



Empowering Security Guards to Deal with Retail Offenders

September 2024



Safety at Service Stations

The Motor Trade Association (MTA) is supportive of using evidence-based solutions to protect businesses and the public from retail crime. Our intention in this response is to highlight questions that should be considered when evaluating the use of security personnel, expansion of powers and tools available, and whether it is safe and effective to do so in the New Zealand context, particularly at service stations.

In doing so, we have canvassed a group of service station members, some of whom have been repeat victims of crime, for their input. Service station members have told MTA the threat or impact of crime is one of the highest risks to their business.

There are 1250 service stations, of which roughly 900 are MTA members. Service stations are amongst the most vulnerable and frequent victims of crime. New Zealand Police data for the first six months of 2024 recorded 62 aggravated robberies at service stations – one every three days – and 13,791 instances of theft, mostly drive off fuel theft but also shoplifting from the store.

Earlier this year, MTA published its [Position Statement and Action Plan](#) to address service station crime. Through our advocacy work and as lead voice in media, MTA represents the service station sector.

The material below should be read in conjunction with the Appendix of MTA member comments.

Do security guards reduce the risk of crime?

Experience from the United Kingdom clearly illustrates that the most effective deterrent against retail crime is the regular presence of police patrols of at-risk sites (see [Fighting Retail Crime: more action](#)).

MTA supports evaluation of security guards as a protective measure and earlier endorsed financial assistance for businesses to employ them. However, after extensive research and consultation MTA's view mirrors that of many MTA service station members: the presence of security guards on sites has at best only limited deterrence value and is unlikely to significantly reduce the risk of crime.

One member in favour of guards commented: *"Security Guard's I believe would have the best impact, they would be seen onsite, just like the extra coper's [police] on the beat."*

Conversely, another member expressed the view: *"In NZ as a deterrent they are laughable. Everybody knows they are unarmed & untrained in unarmed combat."*

And another: *"They are cost prohibited and a waste of time. Guards have no ability to apprehend or hold offenders."*

Several respondents expressed the opinion that increased use of security guards may in fact have the opposite effect to that sought – raising the seriousness of violent incidents as offenders come to the site armed to deal with a security presence and putting guards and staff in increased danger.

The physical presence of a security guard may provide some deterrent for those who would otherwise not be involved in retail crime – however, this is likely to be at a low level, involving first time, juvenile or casual offenders and is unlikely to substantially reduce the risk of more serious crime, if at all.

Looking overseas, in March 2023, [The Sun reported](#) BP's Fourways Garage in Northamptonshire employed two security guards in response to shoplifting. Guards told the newspaper that “simply being challenged by a security officer stopped many thieves in their tracks”.

In line with other “target hardening” measures such as bollards and alarms, the presence of a security guard may also prompt an offender to choose another target they perceive to be an easier site.

However, there is little evidence that the presence of security guards will have any deterrent effect on a repeat or serious offender. Reasons for this include knowledge by offenders that security guards are poorly trained, ill-equipped and often casual workers who are powerless physically and legally to intervene.

Serious, repeat offenders are committed to their course of action, and unlikely to be deterred by the presence of a guard. Most importantly, we have little confidence a security presence would deter criminals intent on a violent invasion or assault on the premises. They will simply come equipped to deal with the presence of a guard.

Accordingly, it may be concluded that at best, security guards have some low-level deterrent benefit but will have little if any reduction on offending. In fact, they are likely to elevate the risk of serious offending.

Are security guards used at service stations now?

One member advised that he currently employs security: *“I currently Pay for an (Untrained) Tall Male Guard/Staff member to be on-site between 8pm to 10pm (we close at 10pm nowadays, previously midnight however not worth the risk anymore), I also pay for P4G to do 5 random patrols onsite between 10pm and 5am.”*

Despite this, deployment of security guards is limited. Reasons against use of security guards provided by members include:

- Cost to the business
- Questions over effectiveness and benefit
- Concerns over training and standard

A member summarised: *“They don’t work, have had them on site and nothing really changes. Shoplifting and abuse continues. In fact the security guard was more of a target having a presence.”*

As noted, the potential benefit of security guards is a deterrent to low-level, opportunist shop-lifting and possibly drive-off theft.

What is the quality of security staff in New Zealand?

There are effectively “tiers” of security staff in New Zealand, peaking with well-trained personnel at sites such as Parliament and courts. Security at mass-populated events such as sports stadiums are trained to a lesser degree; while security staff typically deployed at retail outlets and low-risk sites are, by international standards, poorly trained.

As a member noted: *“Contrary to the PR blitz by Security companies, it is not a career move. When people have no other work they turn to security to fill in the hours.”*

The required training for these security staff is limited. Typically, there is a requirement of two days of training. The quality of this training, and the fail rate for these two-day courses, are extremely low as the trainer essentially walks the participant through each question. There is minimal incentive for training providers to increase the amount of training, because this adds to the cost, and security providers are interested in providing a cheap service.

Security staff are often students (particularly international students) looking for a part time job in the evenings when they are not attending classes, recent immigrants, or unskilled labour. Staff in this lowest tier are typically paid around the minimum wage.

By comparison, in Finland (with a population and economy of similar size) staff receive 400 hours of training followed by supervision. In Australia, staff have two weeks of full-time training.

Improving the quality of security staff to anywhere near international standard would require considerable investment by Government, as the private sector would be unlikely and unwilling to bear the cost.

One member who supports the use of security guards equipped with Tasers and greater powers highlighted the need for greater training: *“Security guards should have a nationally recognised certification or registration to ensure that they are suitable for the role, and that they understand how best to respond in these scenarios. Store staff should attend a certified Armed Robbery course, which simulates an armed robbery. And staff should have access to free self defence classes in order to improve their ability to deal with a situation, if that is what they to feel safe and confident when coming to work.”*

It is worth noting that even amongst security industries with better training and resources, security guards regularly face abuse, threats or violence.

A UK study ([source](#)) in 2020 showed:

- 64.6 per cent of security guards suffered verbal abuse at least once a month. (50 per cent of these were as regular as once a week).
- 43 per cent of respondents reported threats of violence at least once a month (10 per cent were getting threatened on a daily basis)
- More than 30 per cent of those surveyed reported some kind of physical assault in the workplace once a year. (Almost 10 per cent reported a minor physical assault at least once a month).

Should security guards have Tasers, pepper spray or other equipment?

Whilst some members supported the use of Tasers and other equipment (see Appendix), others were vigorously opposed. On balance it is MTA's view that arming security guards with Tasers, pepper sprays, batons or similar equipment is dangerous, will increase the incidence and severity of violent attacks, and would place guards, workers and customers at heightened risk.

In New Zealand, security guards are not trained to anywhere near the level where it would be safe and effective to use such equipment. To do so would involve considerable cost and investment, not to mention a substantial shift in the quality of personnel.

However, the far greater concern is that arming security guards will lead to an "Arms Race" where offenders – often young and aggressive - come equipped to over-power the guard using weapons of their own. This is likely to result in far greater violence against guards and anyone else on site who either witnesses or intervenes in the crime.

Luckily, while aggravated robberies are frequent, serious physical assaults on service station workers here are currently less so (without minimising the trauma such incidents cause). There are concerns that this would change. In the UK in 2019, a security guard at a service station suffered a [smashed cheekbone and trauma](#) after being attacked with an axe by offenders.

More generally there is a risk of equipment being used on the guard. There are numerous instances where offenders have used a weapon against its carrier. Locally, in 1990 Senior Constable Peter Umbers was beaten to death with his own standard issue baton by an offender who had committed an armed robbery nearby.

The risk of such equipment being used by an offender is twofold: at the time of the initial incident; and at a subsequent incident as the offender is now in possession of a reusable weapon.

There should be considerable caution and concern over this suggestion. It risks normalising a “fortress” approach to securing retail sites that many New Zealanders would feel is uncomfortable and unwelcome.

Most importantly, any arming of security guards or the staff will inflame and aggravate violent crime.

Do security guards have an effect on police response?

The effect of security guards on police response depends on the level of commitment by NZ Police. Currently, for resource reasons, theft from service stations is treated as a low priority. NZ Police do however, largely respond quickly to violent incidents where safety is threatened.

In the UK, the [Retail Crime Action Plan](#), which set out policing’s commitment to tackling shoplifting and prioritising attendance where violence was involved or a shoplifter was detained, was launched in October 2023.

Operational implementation of the plan showed significant impact from a sample of 31 police forces carried out in December 2023. Of over 1500 crimes reviewed across all retailers, police attended 60 per cent where violence had been used, with 16 per cent of forces sampled reporting 100 per cent attendance to this type of incident. Police attendance for a detained shoplifter was 76 per cent with 21 per cent of forces again showing 100 per cent attendance (Source: npcc.police.uk).

UK convenience store chain Co-op says working with its security partner, Mitie, specially trained undercover (covert) guards detained 3361 criminals in Co-op stores during 2023. Police response improved from failing to attend in nearly four-fifths (79%) of incidents where a criminal had been detained to 38% (source: [Co-operative.coop](https://www.co-operative.coop)).

In theory, it could be interpreted that giving security guards and service station staff (indeed, even the public) the legal power to detain offenders might result in higher police intervention, with police co-operation. However, there would be many legal obstacles to overcome to reach this point.

More importantly, attempts to restrain/detain an offender, while well-meaning, are more likely to result in increased attacks and violence (in both frequency and severity) on guards and service station staff. Common advice and training in jurisdictions around the world is not to intervene in violent crime and instead to avoid “vigilante” action.

Apprehending and detaining an offender until police arrive raises a heightened likelihood of injury to the security guard or staff member.

A member commented: *“This would put all operators in a situation of serious risk and possible harm to us and our teams, will only escalate the problem.”*

Should security guards and businesses have greater legal powers to detain/restrain?

MTA is concerned about where the legal liability would lie in cases where liability attaches to the actions of a security guard in their role of protecting a business.

As one member responded: *“The answer still lies with the Government and Policing, I would not like to put the added pressure of ‘extra powers’ on my staff, for some it would freak them out and they would more than likely leave and for others they could take it to the extreme and someone could get really hurt or worse.”*

Another said: *“If this type of power is enacted in legislation, staff that are not mentally or physically equipped will be under pressure from employers to respond physically ... which is just dangerous. Staff who are often on a low wages should never be put in that position. They do not normally have the judgement to decide when to remove themselves from the situation or to intervene.”*

“Rogue” members of the security industry are not uncommon, and businesses must be protected from inappropriate action. Even good quality guards may find themselves in a situation where their actions are subject to legal scrutiny; substantial time and resources would be needed to establish required protections.

Leaving aside the issue of whether they should be given this power, fear of legal liability – as well as physical injury – is likely to result in security guards or staff reluctant to intervene to stop criminal activity, thus reducing any effectiveness and exposing them to increased risk for no benefit.

Summary

While evaluation of security guards and the powers of businesses and individuals to deal with offenders is worthwhile and timely given the current incidence of retail crime, it is the opinion of MTA that this would not be an effective step or solution to reducing crime. In fact, it is not unfair to say it could be a backward step.

The comments of this member encapsulate our position:

“Having a security guard on site is one thing for deterrent but I would not like to see them be involved in trying to detain or restrain potential offenders. I do not see any situation where inflaming a situation is a good thing. Safety of people is paramount and the best way for that is to allow offenders to leave the site no matter what they have taken.”

The presence of security guards – particularly those equipped with Tasers and/or batons - risks inflaming the incidence and severity of violent crime, resulting in more innocent parties in danger.

The security industry is under-trained and of insufficient quality to deal with the nature of this work.

Government would need to make considerable investment to lift standards of the industry and to create or rewrite legislation to allow adequate protection of businesses and individuals from liability.

As is evidenced by many of the comments in the Appendix, and believed by MTA, NZ Police have the primary role in addressing and reducing crime. Efforts must also be made to address the causes of crime.

We believe the public, while naturally desirous of safer shopping environments, would generally oppose guards (or staff) routinely carrying Tasers or other coercive equipment.

Simply put, that is not the “New Zealand Way”, and there are other, better means to reduce crime and keep people safe. As one member said: *“We don’t want to end up like America.”*

For further information please contact the authors:

Authors

Simon Bradwell

Head of Communications

Simon.bradwell@mta.org.nz

Maya Polaschek

In-house Counsel

Maya.polaschek@mta.org.nz

Appendix – MTA Member Response Summary

Note – names and identifying details have been withheld. Responses have been lightly abridged for anonymity without affecting substance.

Member A

- What are the pros and cons of security guards at service stations? THEY DON'T WORK, HAVE HAD THEM ON SITE AND NOTHING REALLY CHANGES. SHOPLIFTING AND ABUSE CONTINUES. IN FACT THE SECURITY GUARD WAS MORE OF A TARGET HAVING A PRESENCE.
- Should you and your staff have greater legal power to detain, restrain or use force on an offender? DISAGREE WITH THAT, IT WILL JUST PUT EMPLOYEES AT RISK.
- Would either of the steps above increase the risk to people on site, or reduce it? IT WOULD INCREASE IT.

Member B

- What are the pros and cons of security guards at service stations? They are cost prohibited and a waste of time. Guards have no ability to apprehend or hold offenders
- Should you and your staff have greater legal power to detain, restrain or use force on an offender? NO it will cause higher levels of assault - What's needed is Judges to impose stronger sentences!!
- Would either of the steps above increase the risk to people on site, or reduce it? Guards are a soft way of putting another level of ineffectiveness into our businesses. Both Increase risk to staff!! It is about staff training and coming down harder on offenders.

Member C

- What are the pros and cons of security guards at service stations? Costs will be the issue - as small business operators, our GP\$'s will not allow this expenditure
- Should you and your staff have greater legal power to detain, restrain or use force on an offender? Yes, although difficult to practice as our people including customers safety cannot be compromised in any way. However, there are times when this may be possible and can be done in a safe environment, therefore the law could permit us to do this legally
- Would either of the steps above increase the risk to people on site, or reduce it? If offenders knew that they could be "dealt" with by business owners/ public if caught, it will make some offenders think twice about offending. The worry of course is that it could mean larger groups come in at once, and violence becomes part of how they approach any sites.

There is a concept of not making the offending too difficult , otherwise offending gets violent, and likely of property damage becomes a norm. The theory is that the offenders need to get away within seconds of offending with minimal people contact, and less property damage.

I would look at installing more security measures e.g. jump wires and grills - with tax advantage of such an investment

Member D

Security guards & staff need to have the right to inspect peoples belongings to check for theft (eg: handbags, grocery bags, jackets, etc), or have the right to detain someone until the police can arrive to check these. Security guards must have the right to detain suspects until police arrive. The use of force must be allowed if necessary. I believe that store workers & members of the public should have similar rights in the above circumstances.

Security guards should be allowed to use non-lethal restraints, such as Tasers or Batons, when confronting violent offenders if the situation has escalated to a level where the safety of anyone is in doubt.

In violent situations the security guards should try to de-escalate the situation without force if possible, and only use force when that has failed and the offender refuses to comply or await the arrival of the police.

Security guards should have a nationally recognised certification or registration to ensure that they are suitable for the role, and that they understand how best to respond in these scenarios.

Store staff should attend a certified Armed Robbery course, which simulates an armed robbery. And staff should have access to free self defence classes in order to improve their ability to deal with a situation, if that is what they to feel safe and confident when coming to work.

The law must be structured in a way that protects any “servants” (eg: staff, security, owners, public support) from being punished when responding to violent offenders.

Store staff, security guards and law enforcement need to work seamlessly together to ensure that communication is clear between all parties involved from the time of the event, until the end of sentencing or time served by the offender. This would ensure that any victims can have confidence in knowing whether there is a possibility of the same offender returning again.

The above has been a big downfall of the current system, as currently law enforcement takes as much information as possible from the business and victims, and then will not provide any further information regarding the offenders after they have been apprehended by the police and sentenced in court.

Because of this I have multiple staff whom are too afraid to work graveyard shifts, as they have been involved in an aggravated robbery, and have no idea if the same offenders will come back again.

Member E

My concern with the below suggested course of action re: security guards etc. doesn't address the root cause of the problem and is not economically viable for most small to medium service stations, in New Zealand. Meaning the additional FTE cost to retailers having a full time security guard would simply be unaffordable to most retailers.

I am however, very supportive of any initiative that empowers retailers (of any industry) to be able to protect themselves, their colleagues and property by proportional and appropriate force.

We recently had an individual commit 10 separate theft and/or assaults at our service station in Rotorua and not once did the police intervene despite 111 calls on every occasion. It wasn't until this individual committed a more serious offence at another retail location did, he get arrested. We (staff) are all at a loss as to what to do, we have been told, by the police that if we physically intervene, we can get charged with assault whereas those committing the crimes go un-punished.

Member F

I cannot see our Oil Chanel supporting the cost of Security guards at site

2nd point [*Should you and your staff have greater legal power to detain, restrain or use force on an offender?*]...absolutely NOT. This would put all operators in a situation of serious risk and possible harm to us and our teams, will only escalate the problem

3rd point [*Would either of the steps above increase the risk to people on site, or reduce it? ...as above*] absolutely INCREASE the risk to my people

I DO NOT support any of those initiatives if that is what these are even called.

Member G

1. We believe that staff or security should be allowed to detain offenders till police arrives if safe to do so.
2. Non-lethal measures should be allowed.
3. Training and certification by experienced and certified people is must.
4. Legal protection should be provided in case of saving your business. I am sure anyone reacting reasonably to defend their properties must be protected by law. Human rights should be equal to both, not only to offenders. Otherwise govt should pay for the loss if they think that legal protection cannot be given. Everyone is working hard to earn but cant let it go without resistance. I am sure that even people in govt will react if someone is stealing their valuable in front of them
5. Regular inputs from the business owner will help police to understand the reality

Member H

Police need to stop blaming the retailer and focus on the criminal as drive offs when reported we the retailer are blamed for not having the pumps on prepay it's the effing criminal who's in the wrong not the retailer. Police need more power when they do arrest the criminals harsher sentences etc.

Many crims know they cant be touched so provoke staff and guards.

Member I

Very few would be able to afford to employ security guards.

From my opinion having a security guard on site is one thing for deterrent but I would not like to see them be involved in trying to detain or restrain potential offenders. I do not see any situation where inflaming a situation is a good thing. Safety of people is paramount and the best way for that is to allow offenders to leave the site no matter what they have taken.

Member J

I currently pay for an (Untrained) Tall Male Guard/Staff member to be on-site between 8pm to 10pm (we close at 10pm nowadays, previously midnight however not worth the risk anymore), I also pay for P4G to do 5 random patrols onsite between 10pm and 5am. Together, this cost is large and we currently pay out of our pocket with no Govt help. It would certainly make it a lot easier for me to have Govt Subsidies, and perhaps More and More people would take up the opportunity which will create more work for the security companies and in turn create more jobs. (perhaps an opportunity for the Youth Military Govt Scheme to assist?)

We should not have weak laws such as the current situation where offenders can steal and no enforcement is done. We need to stop crime, especially petty crime. Petrol Drive Offs are the number 1 petty crime in NZ and the police have no admin staff to assist with chasing up the offenders.

Ensure the Public have buy in on the system and the Public feel safe to have new measures in place. Ensure the criminals are aware that the public and shop owners and staff will be able to take action quicker and not have to wait long wait times for Police to arrive. Have more Police doing the correct sector of work (not focus on revenue generating ticketing). Have the Police Train the security guards once every 6 months. Bring Back the Local Community Police Stations!!!

Member K

The Security Companies ... contract out work to private contractors who mainly hire overseas students as they are reliable and turn up to work compared to the local populace.

Contrary to the PR blitz by Security companies, it is not a career move. When people have no other work they turn to security to fill in the hours.

Member L

As for the "Service Station Crime", boy this is a can of worms, if we were dealing with one identity, we all thought and acted the same, there would be a fair chance we could get into place some of those points you mentioned, detention, use of tasers, training etc. However I think Security Guard's I believe would have the best impact, they would be seen onsite, just like the extra copers on the beat.

Again, I myself know what is it like to be on site, 2am for the eleventh or so time for a break in, and if I would come across the offenders still on site, God help them!

I think the answer still lies with the Government and Policing, I would not like to put the added pressure of "extra powers" on my staff, for some it would freak them out and they would more than likely leave and for others they could take it to the extreme and someone could get really hurt or worse, so, I am

only one Service Station with ten staff which all have varying views on crime, multiply this by 1000 sites and I think it would be uncontrollable.

We don't want to end up like America but I do agree some needs to change and quickly, man power I think would be a good start.

Member M

These types of concepts are frankly ridiculous, would be stressful, inflammatory & just downright dangerous. To deal with each issue in isolation ...

Security Guards

In NZ as a deterrent they are laughable. Everybody knows they are unarmed & untrained unarmed combat ... & infact they are more trained in their obligations to not intervene than the layman so hence the criminal feels safer around them. They provide nothing more than you would get from a CCTV system, & in fact less because at the time of the incident, what we see & remember can be at conflict.

If they were armed it can become more dangerous. It is great if they deter the criminal, but if the crime is still being committed & a security guard that is armed / has a right to physically respond intervenes the stress / emotion of the situation can escalate quickly with potentially very dangerous outcomes.

Coming from Australia where Security Guards are armed, & working in environments where they were there to provide a very visual deterrent, they can actually be more frightening than the criminal. Most people seemed to revert to the role of security guard because they didn't qualify for the police which may have included powers of reason or judgement. Of course this also leads to that NZ theory of "arm the police & the crims get bigger guns", so if we have armed security guards the criminals will likely carry further weapons.

Staff Having Increased Powers

If this type of power is enacted in legislation, staff that are not mentally or physically equipped will be under pressure from employers to respond physically ... which is just dangerous. Staff who are often on a low wages should never be put in that position. They do not normally have the judgement to decide when to remove themselves from the situation or to intervene so we train them to remove themselves until experts arrive.

& if they infact were trained & competent to respond & hence chose to it just escalates the situation
Eg – recall the Dairy Owner that got killed trying to protect a business not that long ago.

Member N

I think general retailers should have more power than they do. Just standing there and doing nothing is pointless. They should have tasers or pepper spray – what ever works.



Contact Details

Member Toll Free Phone

0800 00 11 44

Wellington Office

Level 5, AIA Tower
34 Manners St
Wellington 6011

Auckland Office

485 Great South Rd
Penrose
Auckland 1061

Email

mta@mta.org.nz

Website

mta.org.nz