

RISE IN ATTACKS ON THE FRONTLINE

NEW LEGISLATION TO COME INTO FORCE

Legislation is set to be amended by the Justice & Equality Minister to increase the maximum sentence to 12 years for assaults on Gardaí and other emergency service workers, following a steady rise in the number of attacks on members of the force in recent months. It follows legislation Minister Simon Harris introduced 'earlier this year to allow for Gardaí to use body worn cameras on the frontline.



The force is now geared up for new modern policing tools to protect frontline Gardaí. (Pic: Breege Rowley)

The increasing level of attacks against members of the force topped the agenda at the Annual Delegate Conferences of both the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI) and the Garda Representative Association (GRA) in April.

During his address to AGSI conference delegates in Galway, Justice & Equality Minister Simon Harris said that he intends to bring forward legislation, which could see people



'Attacks on members of An Garda Síochána will not be tolerated, and will be dealt with robustly', according to the Justice Minister.

convicted of assaulting Gardaí and other emergency service workers handed down a 12-year prison sentence. "I want to change the law in order to send a very clear message: 'Attacks on members of An Garda Síochána will not be tolerated, and will be dealt with robustly'."

The Minister noted that whilst the relationship between the Gardaí and the public is one of absolute trust for the most part, that trust cannot be taken for granted and must be tended to constantly. "Just because you have chosen to dedicate yourselves to the safety of others, nobody has the right to assault you, threaten you, or ram your vehicle.

"The public revulsion whenever your members are attacked shows the Irish people do not accept and will not accept attacks on Gardaí; neither will I or this government. Perpetrators of violence against Garda members or of any of our emergency services workers must face the full rigours of the law," he reassured AGSI delegates.

BODY-CAMS PILOT LATER IN YEAR

This proposed legislative amendment to impose longer prison terms for assaults follows his announcement in February to introduce legislation in the Dáil, allowing for the use of body worn cameras and other crucial modern policing tools to protect frontline Gardaí and deter criminal activity.

Minister Harris hopes to enact the Garda Síochána



Policing services across the world have gained significant benefits from the introduction of body-worn cameras.



Justice Minister Simon Harris addressing delegates at the 45th Annual Delegate Conference of the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI) in Galway 3 April.

(Recording Devices) Bill 2022 as soon as possible to allow Garda Commissioner Drew Harris to pilot the use of body-worn cameras later this year, prior to their widespread roll-out.

The Bill is in line with recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, which was published in 2019, and is a priority action in Justice Plan 2022. It forms part of a suite of legislative measures being introduced by the government to significantly strengthen the capacity of the force to tackle crime and protect national security.

Minister Harris said, “Policing services across the world have gained significant benefits from the introduction of these technologies and people will have seen their effective use in fighting and solving crime in other jurisdictions. Our Gardaí must have the same tools as their colleagues in police services across Europe and around the world.”

IMPROVING FRONTLINE CAPABILITIES

The Department of Justice engaged extensively with An Garda Síochána, Garda oversight bodies and strategic partners during the preparation of this Bill, as well as the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission



The enactment of the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) Bill 2022 will allow Garda Commissioner Drew Harris to pilot the use of body-worn cameras later this year, prior to their widespread roll-out.



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and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties.

"The Government is committed to building stronger, safer communities. This means providing the force with the tools to fight crime in a modern era and to protect frontline Gardaí as they do their duty," according to Minister Harris.

Body-worn cameras will play an important role in improving Garda frontline capabilities and in ensuring the accurate recording of incidents. Garda use of this technology will be primarily for the investigation, detection, prevention and prosecution of criminal offences, safeguarding against and the prevention of threats to public safety and public order, and in matters relating to the security of the State.

Under the new provisions, the cameras must be visible on the clothing of each Garda member and have a light showing when they are recording. The Bill also contains a broad definition of recording device to ensure the legislation is future proofed.

SERIOUS ASSAULTS RISING YEAR ON YEAR

There have been many incidents of serious assaults on members of An Garda Síochána in recent years, some

resulting in horrific injuries, and death in the most serious occasions, according to Des Gibson from the Garda Representative Association (GRA).

"Over 5,000 Gardaí were assaulted while on duty from 2016-2022, and the trend of acceleration is even more alarming with the number of 700 assaults in 2016 rising to over 1,000 in both 2021 and 2022," he noted.

"Last year there were what we regard as 285 serious assaults on our members (up from 243 in 2021, which is almost a 20% increase year on year) with 17 cases of bone fractures. Other injuries included head injuries, dislocations, open wounds and bites."

Gibson also told 'Health & Safety Times' that members had to deal with over 50,000 public order offences countrywide during the Covid-19 pandemic, "which gives a flavour to the many challenges we have faced over the past few years. Between 40-50% of all injuries suffered by Gardaí were as the result of an assault. The injury rate among other professions nationally is on average 3.4%.

"These figures serve as a stark reminder of the treacherous job description that is modern day policing in

Ireland. There is no excuse for unprovoked assaults. As members of An Garda Síochána we are entitled to expect that we will return to our families after each day on duty in the same condition in which we left our families and our homes,” according to Brendan O'Connor, GRA President.

FRONTLINE ABUSE “RUNS THE GAMUT”

However, it's not just Gardaí who are constantly under attack when performing their duties at the frontline. David Hall, CEO of Lifeline Ambulance Service, told 'Health & Safety Times' that the abuse “runs the gamut”. Staff dealing with emergency calls, he says, encounter everything from verbal abuse to assaults, pushing, spitting, hitting and extreme verbal abuse.

“These same sorts of incidents wouldn't be unknown to firefighters at certain times of the year – especially at times like Halloween when it's hardly unusual to read of crews coming under attack. I think real legislation should be introduced to ensure that for anyone who assaults any frontline worker there is a minimum term in prison.

“There must be zero tolerance of any such behaviour. Anyone assaulting any frontline worker must know there is an automatic prison term awaiting them. Clapping frontline workers is great but they do an important job that is very challenging, and they must be shown due respect.”

“**Alarming, attacks were at an all-time high during the Covid pandemic.... the special role and the value of healthcare workers was highlighted worldwide, but at the same time, so was their vulnerability**”

Maciej Polkowski, Head of the 'Health Care in Danger' project, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

GLOBAL SCALE OF ATTACKS DURING PANDEMIC

It's not just in Ireland where attacks on frontline emergency services workers have increased. The issue of violence against healthcare staff has been a recurrent problem over the years across the globe, according to a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) entitled 'Violence against healthcare: current practices to prevent, reduce or mitigate violence against health care'.

Placing it all within a global context, Maciej Polkowski, Head of the 'Health Care in Danger' initiative at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), told 'Health & Safety Times' that violence against healthcare personnel and facilities has been documented more often in recent years, affecting all regions of the world both in war and in peace times.

“Alarming, attacks were at an all-time high during the Covid pandemic. So, with the pandemic came one moment in history where the special role and the value of healthcare workers was highlighted worldwide. But at the same time, so was their vulnerability,” he added.

Maciej Polkowski is keen to stress that the ICRC works both on the reactive and premeditated violence. “Therefore, we can share reflections on the global situation included beyond conflict. We are primarily concerned with countries affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence in line with our mandate under the Geneva Conventions.”

The 'Health Care in Danger' report noted that the Covid-19 pandemic appeared to worsen the situation, with a documented increase of incidents in many countries. Polkowski says that there is not one single silver bullet.

“A variety of solutions have been proposed. So, on one hand you can do training of healthcare workers. But on the other hand, you should design the services and the physical environment. It has to do with the quality of communication and the quality of the services themselves, and it also has to do with broader societal phenomena and how the society views healthcare workers, what they expect from the treatment and so on.”

The Health Care in Danger is aimed at addressing the issue of violence against patients, healthcare workers, facilities and vehicles, and ensuring safe access to and delivery of health care in armed conflict and other emergencies.



Maciej Polkowski, Head of the 'Health Care in Danger' initiative