

PRESS RELEASE

RETAILERS STEP UP AGE CHECKS AS GOVERNMENT ACTS ON KNIFE CRIME

- *76% increase in independent age check audits as government acts to reduce violent crime*
- *Retailer pass rate for mystery shopper knife audits jumps to 82%*
- *Over 1 in 10 consumers would boycott stores if they saw underage sales taking place unchecked*
- *Online retailers trail bricks and mortar stores, failing half of age check audits*
- *Serve Legal confident that retailers can do better*

High street retailers are stepping up action to keep knives out of the hands of young people, according to new data from Serve Legal, the UK's leading independent retail age check auditors.

Over 4,150 of the firm's teenage mystery shoppers were deployed to stores across the UK in 2018 to buy kitchen and other household knives, to audit retailers' performance around age checks – a 76% increase on 2017 audit numbers (2,357). This significant increase in commitment to independent auditing also improved retailers' compliance rates. 82% of Serve Legal's young mystery knife buyers were asked to show age identification at the point of purchase, compared to 75% in 2017 and 57% five years ago.

Supermarkets almost doubled their knife sale audit numbers in 2018 (3,211) compared to 2017 (1,685) and achieved the highest pass rate (85%) of bricks and mortar retailers tested. Homeware stores increased their audit numbers by 37% in 2018 (919) vs 2017 (672) and improved their pass rates from 59% (2017) to 74% (2018). London was the best performing area of the UK, with the Capital's retailers passing 87% of knife sale audits, compared to 82% in 2017.

In England and Wales, it is illegal to sell a knife*¹, blade or axe to a person under the age of 18, while Scottish law allows sales of kitchen knives to children aged 16 and over. Any young person trying to buy a knife should be asked for official proof of age such as a passport, photocard driving licence or PASS-accredited (Proof of Age Standards Scheme) card. Many retailers have adopted an additional level of enforcement by operating a Challenge 21 or Challenge 25 policy in which staff should ask customers who appear to be 21/25 years of age or younger to produce proof that they are 18+ when buying age-restricted products.

¹ Excluding folding pocket knives if the cutting blade is less than 7.62cm (three inches) long.

In 2018, against a backdrop of record knife crime², the Home Office announced that it would take action to tackle the root causes by launching the Serious Violence Strategy³. Amongst measures designed to reduce knife crime were the extension of the Metropolitan Police's Operation Sceptre to enable other police forces to increase targeted stop and search activity, to carry out weapons sweeps, to encourage the use of surrender bins, and, through Trading Standards, to undertake test purchases of knives. A prosecution fund was put in place until 2020 to enforce the law for repeat test purchase failure. The Home Office Community Fund, worth up to £2 million between 2018 and 2020, is also supporting local initiatives to tackle knife crime in England and Wales, such as youth engagement programmes.

Ed Heaver, Director at Serve Legal, said: "Knife crime is a complex and deep-rooted problem with far-reaching consequences. No retailer, whether a major supermarket chain or a single hardware store, wants to be responsible for selling a knife to an underage person that ends up being used with tragic consequences. Against a tightening government stance on violent crime, our audit data for 2018 shows a significant improvement in retailer action to keep knives out of circulation amongst young people which we hope will continue to be an upward trend. There is still work to do, however, as nearly one in five of our young mystery shoppers were sold knives without age checks last year. Galvanised by government action and through a combination of rigorous staff training, efficient operational systems and independent auditing programmes, we're confident that retailers will further improve their performance."

Research* by Serve Legal suggests that reputation and sales are at risk for retailers that act irresponsibly around underage sales. More than seven in ten (72%) consumers surveyed in May 2019 said that the way a retailer behaves is an important factor in their decision where to shop. Over one in ten would boycott a store if they found out or saw first-hand that it was selling age-restricted products to young people without checks and more than a third (34.5%) would report them to the police or Trading Standards.

Over one in five (22%) felt that not checking young people's age identification was a sign of poor staff training and management. To prevent underage sales of prohibited goods like knives and alcohol, consumers would like to see retailers improve their age check systems (34%), train staff better (29.5%) and use independent mystery shoppers to test staff performance (27%).

²

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingdecember2018>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/serious-violence-strategy>

While Serve Legal's audit data for bricks and mortar stores highlight a much improved picture, online sales are a less positive story. Last year, 4,395 young mystery shoppers ordered age-restricted goods, including knives, from online retailers and mail order companies. Half (51%) took delivery of their order without being asked for proof of age. Despite an increased commitment to independent auditing by online retailers - audits more than tripled in 2018 compared to 2017 (1,359) - pass rates improved only marginally from 44% in 2017 to 49% in 2018.

The Home Office recognises online retailers' historical poor performance in test purchases of age-restricted goods and, through the Serious Violence Strategy, calls for parity of law enforcement and prosecution for those that break the law. On 16 May, the Offensive Weapons Act⁴ received Royal Assent, bringing into force new criminal offences for those that 'dispatch bladed products sold online to a residential address without age verification' and for delivery companies that 'deliver a bladed article on behalf of a seller based outside the UK to a person under 18'.

Ed Heaver said: "There has been very little improvement in compliance in recent years by online retailers and the delivery partners upon which they depend, despite rising audit numbers. The new Offensive Weapons Act should bring clarity for those operating in the online retail space, and tougher penalties where needed."

According to Serve Legal's research, one in ten (9.9%) internet consumers would stop shopping with an online retailer if they found out or saw that it was selling or delivering prohibited goods without age checks.

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Notes to Editors:

*The research was conducted by Censuswide, with 2,081 respondents aged 18+ in UK between 8-10 May 2019. The survey was conducted from a nationally representative sample of UK adults. Quotas were

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/offensive-weapons-act-receives-royal-assent>

applied to nationally representative proportions for age, gender and region. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles.

About Serve Legal

Serve Legal is the leading provider of compliance auditing services in the UK & Ireland. The company provides extensive independent audit services to retailers, leisure operators and sports broadcasters to check that key operational and compliance standards are in place across different areas of their business. Its highly accurate site audits help clients protect revenues, improve operational standards and support responsible retailing.

Audit areas include: Mystery shopping, including age-restricted product sales; Customer service and experience; Queue management; Product availability and price checks; Product code and date checks; Point of sale and promotional compliance; Home delivery checks; Digital media and sports broadcasting compliance; Legal notice and licence compliance.

For age-related audit services, Serve Legal employs 18 and 19 year old mystery shoppers ('visitors'). Visitors undertake around 100,000 audits a year. For age-restricted product auditing, visitors purchase an item and record key information about the transaction, including whether photo ID was requested, a description of the server, a till receipt and other key facts. Visitors should be asked to provide photo ID to complete the transaction. If official ID is requested, the site passes. If items are purchased without ID being requested, the site fails. Only passports, photocard driving licences or [PASS-accredited](#) identification are accepted.

www.servelegal.co.uk