

RESEARCH REPORT

The hidden safety signal

Feeling unsafe is quietly reshaping how people work, and costing your business.

Leaders who wait for incidents to act are already paying the price

Feeling unsafe at work is changing how people behave, and that behaviour is hitting business performance. Most of it never reaches an incident log.

Of more than 1,300 workers surveyed, 92% told us they feel very or somewhat safe at work. But 1 in 2 also said they had felt unsafe at least once in the past year, and nearly a third of people who had never reported a safety concern had felt unsafe. These findings are not contradictory. Safety changes with the time of day, the location, the staffing level and the people workers deal with.

What matters for business leaders is what happens next. When people feel unsafe, they adapt. Almost a quarter of workers told us feeling unsafe had reduced their productivity. One in six had turned down work because of safety concerns. Four in ten had changed their behaviour or working situation. These are not marginal figures. They represent lost output, uncovered shifts and capacity that businesses are paying for but not getting.

For leaders, this changes the question. It is no longer enough to ask how many incidents occurred. We need to ask how safe our people feel, where and when that changes, and what they are doing differently as a result.

Behavioural change is a safety signal, and often the earliest one available. The message for employers is clear. Feeling unsafe is a performance issue, not only a welfare issue, and it demands the same attention as any other operational risk.

Workers are clear about what helps. They want visible, reliable support: knowing someone is there, knowing who to contact and knowing help will arrive quickly. Two thirds said a personal safety solution would make them feel safer, with higher figures still in healthcare and retail. Technology does not replace a strong safety culture, but it gives people confidence that they are not on their own.

This research uncovers the hidden cost of workplace safety and the consequences feeling unsafe causes. When people feel safe, they bring their full attention, confidence and commitment to their work. That is good for them, and good for business.



Naz Dossa
CEO, Peoplesafe

How safe people feel changes how they work

This latest report builds on our previous research into the landscape of lone workers' safety, which showed employees experienced abuse and harassment yet continued to feel unsupported and unheard by employers.

Examining the picture across all sectors, and focusing on specific industries, this research deepens the understanding of how feeling unsafe at work impacts employees' behaviour: changing and adapting their ability, willingness and confidence to do their job.

The findings are clear: how safe or unsafe people feel at work can lead to them turning down work opportunities, reduces productivity and causes employees to change how and when they carry out tasks. However, when perceptions of safety are not a metric used to determine the implications for businesses, a large part of the picture is currently hidden.

Using a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys across industries, focus groups and individual interviews, this research sought to understand the implications for employers when safety concerns influence employee behaviour, attendance, retention and recruitment.

40%

say safety concerns had caused them to change their behaviour or their working situation

29%

say safety concerns affected their mental wellbeing

23%

said feeling unsafe negatively affected their productivity

16%

turned down work as a direct result of feeling unsafe

7%

have taken time off work because of safety concerns

The landscape of safety

Workplace safety is an established occupational health and organisational issue, encompassing the prevention of physical injury, violence, harassment and other circumstances that may adversely affect workers' health, safety and wellbeing.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related violence as any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work. This includes verbal abuse and threats as well as physical attacks, and may involve customers, clients, patients, service users or other members of the public. The issue is particularly relevant to sectors in which employees have regular contact with members of the public.



Safety and wellbeing are connected. Evidence indicates that exposure to violence and harassment can have psychological consequences including stress, anxiety, fear and reduced job satisfaction.



Violence and harassment are prevalent. There is substantial evidence that workplace violence and harassment are prevalent, particularly in public-facing occupations such as healthcare and retail. A substantial proportion of the risk comes from third parties such as patients, relatives, customers and members of the public.



Perception matters before an incident. The effects of unsafe working environments may occur through multiple pathways. An incident may result in physical injury or psychological harm, but the perception that a situation is unsafe may also influence behaviour before an incident occurs. Rather than measuring safety solely through the frequency of incidents, employers need to consider situations where feeling unsafe is influencing behaviour and affecting an employee's ability to perform their work.

Feeling unsafe changes what people do

The strongest theme coming through from survey respondents and focus group participants is not simply that workers experience unsafe situations. It is that feeling unsafe can change what people do, how they undertake tasks and whether they want to participate in work.

Workers described avoiding places or people, changing tasks or shifts, seeking colleagues, watching exits and becoming more alert. In these moments, self-protection becomes part of the job. The consequent hyper-vigilance and self-protection impacts where, when and how employees carry out their work.

1

Feelings of safety

Context shapes how safe someone feels in the moment.

2

Adapting behaviours

Avoiding places or people, changing tasks or shifts, seeking colleagues.

3

Self-protection

Watching exits and staying alert becomes part of the job.

4

Work consequences

Where, when and how work gets done is affected.

FINDINGS

Safety isn't fixed. It's contextual.

Feeling safe and feeling unsafe are not mutually exclusive.

92%

feel very or somewhat safe at work

51%

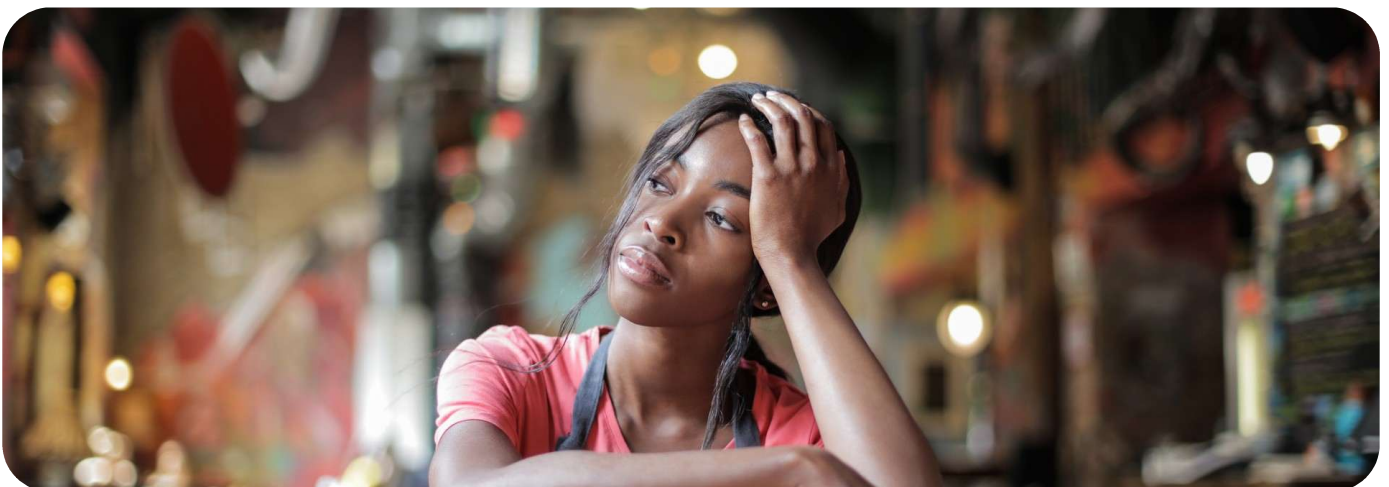
felt unsafe at least once in the past year

32%

of workers who had never reported a workplace safety concern had nevertheless felt unsafe at work in the past year

Employees clearly differentiated between having experienced an incident and a general feeling of safety. A worker can generally feel safe while still experiencing particular places, times or situations in which they feel unsafe.

- ✓ Feeling unsafe can arise before a specific incident
- ✓ Context matters: location, time, isolation, staffing and interactions can all change the feeling of safety
- ✓ Perceived safety can influence behaviour even when no formal incident is recorded



When people don't feel safe, self-protection can become part of the job

The story isn't simply that workers experience unsafe situations. It's that feeling unsafe can change what people do, how they work and whether they want to participate in work. Contextual safety was commonly reported as impacting feelings of safety, with employees adapting behaviours as follows:



Avoid certain areas or people



Avoid lone working



Change when they do particular tasks



Seek colleagues for support



Become more alert or vigilant



Change or decline shifts and work opportunities

Workers described spending mental energy monitoring their surroundings and protecting themselves rather than concentrating fully on the job.



Instead of focusing entirely on customer service or processing transactions, I find myself constantly scanning the shop floor for potential threats, or watching the doors.

Feeling unsafe can affect employers long before an incident occurs

It influences retention, workforce availability, staffing flexibility and where employees are willing to work. The impact on retention, productivity and presenteeism is clear when ranking the impacts most commonly cited by staff:



“

When I feel unsafe at work, I become more cautious and less focused. I may avoid certain situations, keep to myself more, and spend extra time thinking about my surroundings instead of fully concentrating on the job.

“

Feeling unsafe can make me more alert and distracted. I may avoid certain situations, limit my interactions, and focus more on protecting myself than on doing my job.

Verbal abuse and threats lead the causes of feeling unsafe

We asked respondents to tell us the types of incidents they had experienced in the course of their work. Verbal abuse and threatening behaviour are the leading causes of feeling unsafe at work, with third parties regularly cited as those causing safety concerns. This data is important for employers to be aware of.

The five experiences that most commonly made workers feel unsafe



These responses support an emerging theme from the survey: feeling safe is shaped by more than incidents alone.



I have verbally been abused on at least 4 occasions with one man pointing his finger in my face and calling me a f..... b..... I left my job soon after from a large supermarket.



I was unlocking gates to a premises when three hooded figures started to hang around.

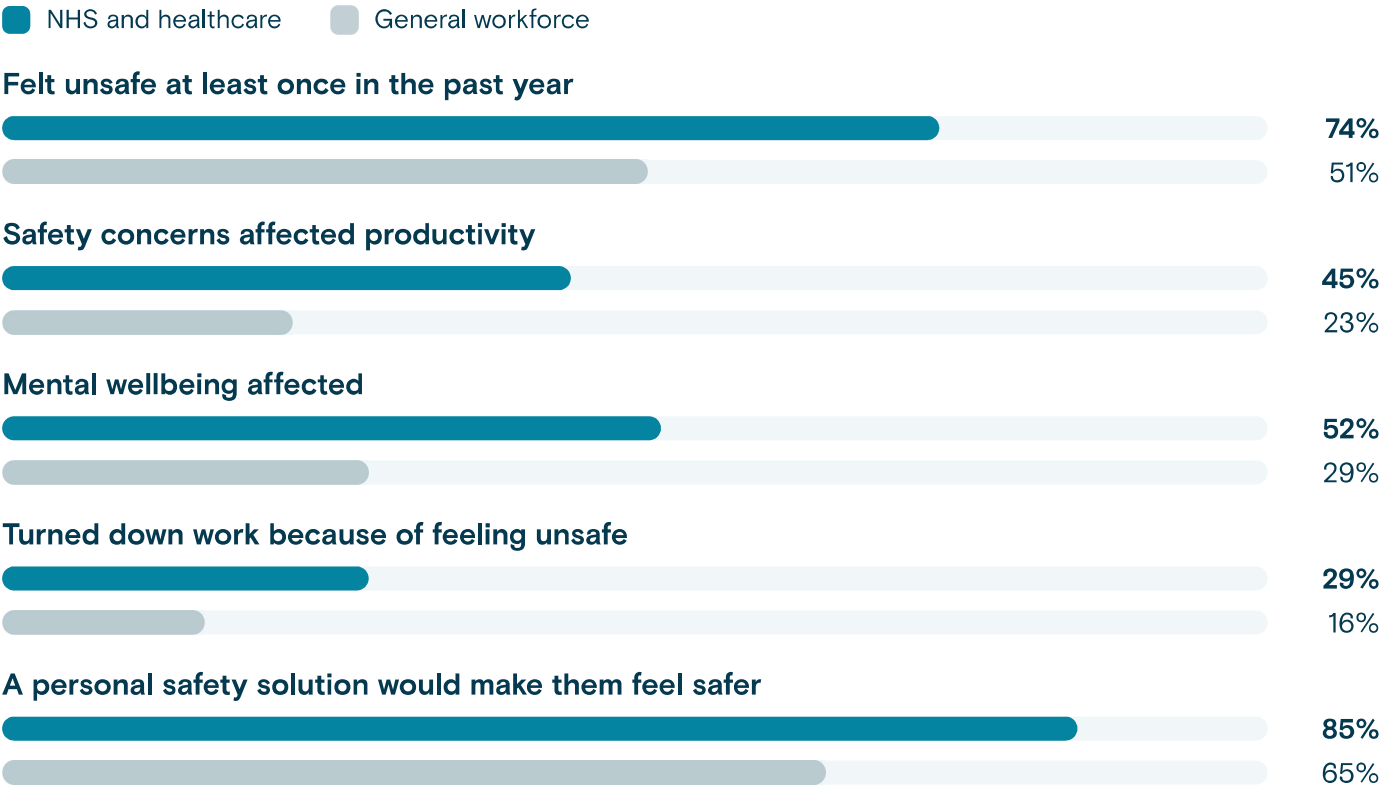


SECTOR FOCUS

NHS and healthcare

Healthcare workers report a stronger relationship between feeling unsafe and their ability or willingness to work.

Comparing results from the general workers' survey with the survey specific to the healthcare sector:



NHS and healthcare worker data

NHS and healthcare workers reported feeling less safe generally, and less safe in the last 12 months, than respondents in other sectors.

74%

felt unsafe at least once in the past year

80%

feel very or somewhat safe at work

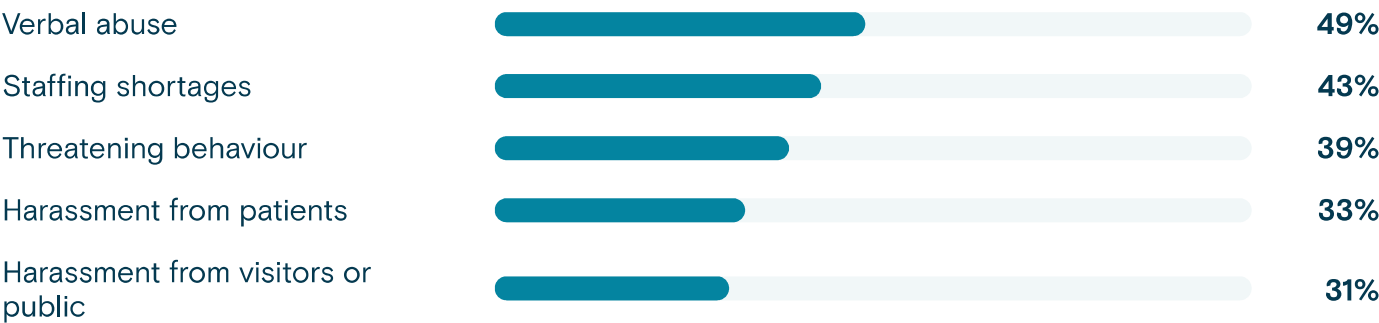
29%

turned down work as a direct result of feeling unsafe

14%

have taken time off work because of safety concerns

Types of incidents healthcare workers experienced



“

While caring for an agitated patient... I requested a colleague to accompany me... and chose to decline upcoming voluntary bank shifts.

Almost 1 in 3

healthcare workers have turned down work in an already short-staffed industry.

A worker can feel safe in one situation and vulnerable in another, without anything about the job itself changing

ROLE

Clinical Nurse Specialist in Surgical Pre-Assessment, leading surgical pre-assessment teams across three hospitals. F's role involved assessing patients one-to-one in a consultation room or undertaking office-based duties in a hospital setting.

F described herself as generally feeling safe at work, particularly during normal daytime working hours when there are plenty of colleagues around. But her perception of safety changes depending on when and where she is working.



Suddenly it's 8 o'clock at night and I'm in a basement area of the hospital and nobody knows I'm here. You've kind of landed yourself in a situation you didn't mean to and suddenly feel quite unsafe.

Late evenings, weekends and quieter periods in the hospital can feel different. She described walking through an otherwise familiar hospital when there are very few people around, or leaving work late and walking alone to the car park.



Predominantly I always sort of think late in the evening, suddenly it's quite dark and you're aware that there's not many people around, but even things like weekends. I felt unsafe sometimes because the hospital can be a bit of an eerie sort of place, and working shift work and late at night, it's felt unsafe.

Thematic analysis

Workplace safety is experienced as more than protection from physical harm.

Across the NHS focus group, individual case study and a subsequent engagement session involving around 50 NHS staff, participants described safety as a combination of practical protection, psychological confidence and organisational support.

Feeling safe meant knowing there were enough people around, having access to functioning safety measures, being able to speak openly, feeling respected and knowing that concerns would be taken seriously. Feeling unsafe could arise from aggression or inappropriate behaviour, but also from staffing pressures, isolation, poor lighting, unfamiliar environments, late working and uncertainty about whether help would be available.

Importantly, staff did not describe feeling unsafe as something that necessarily stops them from working. Instead, they described changing how they work, including adapting communication, modifying assessments, avoiding certain situations, seeking colleagues' support and becoming more vigilant. Some also described becoming less willing to speak, contribute or share ideas.



When you're not feeling safe, you're cautious, you're less focused, you avoid certain situations... it takes more mental effort.

Healthcare worker



Safety isn't just about avoiding physical injuries. It includes physical safety, psychological safety, and having the right equipment, staffing and support.

Healthcare worker

Five themes from healthcare workers

Focus group sessions with over 60 NHS and healthcare workers established further themes.

THEME	WHAT IT MEANS	OVERALL INSIGHT
1 Feeling safe means more than avoiding harm	Safety is shaped by support, respect, communication, adequate resources and confidence to speak up.	Feeling safe has both physical and psychological dimensions.
2 Safety is contextual	Feelings of safety change according to the environment, situation, time, location and level of support available.	Feeling safe is not a fixed state.
3 Feeling unsafe changes how people work	Workers become less productive when they feel unsafe, increasing presenteeism, absenteeism and turnover rates.	Workers feeling unsafe impacts business performance.
4 Feeling unsafe can reduce participation and voice	Workers may become less motivated, less confident and less willing to contribute or share ideas.	Feeling unsafe can affect both confidence and productivity.
5 Feeling safe depends on trusted support	Workers need confidence that staffing, management, procedures and safety measures will provide effective support when needed.	Safety is strengthened when people trust that support will be available and effective.

What support looks and feels like for healthcare workers

When asked what would make them feel safer at work, the most common answer was support.



People

Enough colleagues. Someone nearby.
Someone who knows where you are.



Response

Knowing who to call, how quickly help
will come and that responders know what
to do.



Procedures

Clear processes, training, handover and
sensible lone-working arrangements.



Culture

Being listened to, concerns taken
seriously and action following reporting.

**Feeling safe isn't just the absence of danger.
It's the presence of support.**



SECTOR FOCUS

Retail

Retail workers report higher levels of feeling unsafe than the general workforce, with that feeling translating into greater impacts on both wellbeing and productivity.

Comparing results from the general workers' survey with the survey specific to retail, colleagues report a more pronounced experience of feeling unsafe, and of its effect on their ability to be productive.

■ Retail ■ General workforce



Retail worker data

Retail workers' feelings of safety are shaped not only by customer behaviour, but by the conditions around them, including staffing, working alone, time of day and access to support. When people feel unsafe, they can change how they work, lose confidence and devote attention to protecting themselves. Retail workers reported feeling less safe in the last 12 months than respondents in other sectors, as well as an increased impact on mental wellbeing.

66%

felt unsafe at least once in the past year

58%

had ever felt unsafe at work

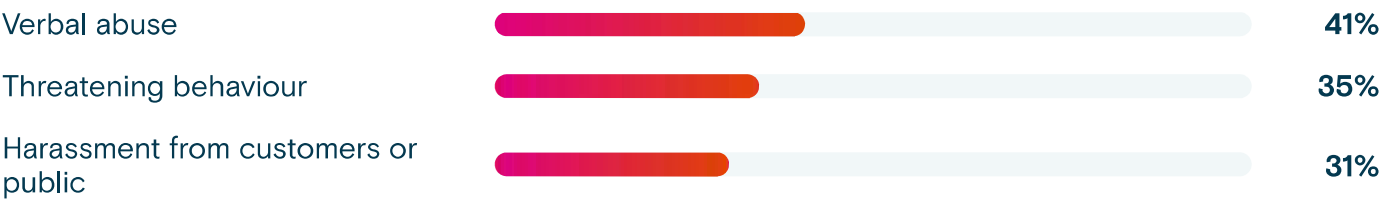
30%

said feeling unsafe negatively affected productivity

37%

say safety concerns affected their mental wellbeing

Types of incidents retail workers experienced



“

When I don't feel secure, I become hyper-vigilant.

29%

of retail workers said they would accept additional shifts if they felt safer at work.

The conditions around a person can shape how safe they feel, even before an incident occurs

ROLE

HR administrator and divisional coordinator in general retail, drawing on experience working in stores and managing staff across multiple stores.

For C, feeling safe is strongly connected to not being isolated. She described safety as:



Having colleagues around



Avoiding isolated spaces



Avoiding certain customers



Working in well-lit, open-plan areas

Importantly, C had not personally felt unsafe when she was working in well-staffed stores. But she had witnessed colleagues being injured and attacked at work. Her experience illustrates an important distinction: the working conditions around a person can shape how safe they feel, even before an incident occurs.

C cited many situations where context hugely impacted her feeling of safety:

“

Working alone... working in evenings... working when isolated... travelling to and from work in evenings.

Five themes from retail workers

THEME	KEY FINDING	WHAT IT MEANS
1 Feeling safe means having support around you	Feeling safe was closely linked to having colleagues, security, clear procedures and someone to turn to when something happens.	Safety is about knowing you are not on your own.
2 Context changes how safe people feel	Feelings of safety varied depending on staffing, how busy the store was, time of day, working alone and the situation being dealt with.	The same workplace can feel safe in one situation and unsafe in another.
3 Feeling unsafe changes how people work	Workers described becoming more cautious, changing how they worked and relying more on colleagues or other safety measures when they felt unsafe.	Self-protection can become part of the job.
4 Feeling unsafe can affect confidence and performance	Participants described reduced confidence, difficulty communicating and being less able to carry out their role effectively when they did not feel safe.	Feeling unsafe can affect both confidence and ability to work.
5 Feeling safe depends on trust in the organisation	Workers wanted safety concerns to be taken seriously, communicated between shifts, reported safely and followed up with meaningful support.	People need to trust that the organisation will act when safety is at risk.

Solutions and interventions

Feeling unsafe can change what people do, how they work and whether they want to participate in work. There is a remarkably consistent picture across the UK workforce: people aren't asking for one single safety product. They want a combination of practical support, organisational action and rapid access to help.

Four clear solutions were commonly expressed as priorities.

1

Make help visible and reliable

Clear routes to help, rapid response for lone or isolated work, and trained responders.

2

Reduce isolation

Consider staffing, lone working, security and post-incident support.

3

Improve transparency

Make concerns easy to raise, close the feedback loop and be open to continued dialogue about safety.

4

Measure perceptions, not just incidents

Ask how safe people feel, where and when it changes, what they do differently and what would improve it.

What is the role of tech solutions?

Overwhelmingly, the people we surveyed and interviewed were in favour of tech solutions, and reported such interventions would help them feel safer in the workplace.

For both retail and healthcare employees, the number of respondents saying a tech solution would make them feel safer was higher than the general response.

66%

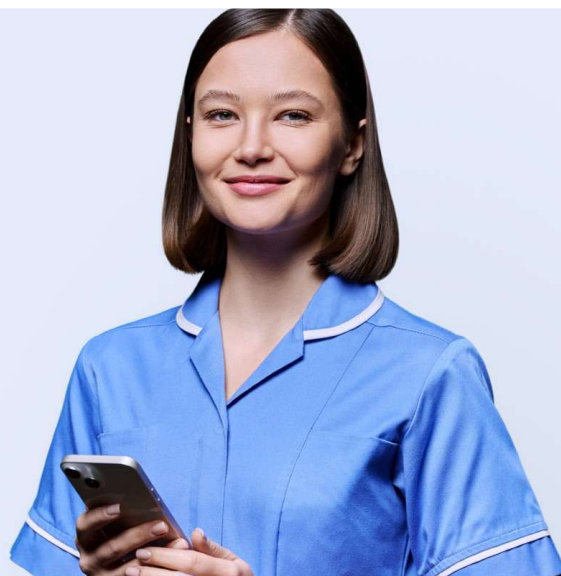
said a personal safety solution would make them feel safer

90%

of retail workers said the same

85%

of healthcare workers said the same



Technology can support safety. It cannot create the whole safety culture.

What workers appear to want is reassurance that help is available and that the response will be reliable. Where tech can provide reassurance and peace of mind as part of monitored support, it does not replace culture or clear procedure, but rather enhances them.

For tech solutions such as Peoplesafe to bring the best level of reassurance and increase feelings of safety, they must deliver:



Reassurance



Access to help



Reliable response



It would actually make me feel safer... if there are authorities you can just report to during any security emergencies, it would actually go a long way in ensuring the safety of workers.



The important thing would be knowing that the response would actually be quick and reliable.

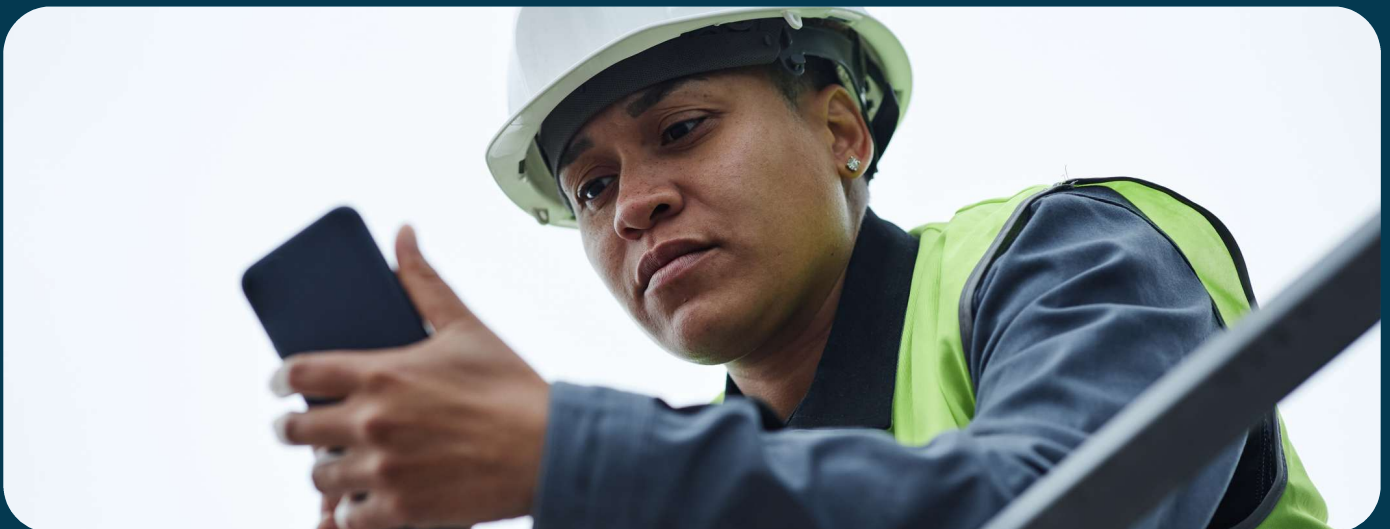
A direct route to support, at the moment it's needed

Workforce safety services such as those from Peoplesafe can form a practical part of this wider solution by giving workers immediate access to help when they feel unsafe. The research consistently shows that people want reassurance that support is available, particularly when working alone, late at night, in isolated locations or in situations where they are uncertain what might happen next. A 24/7 Alarm Receiving Centre (ARC) provides a dedicated response layer, so workers are not left to manage a situation themselves or rely on finding a colleague who happens to be nearby.

4s

Peoplesafe's ARC answers alarms in an average of 4 seconds, creating a rapid connection between the worker and a trained response service.

The speed of that response matters. It is particularly important in the moments this research identified as making people feel unsafe: the isolated retail store, the late-night journey to a car park, the lone healthcare visit or the situation that begins to escalate unexpectedly. Rather than expecting an employee to assess the situation alone and work out who to contact, the technology provides a direct route to support.



When people feel unsafe, they adapt

This research set out to understand something that traditional workplace safety measures can easily miss: what happens before an incident occurs, when an employee simply does not feel safe?

The findings show that feelings of safety are not a peripheral issue. They can influence behaviour, performance, wellbeing, attendance, participation and people's willingness to remain engaged with work.

Across the general workforce survey, 51% of workers said they had felt unsafe at work at least once in the past year, while 23% said feeling unsafe had negatively affected their productivity and 16% had turned down a work opportunity because they felt unsafe. A further 7% had taken time off work because of safety concerns, and 29% said safety concerns had affected their mental wellbeing. At the same time, 92% described themselves as very or somewhat safe at work.

These findings are not contradictory: people can generally feel safe while still experiencing particular moments, places or situations in which that feeling changes.

520

respondents, around 40% of the sample

selected at least one behaviour or working situation they had changed because of safety concerns.

Changing the metrics of safety

Incident data alone does not capture the full experience of workplace safety.

Across the survey responses and interviews, people described feeling unsafe in situations where no formal incident had necessarily taken place, but because they were working alone, in an isolated location, late at night, with limited staffing, dealing with an unpredictable customer or patient, or uncertain about whether support would be available. The data points to a gap between what organisations can see through reported incidents and what employees are actually experiencing in their day-to-day working environment.

This safety gap matters for employees, and it matters for employers too. Individuals' feelings of safety are not left at home when they begin work that day. They continue to shape the way they work, behave, participate and engage in their role.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS SEE

Reported incidents

WHAT EMPLOYEES EXPERIENCE

**Perceptions, feelings and
changed behaviour**

Behavioural change should be treated as a significant safety signal.

To ensure employee safety, measuring the number of incidents is no longer sufficient. It must move beyond numbers and into perceptions, feelings and the related behaviours. The evidence from this research shows that by the time an incident is reported, the impact of feeling unsafe may already have been changing the way someone works.

Methodology

To achieve the research objectives, three distinct public surveys were published across a range of platforms to understand feelings of safety at work: general, retail and NHS/healthcare. As a secondary phase, verbatim statements were drawn following a thematic analysis, and a series of focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with employees. This further phase deepened the understanding of their views within the context of workplace safety, and of how tech solutions can be used in a preventative way to improve perceptions of safety.



Survey questions

1,313
participants

A series of questions asked participants to tell us their experiences of feeling safe at work and how it impacts their behaviour. Providing a range of opportunities for quantitative findings, as well as for participants to express subjective opinions through open-text responses, the survey allowed a thematic analysis to understand commonplace issues and perceptions.

**Protect your
people. Wherever.
Whenever.**