

**REPORT ON VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE
TOWARDS BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED
PEOPLE ACROSS THE UK**

BY

ACTION FOR BLIND PEOPLE

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REPORT ON VERBAL AND PHYSICAL ABUSE TOWARDS BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED PEOPLE ACROSS THE UK

Background

Action for Blind People has seen cases of verbal and physical abuse towards blind and partially sighted people. In some cases visually impaired people have needed to leave their home to be in a safer area. We wanted to identify if these were just isolated cases or if abuse was happening on a regular basis and if so, what could be done to address this issue?

Action for Blind People worked with Tickbox (external research agency) to conduct a survey on verbal and physical abuse towards blind and partially sighted people. The same survey was carried out amongst people without a visual impairment to provide a comparison.

10 questions were asked, to identify the following issues:

1. What percentage of blind and partially sighted people have been victims of verbal and/or physical abuse?
2. Is this occurring often i.e. on more than one occasion or are they just one off incidents?
3. Who do victims of abuse turn to for support, or if they don't turn to anyone, what are the main reasons they don't?

In order to cover a representative sample, we needed 1,000 sighted and 100 VI people to respond to the survey. The number of people actually questioned exceeded the requirement. 199 visually impaired people and 1,942 people without a visual impairment took part in the survey.

Two focus groups also took place with blind and partially sighted people to gain more in-depth understanding of the types of abuse visually impaired people experience and the extent to which this is a real issue within the UK today.

Key findings from the survey

Summary

The survey has revealed some very shocking statistics and has shown that verbal and physical abuse towards blind and partially sighted people is prevalent and should be taken seriously.

Over 1.2 million visually impaired people have been verbally and/ or physically abused, many on more than one occasion and within the last six months.

Almost 20,000 blind and partially sighted people were physically abused today, four times more likely than a sighted person.

The majority of visually impaired people who experience verbal and physical abuse tend to turn to their family and friends for support; however it was alarming to see a great number didn't turn to or tell anyone.

It was shocking to see that sighted people are twice as likely to go to the police than someone with a visual impairment and even more appallingly a very small number of VI¹ people turned to a support group or helpline.

A considerably higher number of visually impaired people than sighted people felt that they would not have been taken seriously if they had told anyone (31% v 17%) and many didn't know where or who to turn to – more than that of sighted people (24% v 8%).

Disturbing examples of verbal and physical abuse experienced by blind and partially sighted people have been brought out in the focus groups.

Key findings of the survey are given in more details below.

¹ VI stands for visually impaired. 'Visually impaired' and 'blind and partially sighted' have the same meaning.

There are two million VI people in the UK today; we have therefore extrapolated figures from this survey to demonstrate how these statistics relate to the wider VI population.

Have you ever been a victim of verbal and/or physical abuse?

- 60% of blind and partially sighted people have been a victim of verbal and/or physical abuse, 50% of sighted people
- 56% of visually impaired people have experienced verbal abuse and 47% of sighted people
- 24% of visually impaired people have experienced physical abuse and 21% of sighted people

If extrapolated to the entire visually impaired population (ie two million people) then this equates to the following:

- 1,200,000 visually impaired people have experienced verbal and/or physical abuse
- 1,120,000 visually impaired people have experienced verbal abuse
- 480,000 visually impaired people have experienced physical abuse

How long ago were you verbally and/or physically abused?

- **I was abused today**
- **In the last week**
- **In the last 6 months**
- **In the last year**
- **More than a year ago**

- 4% (19,200) of blind and partially sighted people who have been physically abused were so today, four times more likely than a sighted person at 0%.
- 10% (48,000) of blind and partially sighted people who have been physically abused were so within the last week, 10 times more likely than a sighted person at 1%.
- 16% (179,200) of blind and partially sighted people who have been verbally abused were so in the last week, more than twice as likely than a sighted person at 7%.
- Over half (51%) of VI people who have been verbally abused were so within the last year, 48% of sighted people.
- Visually impaired people are twice as likely to have been physically abused within the last year (37% v 18%).

How often do you experience verbal and/or physical abuse?

- **Rarely – it was a one off**
- **Occasionally**
- **The whole time**
- Almost 70% of VI people who have experienced verbal abuse have done so on more than one occasion (50% of sighted people).
- Almost half (46%) of blind and partially sighted people physically abused have been victims on more than one occasion. One third (30%) of sighted people.

Do you know the person who physically/verbally abused you last?

- **No - it was a total stranger** (54% VI v 49% sighted)
- **Yes - it was my partner** (6% VI v 11% sighted)
- **Yes – it was my neighbour** (3% VI v 8% sighted)
- **Yes – it was a family member** (7% VI v 7% sighted)
- **Yes – it was a work colleague** (4% VI v 5% sighted)
- **Yes – it was a friend** (5% VI v 3% sighted)
- **Yes – it was my employer** (2% VI v 2% sighted)
- **Yes – it was a shopkeeper** (2% VI v 0% sighted)
- **Yes – other** (16% v 16%).

Although the majority of blind and partially sighted people had been abused by a complete stranger, it was shocking to see that almost half (46%) actually knew their abuser.

Who was the first person/group of people you turned to and told about your experiences of physical and/or verbal abuse?

- **Family**
 - **I didn't turn to or tell anyone**
 - **Friend/s**
 - **The police**
 - **Work colleague**
 - **Employer**
 - **A support group/helpline**
 - **Lawyer**
 - **Other.**
- Only 4% of visually impaired people who have been physically and/or verbally abused told the police. Sighted people are more than twice as likely to go to the police with 9%.

- Only 1% called a support group or helpline. This was the same for sighted people.
- 32% of VI people told a family member and 20% told a friend. This was similar for a sighted person at 28% telling a family member and 18% telling a friend.
- 29% of VI people didn't turn to or tell anyone and for sighted people this was 28%. Although this was similar it was interesting to see the comparison (below) between a sighted person and a VI Person on the main reasons for why they didn't turn to or tell anyone about their abuse.

The following are the main reasons why respondents who have experienced abuse did not turn to or tell anyone:

- **I didn't think anyone would take me seriously** (VI people are less likely to believe they will be taken seriously than sighted people at 31% v 17%)
- **I didn't know where or who to turn to** (VI people are more than twice as likely not to know where or who to turn to at 24% v 8%)
- **I was too scared to tell anyone** (13% VI people v 9% sighted people)
- **I have told people in the past, but they were unsupportive** (16% VI people, twice as likely as a sighted person at 8%)

Do you think you will suffer physical/verbal abuse in the future?

- **Definitely**
- **Potentially**
- **No.**

59% of VI people think that they will suffer physical/verbal abuse in the future, 51% sighted people.

- 13% of visually impaired people think that they will **definitely** be abused in the future, almost twice as likely as sighted people at 7%.
- 46% of visually impaired people think that they will **potentially** suffer abuse in the future v 45% of sighted people

My physical appearance definitely makes me an easier/more likely victim of verbal and/or physical abuse.

- VI people are more than twice as likely to think their physical appearance makes them a likely victim of verbal abuse (53% v 21%), and over three times more likely to think their appearance makes them a more likely victim of physical abuse (43% v 13%).

Do you feel safe living in your local area and going out after dark?

- More than one in four (27%) blind and partially sighted people don't feel safe in their local area and half (50%) don't feel safe going out in their local area after dark. Interestingly it is quite similar for sighted people, with close to one in five (18%) not feeling safe in their local area and almost half (46%) not feeling safe after dark.

- Furthermore, close to one in ten who are visually impaired also do not feel safe in their own homes (9%).

‘Blind and partially sighted people are more likely to be victims of verbal and/or physical abuse’

- 70% (of those with and without a visual impairment) agree with this statement, which is an indication of how people think society has become.

Key findings from the focus groups

There were two focus groups held. Members of the focus groups were from our Service User Participation groups and were not pre-selected because of any experiences of abuse.

The following gives the main findings and identifies the kind of abuse that some visually impaired people have experienced, who the abusers tend to be, why this could be happening and what they feel could be done to help tackle this serious issue.

Experiences of abuse

‘When I get home and I haven’t encountered any problems then I always think that’s a miracle, rather than the norm.’

‘When I go out on my own I’m frightened about what is going to happen to me. I’m OK when I’m with someone.’

‘It’s verbal abuse. I’ve also had little kids as young as nine or ten trying to steal my white cane.’

‘Before I got my dog, three little girls tried to rob me. Only twelve or thirteen years old.’

'I don't think this is going to end because it is an ongoing thing – it never stops.'

'It makes you more vulnerable.'

'It always seems to happen when you're on your own – it never happens when you're with someone.'

'I know a gentleman who had to stop coming out between about 2 and 3pm in the afternoon, when the schools were coming out, because they would jump in front of him and stop him and wave in front of his face. He's in his 80s and started to get quite frail, so he just stopped coming out.'

'There was one time in Halifax where I was in a mugging. I was using a long cane, and going past a bus station a guy tried to mug me. I connected with him twice (with the cane), they found blood, but I was told by the police not to use force. So what am I supposed to do when someone attacks me? Lie back and let them walk all over me?'

'I know someone in a similar situation where there was an attempted mugging and the person defended themselves with a white stick and they were in trouble with the police.'

'These kids tried to mug me and asked if I was blind and then that was it.'

'My friend was using a long cane and kids were jumping over the cane, treating it like a skipping rope.'

'It's pointless, because I've tried that reporting it to the Community Police and the first thing they say to me is, could you recognise him?'

'Verbal and physical abuse does have a real impact on a person's confidence. I've worked with people who are not going out much at all.'

'Mainly verbal. When people tell you that there are things in the way that aren't there. Shouting in the street. It happens all the time.'

Who are the abusers?

'It's 11 to 16 year olds mainly, that sort of age group.'

'Only 12 or 13 years old.'

'Little kids as young as nine or ten.'

'You get kids coming up aged 12, 13, 14.'

'Teenagers.'

'I've had it from young children up to 12, teenagers around 17/18, and then the middle 20s bracket.'

'It isn't only people in the street – it can be employers as well. I've had it from employers, but it was insidious. They can actually put so much pressure on you that you assume you're not coping and you leave. It can be very insidious, but it's abuse just the same. I ended up with a counsellor and having treatment because I almost had a nervous breakdown'

'20 to 30 year olds that stand in front of you. They come down in threes and fours.'

'I think it's the same people, the same individuals that would take the mick out of anyone who may be a bit different. It's the same ones.'

Why is it happening?

‘Carrying a white stick makes you look more vulnerable.’

‘It’s teenagers’ mentality and lack of discipline.’

‘It’s lack of awareness basically, and it’s also down to respect in general.’

What can be done?

‘Targeted Visual Awareness (VA) training² is the key. Targeting the groups that want to help.’

‘VA training in schools would be good and start them young.’

‘VA training can’t be just once, you need to go back and recommend that they do it once a year or every 18 months.’

‘VA training should be funded by the government.’

‘Visual awareness training should perhaps concentrate on schools. That way, if parents are not giving children the appropriate guidance, there is a chance they will get it that way.’

‘Society may be difficult to change, but there are people in society like shop assistants, security guards, police, whoever is prepared to help, if they are informed about what they can do.’

‘VA training to the general public in some way, but avoiding exploiting the vulnerabilities of VI people. Help people to become more aware of

² Visual Awareness training provides you with an understanding of visual impairment and the challenges faced by a visually impaired person. Action for Blind People’s Visual Awareness team provides this training.

VI people and how a person can help them, rather than trying to expose their vulnerabilities.'

'It's all down to education and the problem is we live in an undisciplined society.'

'If you can reduce the amount of visually impaired people looking lost, then that will actually go some way to minimising them looking vulnerable in the first place. If they had someone to go to straight away when they walk into a shopping centre and get unnoticed, without bumping into things and looking completely out of place.'

'I think if they knew they would be getting a hefty fine and thrown in front of the courts then they wouldn't do it.'

Real life examples

Denise

I have had bricks and stones thrown at me, a football kicked at my face, eggs thrown at my window and kids spitting at me. I cannot wait to get away from this abuse and live in an area where I can feel safe. Thanks to Action for Blind People I will feel confident again and will be able to get on with my life peacefully.

Andrew

Andrew is registered blind and was living on a housing estate in London. He had become a target for abuse and harassment from a gang of youths near his home. He had been shot at with an air rifle and even had dog excrement posted through his letter box. The gang had also attempted to break into his property and attacked his guide dog. Because of this he was too frightened to answer the door or leave his flat. Action for Blind People found Andrew alternative accommodation where he now feels safe.

Jonathan: I was meant to be meeting up with people at the Student Union. I went up to some people, who I thought were students and asked them if they knew the way to a nightclub I was going to. They asked me if that was a baseball bat I'd got in my hand and so I said no, it's a white cane. The next thing I knew they had pulled it off me and smacked me over the head with my cane. I had to go to hospital. Luckily it hasn't made my sight worse as a result, but it could have.

Richard: I remember once I was going to the Library in Durham and someone walked past me and saw I was carrying a white stick (I'm registered partially sighted) and turned to me and said "Liar!" I thought "How the hell do you know? Do you think I'm carrying this for the fun of it?" I just ignored him, but it does hurt.

My social worker suggested going up and talking to them, but it's pointless. I've tried that, and I've been threatened before. I don't want to talk to someone who's being abusive.

Ron:

A couple of kids aged about 14 or 15 asked me if I wanted to cross the road and I said yes. They took me across and left me standing in the middle of the road, a main road.

Pauline:

I had my white stick out when I went to London and I was picked out. By the time I got on the tube I'd lost everything I had with me.

Robert:

Robert and his partner Beth were living in a council property in Islington. They had lived in their high rise property for 17 years before they asked for a transfer because Robert who is visually impaired also has restricted mobility and was increasingly struggling to manage stairs when the lift was out of use. They were transferred to a different block into a ground floor flat. Here they experienced serious abuse from a neighbour and her relatives.

Jeanine

Jeanine is 34 years old and experiences verbal abuse from school children, as she takes her own child to school. Jeanine uses a white cane to guide her. Jeanine is not sure what ages the youths are, but they crowd round her to intimidate her and have been known to kick her cane.

Lewis

Lewis is 27 years old and carries a symbol cane³ He has experienced youths about 12 years old going past him shouting and spitting at him and his partner.

Conclusion

The results have clearly shown that verbal and physical abuse is occurring towards blind and partially sighted people and for many on more than one occasion. The consequences of a visually impaired person experiencing such abuse can be devastating, as shown from the examples given in the report.

Society may not be aware of the issues faced by visually impaired people and therefore not fully understand the impact that verbal and physical abuse can have on a visually impaired person. Of course, many people in society will be as horrified as we have been by these figures, and therefore can play a role in helping to combat anti-social behaviour of this kind.

It is extremely concerning that many visually impaired people who have been abused did not tell anyone about it, as they did not think they would be taken seriously. Many didn't know where or who to turn to and/or were too scared to tell anyone. Those who had told someone in the past found that they were unsupportive. This is

³ Symbol canes, as their name suggests, are intended to be used only to indicate visual impairment. For this reason they are not designed to be used as a mobility aid, but to draw the attention of the public to the fact that the user has a degree of sight loss.

shocking and clearly more needs to be done to make mainstream services and agencies more accessible to visually impaired people.

Recommendations

Action for Blind People wants to raise awareness of the unacceptable levels of verbal and physical abuse towards blind and partially sighted people. Society as a whole must start taking responsibility for such anti-social behaviour, so we need to bring this issue to the public's attention.

Action for Blind People would like to work with the police to address the problem. We offer Visual Awareness Training tailored to help gain a greater understanding of the disability and the everyday issues faced by visually impaired people. In doing this, we aim to help them provide a more accessible service for VI people and ensure that visually impaired people feel safer in their local area.

Action would like to see the police recording any reports of verbal and physical abuse towards blind and partially sighted people, to establish the true extent of the problem.

Action for Blind People would like to work with schools, employers and other support organisations to help them understand the issues surrounding someone with a visual impairment. Society as a whole has a role to play in tackling anti-social behaviour and Action believes its Visual Awareness Training team can help towards achieving this.

With many visually impaired people not knowing who to turn to, Action for Blind People has expanded its services and is working in partnership with other organisations to be able to offer advice and support to blind and partially sighted people in all aspects of their lives. Action does urge blind and partially sighted people to report any form of anti-social behaviour they encounter.

If you or anyone you know is experiencing verbal and/or physical abuse, contact Action for Blind People on our National Freephone



Helpline 0800 915 4666 or visit our website at www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk for further information and support.

Contact Details

For further information please contact Action's Press Office on 020 7635 4921 or email debbie.flatley@actionforblindpeople.org.uk