

Why storefront car crashes happen at c-stores so often — and how retailers can prevent them

7-Eleven's recent \$91 million settlement for an accident in its forecourt highlights an alarmingly common — and potentially hazardous — issue.

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Brett Dworski / Reporter



*In c-stores, storefront crashes happen as often as 20 times every day, according to the Storefront Safety Council.
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In November 2010, a driver suffered a stroke and drove his SUV at over 70 miles per hour into a Cumberland Farms convenience store in Chicopee, Massachusetts, killing a customer.

Cumberland Farms was eventually forced to pay the victim's family over \$20 million in a wrongful death suit, with jurors deciding the retailer was negligent and should have previously installed barriers to prevent vehicles from colliding into its building.

Until recently, that \$20 million was the most Rob Reiter had ever seen a c-store retailer pay in a storefront crash lawsuit. That changed about a week ago, when 7-Eleven agreed to pay a \$91 million settlement to a customer who lost both of his legs after being struck by a vehicle outside one of its stores in 2017.

As it turns out, accidents like these are alarmingly common across the country. Throughout all U.S. commercial businesses, storefront crashes happen about 100 times a day, Reiter, co-founder of the Storefront Safety Council, said in an interview.

In c-stores alone, these crashes happen as often as 20 times every day, according to the Storefront Safety Council.

“Across the 30,000 accidents I have in my database, about 45% of them have at least one injury, and at least 8% have at least one fatality,” Reiter said.

While liability for these accidents varies state by state, in many cases, the store or property owners are held responsible — as Cumberland Farms and 7-Eleven were — if they don't have the proper barriers to prevent a vehicle from accelerating onto its sidewalk or into its store.

As seen with 7-Eleven and Cumberland Farms, if customers are injured or killed due to that lack of barriers, it can cost the retailer millions.

“The [crashes] that have injuries get expensive really quick,” Reiter said. “And then there's the ones that have fatalities, and those get expensive even quicker.”

Tight forecourts, rushed drivers

One reason c-stores are susceptible to storefront crashes is because of the traditional forecourt layout, Reiter said. Most stores have a limited number of parking spaces around the building,

and cars park with their noses towards the stores, which can be dangerous without barriers in place, Reiter said.

“Approaching vehicles are aimed at your front door,” he said.

Additionally, drivers visiting c-stores are often in a hurry and on their phones, making them more likely to get in an accident, Reiter said. Combine that with c-stores having high in-and-out rates and people moving quickly, and it’s not uncommon to see drivers hit the gas instead of the brake — or put the car in drive instead of reverse — and accelerate right into the store.

“You have people who are headed to work or headed to an appointment or coming home from work, and they’re stopping really quickly, and they’re distracted,” Reiter said.

7-Eleven experiences storefront crashes more than most c-store operators, seeing an average of 1.3 a day in the U.S., according to the Storefront Safety Council. It doesn’t have any particular factors making it more dangerous than its peers, but since 7-Eleven operates so many stores, “it’s a numbers game” with them, Reiter said.

“The majority of [7-Elevens] have vehicles approaching the building under acceleration to park,” he said. “[It’s a] recipe for a problem.”

Bollards, bollards and more bollards

While c-store retailers may try to paint warning signs to prevent cars from pulling too far into parking spaces, at the end of the day, the only step that can prevent storefront crashes is installing physical barriers separating those spots from the store, Reiter said.

“You can paint a curb yellow or red, but paint is not a vehicle barrier,” he said.



A Wawa with bollards separating parking spaces from the store.

Retrieved from [Wawa press release](#).

Reiter suggests installing bollards — protective posts usually made of metal or concrete — because they’re “pedestrian permeable, effective and cheap,” he said.

C-store operators can install bollards at a rate of \$1,000 per parking space, building about 10 to 15 bollards for a store that has anywhere from eight to 10 parking spaces, he said. This is far easier and more affordable than redesigning the traditional nose-in parking setup.

“That’s what you’re zoned for, that’s where your traffic flow is, and it’s usually a pain in the neck to change,” he said. “So if you can’t redesign it, put the stupid things in.”

Convenience retailers are well aware of the need for bollards. Reiter noted that most new c-store designs include bollards, and it’d be unusual for a retailer to not have bollards for bigger locations or for stores that have outdoor seating.

“No architect is going to let you build a new store unless you put the bollards in,” he said.

The issue isn't new stores. It's the locations that have been around for years, even decades, that aren't being retrofitted with bollards, Reiter said.

For example, although 7-Eleven is installing bollards on three sides of its newest stores, the retailer isn't updating its older locations — placing customers at those locations at risk, he noted.

“Let's pretend [7-Eleven] is going to open 500 stores,” he said. “They'll have bollards at 500 stores, but how many of the 7,000 stores that need to be protected are they going to go back and do?”

Moving forward, Reiter foresees c-store retailers increasing protection against storefront crashes, eventually having bollards become a “universal” standard for all locations. He said he expects this to accelerate as more crashes happen and as more companies see their counterparts being held accountable, which will spark improvements to happen over time.

“You maintain these things, you improve these things,” he said. “You built a store 30 years ago, it didn't have Wi-Fi. I'll bet you have Wi-Fi now.”

Correction: An earlier version of this story misstated the amount that Cumberland Farms paid in its lawsuit from 2010. That correct number is \$20 million.