-Black, C. & Ross, A. (1995, Crime Against Retail and Manufacturing Premises: Findings from the 1994) Commercial Victimisation Survey. *Home Office Research Study* no. 146. London: Home Office.

Retail Crime Costs 1999 Survey (2000), *British Retail Consortium*; London.

1. There needs to be further understanding of the differing contexts that generate abuse and violence against businesses. The previous research has focused upon retail and manufacturing premises. We need to begin to identify the patterns of abuse and violence against all business sectors (particularly those subject to little previous investigation such as the service, wholesale and transport sectors).

2. In addition to the above, there also needs to be further understanding of the triggers of abuse and violence within businesses. The BRC surveys highlight a correlation between shop theft and violence. However, there needs to be more detailed understanding of how incidents can be triggered. In retail outlets, shop theft will be a key trigger, though we need a greater understanding of how incidents are triggered across other sectors. This would have obvious implications for developing prevention strategies.

3. Whilst a vast number of criminological studies have considered the impact of crime against those outside of the business context, little previous research has considered the impact of abuse and violence upon employees and businesses. Here, there needs to be further understanding of the psychological impact of incidents on victims and how this can potentially alter the behaviour of the business/victims.

Finally, it is also evident that there has been little attempt to develop a theoretical framework for understanding abuse and violence against businesses. Similarly to individuals, it could be hypothesised that business also have 'lifestyle' characteristics that generate abuse and violence. For example, there are key 'lifestyle' attributes of businesses (such as business type, geographical location, number of staff employed and their demographic characteristics) that could all be important in generating incidents of abuse and violence. The impact of these 'lifestyle' characteristics needs to be assessed in more detail if we are to identify how abuse and violence is generated in business premises and to develop a theoretical framework to understand the contexts and triggers of incidents.

■

Matt Hopkins is a lecturer in Criminology at The Nottingham Crime Research Unit, Nottingham Trent University.