

Courtroom chaos: Nearly 450 assaults in New Zealand courthouses since 2019



By [Shannon Pitman](#)

Open Justice multimedia journalist, Whangārei·NZ Herald·

5 Jan, 2025 06:25 AM 8 mins to read



The number of concerning incidents occurring at our courts is increasing. Photo / NZME

Verbal abuse, intimidation and brawls where security officers are often outnumbered are becoming all too common in government buildings intended to uphold law and order. Shannon Pitman looks into the number of assaults occurring at our courts and what is being done about the growing problem.

The pressure of life-changing decisions faced by individuals involved in court proceedings has turned many court buildings across the country into volatile environments with nearly 450 assaults occurring in just five years.

The escalating violence appears to be linked to rising tensions at court where people are dealing with sensitive matters such as child custody matters, the incarceration of loved ones and grieving victims of crime.

Incidents of assaults on [court personnel](#), verbal abuse aimed at judges, and intimidation of lawyers have become disturbingly common, reflecting a growing trend of security issues within the court system.

The most recent incident occurred in early December in Invercargill where two security guards were assaulted, leaving one with facial injuries. For that offence a 38-year-old was charged with common assault, injuring with intent to injure, and resisting police.

Earlier in 2024 two youth scaled a glass wall in Hamilton and lept into a dock where their relative's killer was appearing, triggering a large brawl that spilled out into the public foyer.

The family of the victim became enraged when [Richard Coburn](#) was sentenced to five years and 10 months for the manslaughter of [Paige Tutemahurangi](#) and family members allegedly launched at court security guards.



Isaac Aydon was jailed for assaulting a Family Court lawyer in the Whangārei District Court. Photo / NZME

In 2022 a Whangārei court security officer was pushed down a stairwell by [Jacob Pukeroa](#), also enraged at the sentencing handed down for the death of his brother, [Cale Bucknell-Pukeroa](#). The officer suffered a fracture to his left lower leg, as well as a cracked bone in his ankle and required surgery and Pukeroa was sentenced to home detention for the assault.

It was the same courthouse where lawyer [Brintyn Smith was savagely assaulted](#) in 2023 by Isaac Aydon in the elevator, leaving him hospitalised and with such serious PTSD he was unable to return to Whangārei court to represent his clients.

The various security breaches triggered an investigation into court processes, highlighting a lack of CCTV across the country, specifically in elevators and closed spaces. Despite the elevator being remodelled in Whangārei this year, a camera was not installed.

Also in 2023 a police officer, a Corrections officer and a prisoner were injured during an explosive brawl in the High Court at Napier in September. Video footage of the melee showed one Corrections officer trying to hold back a mob of people at the partition between the public gallery and the rest of the courtroom.



Police entering Napier courthouse on the day of the brawl. Photo / Ric Stevens

483 assaults, 42 injuries

Data obtained under the Official Information Act (OIA) from the Ministry of Justice highlights the violence within courthouses over the past five years.

Between November 2019 and October 2024, there were 438 recorded assaults. Broken down by region they were 83 in the Northern region, 143 in the Central region, 112 in the Lower North and 100 in the Southern region.

The incidents led to 42 injuries, with the Lower North and Southern regions reporting the highest number (13 each), followed by Central (10) and Northern (6).

Of these injuries, 17 required medical treatment, most notably in the Southern region (eight cases), while the Northern, Central, and Lower North recorded two, four, and three cases, respectively.

Assaults and injuries in NZ courts

Nov 1, 2019 to Oct 31, 2024

Region	Assaults in courthouses	Injuries from these assaults	Numbers requiring medical attention
Northern	83	6	2
Central	143	10	4
Lower North Island	112	13	3
South Island	100	13	8
Total	438	42	17

 Herald Network graphic

Over the past five years 438 assaults have occurred within court houses across the country. Photo / MOJ OIA statistics

It's not just inside the courthouse workers are being exposed to risk though with court bailiffs arriving in unpredictable environments daily often alone and being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“Most of the time, it's a third party so someone who is not even involved in the enforcement and it's usually I've walked into something I shouldn't of like arriving at an address and finding a crack house and thinking I don't think this is right,” they said to NZME.

“No one's going to thank you for putting yourself in that position. It's the unpredictability you just don't know what you're going to get.”

When asked what they believed had caused the increase in aggression towards workers they immediately responded “Covid”.

‘We pay taxes and I can talk to you like sh’**

“After Covid, you’ve really got to watch your Ps and Qs, there’s a lot of paranoia, conspiracy theories around government workers. This entitlement to just lash out, ‘We pay taxes and I can talk to you like sh*t’ and that’s right across the board.

“In these roles, it is a bit different because we’re not police officers. A lot of the issues we get is that entitlement.”

The worker said they’re in a position where they can drive away however most court staff are confined to the building.

“At the court, they’re locked in, it’s like a prison warden, they’ve gotta deal with it. You can’t just walk away and leave it.”

The worker said the ministry had done a lot to make their work safer including installing pendants, and GPS monitoring and safety took priority over KPI targets which had previously created overzealous bailiffs.

The worker said if they know an address is going to be a security issue, police have to be booked in but there is sometimes a two-month wait for a police escort.

“That’s probably the biggest concern is the lack of police numbers if we need assistance.”

‘There has been an increase in security incidents’

Chief operating officer for the Ministry of Justice, Carl Crafar, said there had been increased problems at the courts.

“There has been an increase in security incidents and in particular disorderly behaviour across courts over the past two years,” Crafar said.

He said court security officers are required to requalify yearly and be upskilled based on emerging trends seen by New Zealand Police and recent legislative changes such as the Gangs Act 2024 where we can expect to see more gang members attending court.

Investment had also been made into recruiting more court security officers and work is consistently being evaluated to identify ways to improve processes.

“Risk management is a continuous process,” he said.

“The ministry works with our justice sector partners to inform better decision-making and assist security with keeping the courts and tribunals safe.”

Despite the concerning figures, the ministry could not provide any data on how many people have been prosecuted for courthouse assaults.



Police responded to a brawl inside the Wellington High Court early 2024. Photo / Ethan Griffiths

At a recent induction to court security for lawyers in Auckland, multiple issues were raised including the lack of CCTV in blind spots such as stairwells and elevators, frosted windows in interview rooms and the lack of visible security in courts dealing with clients with mental impairments.

In courtroom 11 in the Auckland District Court, a lawyer was punched and stomped on by a mentally impaired client where no security was present late last year.

Auckland criminal defence lawyer Samira Taghavi said since the issues were raised, a permanent guard has been placed in the mental health courtroom and discussions are being had about visibility in interview rooms.

“That is a very, very huge improvement but it’s necessary because we are dealing with people who are very unpredictable.”

Taghavi said the issue of mobile duress alarms was also raised with Auckland lawyers only being allocated two.

“Two is simply not enough if we have 10 on duty,” she said.



Samira Taghavi has been instrumental in voicing the concerns of security in court for lawyers. Photo / Dean Purcell

Contact details for heads of security were also raised and Taghavi said since the meeting, lawyers had been provided with direct lines to guards if tensions are escalating in court.

“I was in a courtroom a few weeks ago and I saw the defendant was getting rather agitated, it was a sentencing court and I texted [security] it might be a good idea to get someone here, and within two minutes they were there.

“They are some of the most hardworking people the security officers, it breaks my heart. They are sometimes there until 8’ clock at night.”

PSA acting national secretary Fleur Fitzsimons told NZME they share the same concerns around the safety of workers in the justice system and health and safety will be a key area for bargaining over the next year.

“The courts need more security officers to keep people safe and more needs to be invested in upgrading buildings and courtrooms to prevent the violent outbursts we have been seeing,” Fitzsimons said.

“As the Government embraces a tough-on-crime approach, the court will become a more dangerous place for workers and participants. The ministry has a unique position among government agencies in that its employees experience the entire gamut of health and safety issues, from psychosocial stressors of a busy office environment to physical violence experienced by security officers and bailiffs,” Fitzsimons said.