

Ministers must start recording figures on acid attacks

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The Scottish Government should start collating figures on the growing problem of acid attacks, an MSP has said.

A number of recent incidents have taken place across the UK amid calls for tougher sentences on perpetrators.

It has now emerged, following a parliamentary question, that ministers here don't collect statistics on acid attacks, meaning there's no way of telling how often they occur.

In his answer to Scottish Conservative MSP Rachael Hamilton, justice secretary Michael Matheson said: "Information on the number of acid attacks over the last five years is not held centrally. The statistics for assault held do not differentiate when corrosive substances have or have not been used."

He added that ministers are working closely with counterparts in the UK Government on an action plan, which includes looking at online sales of acid materials which could be used in an attack.

Last month, a man was found guilty of an acid attack on a journalist in Glasgow, and a schoolgirl in East Lothian was jailed this week for a similar assault.

The MSP for Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire said while it was understandable the Scottish Government didn't yet have statistics, it had to start collecting them in light of recent incidents.

Scottish Conservative MSP Rachael Hamilton said:

"Acid attacks appear to be a fairly new phenomenon, and authorities are still getting to grips with how best to deal with them.

"But there's no question they are becoming more of a problem, with a series of high profile incidents across the UK.

"That's why it's essential the Scottish Government starts collating these figures so we can assess the scale of the issue.

"Ministers are able to publish statistics on other crimes, and it's now time for acid attacks to be included too.

"These are devastating attacks which change the lives of victims for ever and support mechanisms must be put in place for those affected.

"We need to do our very best to stamp these out, and assessing the scale of the problem in Scotland would be a good place to start.

"Scotland is a safe place to live, work and visit and we want it to remain that way.

"We need to engage with retailers to ensure that harmful substances are sold responsibly."

Below is the parliamentary question from Rachael Hamilton, and the answer from Michael Matheson:

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Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party): To ask the Scottish Government how many acid attacks there have been in each of the last five years, and what action it is taking to reduce the number of and prevent such attacks.

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Michael Matheson:

Information on the number of acid attacks over the last five years is not held centrally. Where someone uses acid or other corrosive substances to attack another person, a range of general criminal offences can be used to prosecute including the common law of assault. The statistics for assault held do not differentiate when corrosive substances have or have not been used.

The Scottish Government is committed to doing whatever it can within our powers to ensure our communities are safe from harm. This includes any steps that can be taken in relation to the availability of corrosive substances that can have such real and lasting harm if used against another person or property.

The UK Government has announced plans to prepare an action plan to tackle the use of acid or other corrosive substances in violent attacks. This follows a spate of such incidents in London. The action plan focuses on:

- effective law enforcement;
- ensuring legislation covering the use of acid and other corrosives in attacks is understood and consistently applied;
- working with retailers to restrict access to acids and other very harmful products; and

- ensuring effective support for victims through both the Criminal Justice System and health services.

Along with considering the operation of the criminal law of Scotland in this area, I can advise that the Scottish Government will be working closely with the UK Government on such issues as the online sales of corrosive substances as it is apparent that effective steps in that specific area will need to be taken on a consistent basis across the whole of the UK if possible.