



# How Common is Workplace Abuse?

## Findings from the Skills and Employment Survey 2024

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### HEADLINES

Abuse is the dark side of the social environment at work, with detrimental effects on worker health and wellbeing, and a reduced commitment to work. Too little is known, however, about the prevalence of abuse across UK workplaces. This report analyses perceptions of physical violence, sexual harassment and other harassment or bullying. It finds that:

- Over a year, 14% of UK workers experience some form of workplace abuse. The risk of any abuse is much greater for women than for men (19% compared with 10%). The risk of sexual harassment is much greater for LGBTQ+ workers than for heterosexual workers (7% versus 2%).
- Northern Ireland is the UK nation with the lowest level of perceived sexual harassment (0.4%).
- The risk of physical violence is much higher in public sector jobs (12%) than in the private sector (4%).
- Occupations facing the greatest annual risks of abuse include nurses (39%) and teachers (31%). Risk is also elevated for night workers (24%). In contrast, the risk is quite low for home or hybrid workers (8%). It is lowest for those working in the Financial Services sector (5%).

The report recommends that the prevalence of each form of workplace abuse should be regularly monitored and published using the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, in order to assess progress in improving job quality in the UK.

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## 1. The Dark Side of the Social Environment at Work

The social environment of the workplace is an important aspect of the quality of a person's job, with both positive and negative aspects. This report concerns its negative dimension – the risk of experiencing workplace abuse – which has come to be acknowledged as a widespread social and economic problem in many countries. While only a minority of employees suffer abuse in any one year, its effects on the wellbeing of abuse victims are lasting and substantive, with further consequences for their participation in, and commitment to work.

Evidence confirms that bullying is strongly associated with job dissatisfaction, sickness absence, stress, sleep deprivation, depression and thoughts of suicide. Sexual harassment is associated with headaches, gastric and respiratory complaints, musculoskeletal pain, and weight change. Victims of workplace violence suffer substantial and enduring losses of earnings, and male-female violence induces a decline in the proportion of women in a firm.

Reflecting the seriousness of its consequences, workplace harassment is unlawful in the United Kingdom under the Equality Act 2010 when it is connected to a protected characteristic such as sex, age, ethnicity or disability. Employees can pursue grievance procedures on these grounds against both their bosses and the perpetrators of the abuse. They may also seek damages through an employment tribunal. Notwithstanding these proscriptions, the problem persists.

The scourge of workplace sexual harassment is strikingly illustrated by an ongoing stream of high-profile misconduct news stories, such as the accusations levelled at the late owner of the Harrods store in London, or the allegations of widespread abuse at McDonald's following a BBC investigation. In 2023 the Equality Act was amended, giving employers a legal duty from October 2024 to try to prevent sexual harassment of their staff in the course of their work. There are therefore compelling reasons to gauge the prevalence and distribution of different forms of workplace abuse and how they may be changing, and hence to better assess the challenges that face employers and policymakers.

## 2. Previous Evidence on the Prevalence of Workplace Abuse

Previous evidence about the extent of abuse in the UK has been patchy. A comprehensive study using 2014 data found that one in ten employees in England experienced some form of workplace abuse over the course of a year. Bullying was distinctly more prevalent among women than men. In most cases the perpetrators were managers or colleagues, but sometimes they were clients or customers. The commonest forms of abuse were excessive criticism, verbal abuse, humiliation, setting of unrealistic targets, constantly changing instructions, threatening behaviour, excessive workloads and refusing reasonable requests. Less common were physical abuse and sexual harassment, but the latter experience was far more prevalent among women than men.

One year later, according to data from the European Working Conditions Survey, approximately 5% of UK

workers experienced physical violence in the workplace over the course of a year, about three times the rate perceived in the rest of Europe. About 5% also reported being bullied or harassed (with some evidence that this had decreased over the previous decade). Then a TUC survey in 2016 of female union members in Britain, while admittedly not a representative sample, found that some forms of sexual harassment at work were common. For example, nearly a quarter had experienced unwanted touching, and one fifth had received unwanted sexual advances at some time during the course of their working lives.

A recent report from the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency using the Quarterly Labour Force Survey for 2022 reveals that 16% of UK workers were bullied or harassed in their jobs, though the proportion was just 10% in Northern Ireland. While this evidence is enough to indicate a serious problem for a minority of employees, up-to-date evidence for each of the main forms of abuse across the UK as a whole is warranted.

## 3. The Skills and Employment Survey 2024: A New Source of Evidence

The Skills and Employment Survey 2024 (SES2024) is the eighth in the SES series, which has been conducted periodically since 1986. SES2024 allows us for the first time to examine the prevalence of all main forms of workplace abuse in a nationally representative sample of individuals aged 20-65 years old in employment. The complete survey consists of three types of data collected from working adults aged 20-65 years old. The first is a face-to-face survey of those working in Britain. The sample of 2,824 people was drawn using random probability principles stratified by several socio-economic indicators. Two eligible respondents per address were randomly selected for interview; 32% of those selected were interviewed and most were completed in 2024. The second is an online survey of eligible workers who agreed to join a panel of respondents recruited from previous NatCen surveys (including the British Social Attitudes Survey). The third is a fresh push-to-web sample of eligible workers living in Northern Ireland supplemented by a smaller number of panellists who resided in Northern Ireland and were eligible to take part. Both online surveys were carried out in 2023.

For this report, we use both the face-to-face and online surveys. Hence the data, with a total sample of 5,469, relate to 2024/2023 and present a picture of the UK. All parts of the data collection process were directed by the research team and the fieldwork was carried out by NatCen. Weights were computed which correct for differential probabilities of sample selection, the over-sampling of certain areas and response rate variations between groups (such as sex, age, occupation and qualification level). All the analyses that follow use these weights.

## 4. Indicators of Workplace Abuse

Using this new survey, we investigate all the main forms of workplace abuse for the first time within a UK-wide representative sample of workers. Employees who had been in employment a year earlier were asked: 'Over the

past 12 months, during the course of your work have you been subjected to any of the following: physical violence, sexual harassment, bullying/harassment, cyber bullying'. For each of these separately, respondents replied Yes or No. This process was effective at capturing employees' perceptions of abuse of each type, with few 'don't know's'. However, it is acknowledged that the interpretations of, for example, 'bullying', are left to the respondent, and could be different from the interpretations of a perpetrator or a manager or a neutral observer. Moreover, the question does not ask about the perceived severity of the abuse, and the survey did not cover those who have left employment altogether in the previous year. On examination, only a small number (43) of respondents reported cyber-bullying; for ease of analysis, this experience is interpreted and recoded as bullying/harassment.

## 5. Findings

### *The Prevalence and Socio-Economic Distribution of Workplace Abuse*

One in seven employees experience at least one form of workplace abuse over a year (see Figure 1 and Table 1). While this new overall estimate is not properly comparable with those from a decade ago, it provides no sign of any alleviation of these negative aspects of the social environment of work over the UK's recent past. The most common perceived form of abuse is bullying, which is experienced by approximately one in eleven employees. A lower proportion (6.9%) are victims of physical violence. A smaller but still notable proportion (2.4%) report

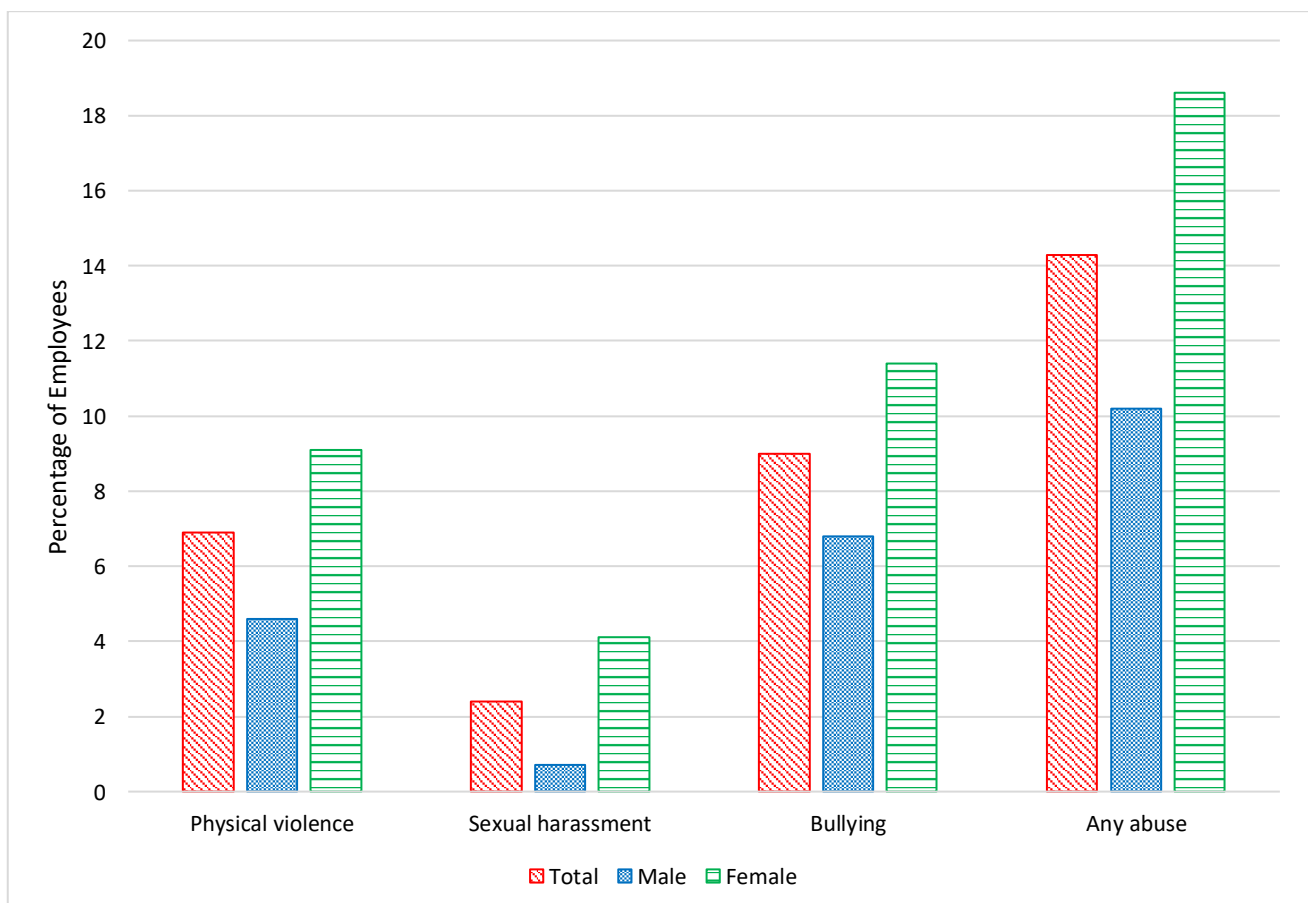
experiencing sexual harassment over the year during the course of their work.

Consistent with previous evidence, the prevalence of workplace abuse in all its forms is substantially greater for women than for men. This gender gap in abuse thus adds to the inequality of the gender pay gap. The largest gender gap in the experience of abuse surrounds sexual harassment, with only 0.7% of men reporting sexual harassment, as compared with 4.1% of women. Both younger workers aged 20 to 34 and those aged 35 to 64 can find themselves victims of workplace abuse, in roughly equal measure. However, the younger workers are more likely to be subject specifically to sexual harassment. Among women under 35, 6.7% report sexual harassment.

The new data reveal also that sexual orientation makes a substantial difference to the likelihood of experiencing abuse: LGBTQ+ employees are much more likely to experience all forms of abuse in the course of their work, as compared with heterosexuals. Notably, they are three times more likely to be subject to sexual harassment.

Previous evidence has also hinted at differences among ethnic groups in the experience of workplace abuse. Here, the new evidence is that Asian employees (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Chinese) are less likely than Whites to face workplace abuse in all forms. Conversely, employees from Black African or Caribbean ethnic groups are more likely than Whites to experience bullying (12.7% versus 8.9%) and somewhat more likely to experience workplace violence (9.3% versus 7.0%).

**Figure 1: Prevalence and Forms of Workplace Abuse**



**Table 1: Workplace Abuse among Socio-Economic Groups**  
(percent of employees)

	<b>Physical violence</b>	<b>Sexual harassment</b>	<b>Bullying</b>	<b>Any abuse</b>
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	4.6	0.7	6.8	10.2
Female	9.1	4.1	11.4	18.6
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>				
Heterosexual	6.5	2.0	8.9	13.8
LGBTQ+	10.0	6.5	10.5	21.0
<b>Age band</b>				
20-34 years	7.5	4.0	8.9	14.8
35-65 years	6.4	1.6	9.1	14.0
<b>Ethnic group</b>				
White	7.0	2.6	8.9	14.5
Black African or Black Caribbean	9.3	0.8	12.7	16.2
Asian	4.2	0.7	5.8	9.9
Other ethnic group/mixed	5.3	3.1	11.6	14.9
<b>Religion</b>				
None	6.5	2.7	8.2	13.7
Christian	6.9	2.0	8.9	14.1
Hindu or Muslim	6.5	1.8	11.7	13.7
Other	10.2	2.0	18.3	25.7
<b>Nation</b>				
England	6.8	2.3	9.1	14.3
Northern Ireland	4.2	0.4	11.6	15.4
Scotland	5.0	4.0	7.7	12.6
Wales	8.6	2.7	8.5	15.2
<b>All</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>14.3</b>

Note: the base is all employees who had been in employment one year earlier.

As for religious affiliation, there are no major differences in the experience of workplace abuse between the main religious groups (none, Christian, Hindu and Muslim). However, those from religious groups who are less numerous within the UK – including Buddhists, Jews and Sikhs – when taken together report a notably higher prevalence of abuse.

Finally, the prevalence of sexual harassment is lower in Northern Ireland (0.4%) than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. However, workplace abuse happens in all regions and nations, with no nation standing out as overall worse or better than others. Although, therefore, workplace abuse does vary somewhat among demographic and ethnic groups, none avoid it altogether.

### *It's What You Do*

An alternative perspective on the risk of workplace abuse focuses on the job itself, rather than the person doing it. The origins of abuse lie, in part, in the unequal distribution of power within the workplace social environment, but the likelihood of abuse is heightened where that power is unaccountable and uncontrolled, and where opportunities for abuse abound. Certain job characteristics may provide

abundant openings for abuse if poorly managed, including jobs that involve multiple interactions between people.

The first panel of Table 2 shows that jobs where the tasks of counselling, advising or caring are very important or essential are far more likely than other jobs to be the locus of workplace abuse (18.2% versus 10.5%). Those doing night shifts at least 5 nights a month are also much more likely to be targets for abuse, especially violence (14.5% versus 5.8%).

By contrast, working at home gives some protection from workplace abuse. For example, those working at home exclusively or for some of the time are at less than a quarter of the risk of facing workplace violence as compared with those working in a variety of places or on the move (2.2% vs 9.4%). While this protection partly derives from the kind of work done, working at home puts employees at physical distance from potential perpetrators of abuse – be they co-workers or customers. This advantage of working at home, however, may be counterbalanced by an increased likelihood of domestic abuse, as suggested by the reported upsurge during the Covid pandemic lockdowns.

Perhaps surprisingly, there are no large differences between the exposures of permanent and temporary/fixed-term contract workers to the hazards of workplace abuse.

The next panel shows substantive gaps between public and private sector jobs. It can be seen that approximately one in five (19.9%) public sector workers is exposed to abuse in some form each year, as compared with 11.6% of private sector workers. Much of this sectoral difference reflects the caring and people-centred occupations that cluster in the public sector. Thus, as shown in the final panel, the Caring, Leisure & Other Service Occupations, among whom three in every ten workers experience workplace abuse each year, has the largest exposure. For more than one in five such jobs, the worker is exposed to violence, while almost one in twenty have to deal with sexual harassment, and one in eight with perceived

bullying. No other large occupational group approaches anything like this level of exposure.

Looking at more detailed and disaggregated occupations for which we have at least fifty cases, those facing the highest risk of abuse are nurses (39%), care workers (28%) and teachers (31%). Indeed, for the Health sector the worst abuses are found in hospitals; for Social Work in residential care; for the Education sector in schools. At the other end of the scale, in contrast, Finance Professionals (9%), Business, Research and Administrative Professionals (2%) and Functional Managers and Directors (7%) are all low-abuse occupations. In the Financial Services sector only 5% of employees reported any abuse over the previous year. Even there, however, there is concern from the regulator that bullying and other incidents of non-financial misconduct in the finance sector may have risen since 2021.

**Table 2: Workplace Abuse and Job Characteristics**  
(percent of employees)

	<b>Physical violence</b>	<b>Sexual harassment</b>	<b>Bullying</b>	<b>Any abuse</b>
<b>Counselling, advising, or caring tasks</b>				
Very important or essential	10.6	2.9	10.8	18.2
Other	3.1	1.8	7.3	10.5
<b>Night working at least five nights a month</b>				
Yes	14.5	4.7	12.0	23.6
No	5.8	2.1	8.7	13.1
<b>Homeworking or hybrid working</b>				
Yes	2.2	1.3	6.8	8.3
No	9.4	3.0	10.3	17.7
<b>Permanent contract</b>				
Yes	6.7	2.4	9.0	14.2
No	8.5	1.5	9.3	15.5
<b>Sector</b>				
Private	4.0	2.4	8.5	11.6
Public (including non-profit)	12.4	2.4	10.3	19.9
<b>Occupations</b>				
Managers, Directors & Senior Officials	5.9	2.6	11.6	13.2
Professional Occupations	7.1	2.6	7.7	13.7
Associate Professional Occupations	6.1	2.0	8.0	13.0
Administrative & Secretarial Occupations	1.8	0.6	8.8	9.8
Skilled Trades	2.2	0.8	7.1	8.9
Caring, Leisure & Other Service Occupations	22.4	4.8	12.9	29.6
Sales & Customer Service Occupations	4.0	3.1	9.2	14.8
Process, Plant & Machine Operatives	7.6	1.4	9.9	15.7
Elementary Occupations	4.5	3.4	10.3	14.6
<b>All</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>9.0</b>	<b>14.3</b>

Note: the base is all employees who had been in employment one year earlier.

## 6. Policy Implications

Bullying, sexual harassment and violence all diminish the wellbeing of employees, sometimes severely; they also affect employers through rising turnover and absenteeism. Among the employees in our sample, nearly twice as many victims of abuse say that they are likely or very likely to quit their jobs compared to those who have suffered no such abuse (27.9% versus 14.8%). Also, more victims of abuse than abuse-free employees say they are likely or very likely to quit employment altogether (5.1% versus 2.7%). If these intentions are realised, it suggests that workplace abuse is contributing to the problem of economic inactivity in the UK.

While abuse is a risk for all demographic groups, the evidence in this report suggests that extra attention is called for in respect of night work and in jobs that involve higher levels of interaction with people, such as those that are found in schools and hospitals. Many, but by no means all, of these are public sector jobs. Yet there remains too

little data available to the public on the prevalence of the different forms of workplace abuse across UK workplaces to keep policymakers informed about trends and the effects of regulatory policies.

There is a strong case, therefore, for government statisticians to develop a system of ongoing monitoring, in order to help understand how economic development and policy initiatives such as the recent amendment to the Equality Act may be reducing workplace abuse. It will be insufficient to rely on ad hoc reports from industry bodies in specific sectors (which may not be the worst hit) or investigative journalists. Ongoing separate monitoring of workplace violence, sexual harassment and bullying could, however, be carried out using validated methods at low cost using the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, with the findings made public. Given the manifest efficiency and health benefits from reducing workplace abuse, we recommend early consideration of such an innovation.

### Further Reading

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All titles are downloadable free from the survey website: [wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024](http://wiserd.ac.uk/project/ses/ses2024). The [NatCen SES2024 Technical Report](#) which outlines in detail how the data were collected along with the questionnaires used is also available. You may also like to take the [www.howgoodismyjob.com](http://www.howgoodismyjob.com) quiz which is based on some of the questions used in the survey.

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