



**MINISTRY OF SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT**
TE MANATŪ WHAKAHIATO ORA

Dear

On 9 August 2021, you emailed the Ministry of Social Development (the Ministry) requesting, under the Official Information Act 1982 (the Act), the following information:

- *How many Work and Income New Zealand staff have reported being subject to physical abuse (assault) in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How many incidents have led to prosecutions year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How many Work and Income New Zealand staff have reported being subject to verbal abuse - in person - in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How many Work and Income New Zealand staff have reported being subject to verbal abuse - via telephone and/or email communication - in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015.*
- *How many incidents have led to prosecutions year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How much money has had to be devoted to counselling services for staff who have been physically or verbally abused year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How many incidents of damage to Work and Income New Zealand property have been reported in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015? Is a breakdown of damage - for example, broken windows, graffiti - available?*
- *How much money has had to be budgeted to the repair damage incurred above year-on-year since 2015?*

Every week, Ministry staff assist clients face-to-face and respond to client phone calls. The majority of these conversations occur without any issue, however, in the small number of occasions where people have displayed unacceptable behaviour towards staff, steps are always taken to ensure a safe environment for everyone.

The Public Service Act 2020 and the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 outline the Ministry's obligation to be a 'good employer.' This includes the Ministry's obligation to provide a safe working environment for its employees.

Abusive or threatening behaviour towards frontline staff is treated very seriously. If a security incident occurs, staff record the security incident in the Ministry's reporting database.

The Ministry has zero tolerance for people who demonstrate threatening and abusive behaviour towards both Ministry staff and clients. Over the past few years, this has been reemphasised to staff, and has resulted in more incidents being recorded. Additionally, some threats and incidents that previously may have been considered to represent a minor risk are now interpreted in context of the potential worst-case outcome, resulting in a rise in reported security incidents, and more definitive actions being taken.

For the sake of clarity, I will address your questions in order.

- *How many Work and Income New Zealand staff have reported being subject to physical abuse (assault) in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How many Work and Income New Zealand staff have reported being subject to verbal abuse - in person - in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015?*
- *How many Work and Income New Zealand staff have reported being subject to verbal abuse - via telephone and/or email communication - in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015.*

The Ministry defines assault according to the Crimes Act 1961, which defines assault as the act of intentionally applying or attempting to apply force to the person of another, directly or indirectly, or threatening by any act or gesture to apply such force to the person of another, if the person making the threat has, or causes the other to believe on reasonable grounds that he or she has, present ability to effect his or her purpose; and to assault has a corresponding meaning.

The Ministry records the number of assaults in Work and Income centres, which includes assaults on staff, clients, and non-clients. All assaults which occur in a Work and Income centre are recorded as 'assaults in Work and Income centres', and any specific information distinguishing whether the assault was on staff, clients, or non-clients is not centrally recorded. As such, this part of your request is refused under section 18(f) of the Act, as this information is held in notes on individual case files, each of which would need to be manually reviewed to answer your request.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

In the spirit of being helpful, I refer you to **Table One** overleaf, which shows the number of Physical Assaults and Verbal Assaults at Work and Income sites in the Canterbury region from 1 January 2015 to 16 August 2021, broken down by year.

Table One: The number of physical assaults and verbal assaults at Work and Income sites in the Canterbury region from 1 January 2015 to 16 August 2021, broken down by year.

	Physical Assaults (In Person)	Verbal Assaults (In Person)	Verbal Assaults (Phone)
2015	5	221	73
2016	2	155	59
2017	3	171	37
2018	4	115	51
2019	0	123	48
2020	3	31	49
2021	4	29	69

- *How many incidents have led to prosecutions year-on-year since 2015?*

You have asked how many incidents have led to prosecutions since 2015 for both physical and verbal assaults. The Ministry does not centrally record how many incidents have led to prosecutions since 2015 for both physical and verbal assaults, and if this information was held, it would be held on individual case files. In order to provide you with this information, Ministry staff would have to manually review hundreds of files. As such, I refuse your request under section 18(f) of the Act. The greater public interest is in the effective and efficient administration of the public service.

I have considered whether the Ministry would be able to respond to your request given extra time, or the ability to charge for the information requested. I have concluded that, in either case, the Ministry's ability to undertake its work would still be prejudiced.

- *How many incidents of damage to Work and Income New Zealand property have been reported in Christchurch year-on-year since 2015? Is a breakdown of damage - for example, broken windows, graffiti - available?*

The Ministry has interpreted your request as being in regard to incidents of wilful or intentional damage due to the link to the recent Sydenham incident. Please see **Table Two** overleaf for the number of recorded instances where wilful property damage has occurred for the Work and Income in the Canterbury region. The Ministry has only been recording instances of wilful property damage since 2019, however, this has not included instances where the damage was unintentional. Therefore, the Ministry is unable to provide you with the number of such incidents prior to 2019, and this part of your request is refused under section 18(e). In addition, and for the same reason, the Ministry is unable to provide a breakdown of damage as that information does not exist.

Table Two: the number of recorded instances where wilful property damage has occurred for the Work and Income in the Canterbury region.

Year	Instances of property damage
2019	6
2020	3
2021 (year to date)	3
Total	12

- *How much money has had to be budgeted to the repair damage incurred above year-on-year since 2015?*

The Ministry budgets for all repairs and maintenance and does not differentiate or categorise these as being for intentional or unintentional damage repair. Therefore, this part of your request is refused under section 18(g) of the Act as the information you have requested is not held by the Ministry and I have no grounds to believe that the information is held by another department or Minister of the Crown or organisation.

- *How much money has had to be devoted to counselling services for staff who have been physically or verbally abused year-on-year since 2015?*

The Ministry contracts Benestar to provide confidential, nationwide counselling and coaching to Ministry staff whose work is being adversely affected by a personal or work-related problem. Employment Assistance Programme (EAP) is available to all Ministry staff, and their spouse, partner and dependent children can also access these services if family issues are involved. Staff can initially access up to 6 sessions, and their counsellor can request further sessions if required.

The Ministry budgets for counselling services, however, the Ministry does not differentiate whether the counselling services is necessary due to physical or verbal abuse. Therefore, I am refusing this part of your request under section 18(g) of the Act as the information you have requested is not held by the Ministry and I have no grounds to believe that the information is held by another department or Minister of the Crown or organisation.

The principles and purposes of the Official Information Act 1982 under which you made your request are:

- to create greater openness and transparency about the plans, work and activities of the Government
- to increase the ability of the public to participate in the making and administration of our laws and policies
- to lead to greater accountability in the conduct of public affairs.

This Ministry fully supports those principles and purposes. The Ministry therefore intends to make the information contained in this letter and any attached documents available to the wider public. The Ministry will do this by publishing this on the Ministry

of Social Development's website. Your personal details will be deleted and the Ministry will not publish any information that would identify you as the person who requested the information.

If you wish to discuss this response with us, please feel free to contact OIA_Requests@msd.govt.nz.

If you are not satisfied with this response regarding Christchurch Work and Income sites, you have the right to seek an investigation and review by the Ombudsman. Information about how to make a complaint is available at www.ombudsman.parliament.nz or 0800 802 602.

Yours sincerely



Melissa Gill

**Deputy Chief Executive
Organisational Assurance and Communication**