# A&E assaults nearly double in five years as nurses report acid and gun threats, RCN says



A Royal College of Nursing investigation has painted a stark picture of rising violence against accident and emergency staff across London and beyond, with physical assaults in A&E reported to have nearly doubled between 2019 and 2024. According to the Evening Standard’s reporting of the RCN’s Freedom of Information analysis, nurses describe being punched, spat at, threatened with acid and even having a gun pointed at them — a catalogue of incidents that union leaders say is having a severe effect on staff safety and morale.

The human cost is clear. The Evening Standard quotes political figures condemning the attacks: the Health Secretary, Wes Streeting, and the Liberal Democrats’ health spokesperson, Helen Morgan, have urged that perpetrators face the “full force of the law”. Ms Morgan told the paper: “Violence against hospital staff is utterly abhorrent and those committing it should feel the full force of the law. Those working in hospitals often do so under incredibly difficult conditions to look after us when we are most in need.”

The RCN’s findings sit alongside other regional investigations showing similar trends. A BBC analysis of recorded incidents in Kent and Sussex found a 47% rise in physical assaults on hospital staff over four years, while union surveys report that many nurses face violence or abuse on a daily or regular basis. Unions and researchers warn that the rise in assaults is contributing to worsening retention and recruitment problems in an already stretched workforce.

Nurses’ accounts collected by unions and the RCN are harrowing and varied: staff report being spat at or punched, subjected to verbal abuse and threats, and in a minority of cases confronted with weapons. Unison’s recent survey for Nursing Times highlighted that a substantial proportion of nurses and midwives required time off work after physical attacks, with a notable number considering leaving the profession as a result.

Unions and think-tanks point to common drivers behind the increase. Understaffing, prolonged waiting times and overcrowding are repeatedly cited as factors that can escalate patient and visitor frustration into aggression. The RCN’s position statement and Nuffield Trust analysis both argue that poor working conditions and pressure on services make violence more likely and aggravate its impact on staff wellbeing and sickness absence.

Policy responses are emerging but critics say implementation is uneven. The NHS England Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard, updated in December 2024, offers a comprehensive framework urging board-level accountability, better data collection, workforce training and a red–amber–green benchmarking system for progress. Trials of measures such as body-worn cameras and government proposals to increase sentences for attacks on emergency workers have been reported, but unions say technological fixes and tougher sentences alone will not address root causes.

There are practical obstacles to translating guidance into safer workplaces. Unison’s press release notes that only a minority of staff feel supported after reporting incidents and that police response can be inconsistent; the RCN stresses that legal measures must sit alongside prevention, better reporting systems, thorough incident investigation and victim support. Research bodies recommend improved, consistent data collection so trusts can target interventions based on evidence rather than anecdote.

Taken together, the evidence points to the need for an integrated approach: enforce the law where appropriate, but also invest in staffing and the service improvements that reduce waits, provide comprehensive training and support for staff, roll out proven protective technologies where helpful, and ensure board-level oversight of violence reduction plans. NHS England’s standard sets out those components; unions and independent analysts argue that sufficient funding and political will will determine whether guidance translates into safer shifts for frontline workers.

For clinicians and patients alike, the stakes are high. Unless trusts, government and criminal justice partners convert guidance and rhetoric into consistent, well-resourced action, front-line services risk further erosion through staff sickness, resignations and the long-term damage to morale that repeated assaults cause. Unions say urgent, measurable steps are required if hospitals are to remain places where patients can be treated and staff can work without fear.

### 📌 Reference Map:

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-sussex-68022014), [[6]](https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html), [[6]](https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Position-statements/RCN-position-on-work-related-violence-in-health-and-social-care), [[7]](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/violence-in-the-nhs), [[6]](https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/violence-prevention-and-reduction-standard/), [[5]](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-sussex-68022014), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/), [[4]](https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Position-statements/RCN-position-on-work-related-violence-in-health-and-social-care), [[7]](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/violence-in-the-nhs)
* Paragraph 8 – [[3]](https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/violence-prevention-and-reduction-standard/), [[4]](https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Position-statements/RCN-position-on-work-related-violence-in-health-and-social-care), [[7]](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/violence-in-the-nhs), [[6]](https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html), [[6]](https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/london/a-e-nhs-nurses-attacks-london-b1242495.html> - The Evening Standard reports on a Royal College of Nursing investigation revealing rising violence against A&E staff in London and beyond. Nurses describe being punched, spat at, threatened with acid, and having a gun pointed at them. The RCN used Freedom of Information requests to show physical assaults in A&E nearly doubled between 2019 and 2024, with severe impacts on staff safety, retention, and wellbeing. Health Secretary Wes Streeting and Liberal Democrat spokesperson Helen Morgan condemned the attacks, urging legal consequences and better protections. The article highlights calls for panic buttons, improved security, staffing fixes and measures to reduce waits.
3. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/violence-prevention-and-reduction-standard/> - The NHS England Violence Prevention and Reduction Standard provides a framework for preventing and responding to violence and abuse towards NHS staff. Updated December 2024, it recommends leadership accountability, data collection, workforce training, interventions and evaluation across seven domains. It introduces a red, amber, green rating to benchmark progress and urges integration with equality duties and the NHS People Plan. The guidance emphasises legal duties under health and safety law, the need for board-level oversight, collaboration with police and violence reduction units, and the importance of data-driven action plans to protect staff and reduce physical assaults and improve staff wellbeing.
4. <https://www.rcn.org.uk/About-us/Our-Influencing-work/Position-statements/RCN-position-on-work-related-violence-in-health-and-social-care> - The Royal College of Nursing sets out its position on work-related violence in health and social care, describing physical and verbal abuse as an occupational hazard for nursing staff. The statement cites surveys showing high rates of physical assault, discrimination and harassment and calls for prevention, support for victims, better employer responses and stronger reporting. RCN highlights links between understaffing, poor working conditions and increased aggression, and argues that legal measures alone are insufficient without preventive action. It urges employers, policymakers and the criminal justice system to prioritise staff safety, improved training, and comprehensive incident investigation and follow-up support services.
5. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-sussex-68022014> - The BBC investigation found thousands of recorded physical assaults on hospital staff in Kent and Sussex, revealing a 47% rise in incidents over four years. Nurses reported being spat at, punched and threatened, with many describing fear and unsafe working conditions. The report noted trials of body-worn cameras and government comments on increased sentences for attacks on emergency workers. RCN representatives described understaffing and long waits as drivers of aggression, and unions urged better protections and enforcement. The article highlighted the human cost to staff wellbeing, recruitment and retention, and called for policy action to reduce violence and support victims.
6. <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2025/03/nurses-and-midwives-subjected-to-violence-at-work-on-a-daily-basis-according-to-unison-nursing-times-survey/> - UNISON’s press release reports survey findings that nurses and midwives face daily violence at work, with a third requiring time off after physical attacks and many considering leaving the profession. The union found only a minority felt supported after reporting incidents, and highlighted threats including firearms and inadequate police response in some cases. UNISON called for urgent measures to protect staff, better reporting systems, stronger employer action and increased investment in staffing levels. The release emphasises the psychological as well as physical toll on workers, the link to retention problems, and the need for government and trusts to prioritise safety.
7. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/violence-in-the-nhs> - The Nuffield Trust resource examines violence in the NHS, summarising data from staff surveys and other sources to show incidents of assault, harassment and abuse experienced by health workers. It discusses variations across services, with mental health and ambulance staff often experiencing repeated incidents, and notes trends of increasing reports in recent years. The page highlights links between long waits, understaffing and patient frustration, and reviews evidence on the impact of violence on staff wellbeing, sickness absence and retention. Nuffield suggests improving data collection, prevention strategies, and investment in staffing and support services to reduce risks and protect frontline workers.