

# Over 1,500 assaults on paramedics a year – but new law won't stop the violence

July 10 2018, by John Ambrose

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Paramedics face violence on a daily basis so a new law which will bring in [tougher sentences](#) for those who attack emergency workers when they are on duty is most welcome. It is hoped it will act as a deterrent because offenders currently escape what many would see as meaningful justice (attackers are charged with common assault resulting in a maximum

sentence of six months). The new law will double this with an option for a longer sentence, dependant on the seriousness of the case. But will this toughening up of sentencing powers actually have any impact on the front line?

The damage to those affected by this violence can be long lasting and have widespread implications for their physical and mental health. Violence against [emergency workers](#) should not be seen as an "occupational hazard". More needs to be done to highlight this increasing and dangerous issue affecting today's paramedic workforce.

In 2014/2015, 44 out of every 1,000 [ambulance](#) workers [suffered a form of assault](#). That is a total of 1,861 assaults for that year. And these are just the assaults that were reported – many go unreported.

## **An international issue**

Paramedics deliver care at the front line of the NHS. The unpredictable nature of the [emergency](#) means that they are constantly at risk of harm. Without doubt, this is a national and, indeed, international issue. For example, a recent study reviewed the impact of violence against paramedics across 13 countries, concluding that [65% of those responding had been assaulted](#).

It is sometimes assumed that violence and aggression are always associated with alcohol. And yes, alcohol can play a part. But this is not always the case. Only recently paramedics have been [verbally and physically abused](#) as result of the way a crew had parked the ambulance while dealing with an emergency.

In Australia ambulance staff are taking a stand and [are demanding action](#) . Crews there have even taken to writing slogans on their ambulances.

Paramedics and ambulance services in the UK are also beginning to take a more direct approach with the involvement of the [College of Paramedics](#), which is calling for [more deescalation training](#) and is representing the interests of UK crews.

A paramedic's main focus is to care for the patients they are sent to. They are there to help. But it is all too easy for families, friends, bystanders – and even the patients – to feel they need to vent frustrations against the ambulance crew.

Ambulance crews understand that in an emergency situation the public are not used to the situation they find themselves in. This anxiety and stress has to be managed by the crews at the scene.

The new law may have an impact, but in the presence of a stressful and challenging emergency situation – which may or may not involve alcohol and drugs – will the public consider the implications of a new law and their subsequent actions? I suspect that the bill will not be considered at all. It seems the threshold for violence has been reduced in the UK. It has become almost a default reaction by some against NHS staff with an increase in violent attacks [between 2015/2016 and 2016/2017 of 9.7%](#).

A paramedic that has been assaulted will gain support from their employer and rightly so. They will have stress management policies and counselling services at their disposal, and will be supported through any subsequent prosecution process. But the effects can be devastating – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, [mental health](#) issues, lack of confidence to go back to work and fear of it happening again are all common.

## **Raising awareness**

Paramedics do have training in "deescalation" and ambulance trusts do take the issue seriously. The North West Ambulance NHS Trust assured

staff that any acts of [violence](#) or aggression against them by the public [will be taken further](#).

But [paramedics](#) don't have any other protection. They do not wear stab proof vests, they do not carry any form of defence or deterrent and nor should they have to.

It must be time to use the opportunity of this bill and approach the issue before any crime has been committed. The public must be educated. A national campaign focusing on protecting emergency care workers and indeed any worker within the NHS is much needed. Violence against people doing their job is unacceptable. And the cost to individuals, the NHS and the public is too great.

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