



## Storefront Crashes: Why They Occur and How to Prevent Them March 24, 2015 [David Hochman](#) : [0 Comments](#)



By David Hochman, founder of DJH Marketing Communications Inc.

A child or even a dog left in a car with the engine running while parked at a suburban strip mall accidentally engages the transmission and sends an SUV headfirst into a convenience storefront window. After filling up, an elderly woman hits the pedal instead of the brake and backs into a cashier hut. A drunk driver loses control and crashes directly into a front window at full speed. Unfortunately, it happens much more often than one would think.

A Google Search for the term “car smashes into storefront” returned about 101,000 results, most of them news articles. A Google News search, which is a Google feature that simply searches headlines from credible news sources worldwide, returned thousands of articles based on the search term “car crashes into building,” with an average of about 4-5 separate incidents cited each week, going back decades. According to the Storefront Safety Council, this is nothing short of an epidemic, with over 4,000 injuries annually and as many as 500 deaths caused by vehicle-into-building crashes.



I recently spoke with Rob Reiter, a co-founder of the Storefront Safety Council. Reiter gained a high level of expertise on the topic of vehicle incursion accidents through his career in the security barrier industry. He became highly motivated to effect a change in the way retailers view the issue after the 2003 Santa Monica Farmer’s Market tragedy in California in which an 86-year-old driver collided with dozens of pedestrians, killing 10 and injuring six.

**David Hochman (DH):** When it comes to vehicle-into-building collisions, what organizational job title, role or function(s) is or should be responsible for mitigating the risk in a c-store environment?

**Rob Reiter:** Risk Managers should be looking at the overall problem of vehicle-into-building crashes. For new construction projects, architects and Construction Managers also should be trained to look for vulnerabilities and hazards.

**DH:** When an accident occurs, how much liability is usually shouldered by the driver?

**RR:** Sometimes drivers are fully insured and have high limits—their insurance covers the whole costs. But there is something like 30-million uninsured motorists in the U.S., about 12% of all drivers. And many more have minimal insurance that is insufficient to cover repairs to the store and the merchandise in it, not to mention the cost of any injury claims from customers or employees injured in a crash. So counting on the driver to always cover 100% of costs is not a very good strategy. Additionally, in injury cases, plaintiff attorneys look to see if stores have a record of prior accidents and whether chains have experienced multiple crashes of a similar nature. Being able to prove that storeowners are aware of a hazard and have failed to take steps to correct it can make them a target for liability lawsuits.

**DH: What are some of the causes of “pedal misapplication”?**

**RR:** *As many as 54% of all storefront crashes are a result of pedal error or other operator error. Pedal error in the context of storefront crashes is usually one of two things:*

*Most common is a driver pulling into the parking spaces in front and hitting the gas pedal instead of the brake. When this occurs, drivers pulling in fail to stop and, in fact, go over the sidewalk and into the front of the store.*

*Second most common is a driver leaving the store, getting in his car to leave, and putting the transmission into “drive” instead of “reverse.” Thinking he will move backwards, he usually looks back and hits the accelerator, driving the car forward—hitting the curb or the wheelstop. The driver’s foot is then pushed HARDER into the accelerator and the car accelerates into the building.*

*The results of either of these driver errors is the same—pedestrians hit on the sidewalk, damage to storefronts, and possible injuries to customers and employees inside the store.*

**DH: Why has this risk seemingly been overlooked by the c-store industry?**



**RR:** *I think that this has been not so much overlooked as it has been disregarded. The published statistics from the storefront Safety Council and the Texas Traffic Institute at Texas A&M University indicate that as many as 20 gas and convenience stores are struck every day in the United States. Statistics provided by storeowners and various third parties show that operators of multiple locations deal with this problem on a regular basis. The absence of a clear building or safety code has allowed individual operators to make poor decisions. On the other hand, there are good corporate citizens such as Wawa in Pennsylvania, which routinely protects customers and employees from this hazard.*

*I sometimes refer to this question as “the elephant in the parking lot.” Talking about it calls attention to it, attention requires action, and failure to act—or being seen as failing to act—can be a very expensive problem to solve.*

*It is being addressed in a vigorous fashion by lawyers one lawsuit at a time. There are dozens of lawsuits filed every month for injury claims stemming from storefront crashes at convenience stores. Statistics indicate that 20% of storefront crashes result in an injury to a person or persons other than the driver. That means at least one per day—what is the price for all of those injuries over the course of a year?*

**DH: What are some simple solutions or fixes that the individual location owner or manager can take?**

**RR:** *The simplest solution is to minimize nose-in parking spaces at storefronts. A very large percentage of all accidents occur right at the front door. Where the parking lot layout or the operational requirements of the owners require that there be nose-in parking at the front door, a simple, effective, and less expensive solution is to install tested safety barriers or bollards at the end of parking spaces against the curb or sidewalk to prevent vehicle intrusions. There is a new test standard from ASTM International (F3016) that governs testing of bollards and barriers in this type of application, and architects and planners will be looking at incorporating this into codes, ordinances and building projects in the near future.*

**DH: What are some simple solutions or fixes that can or should be undertaken on a chain-wide or even industry-wide basis?**

**RR:** *Keep track of what is happening and what it is really costing. Protect your customers and employees. A pattern of injuries as a result of a common hazard that is not addressed can be very expensive from a workmen's compensation standpoint, not to mention from a legal standpoint.*

*Also— it is time for the industry to get passed the “Customers won't come into my store if it looks like a fortress” mentality. Wawa has safety barriers and bollards and they are profitable. Walmart is the largest retailer in the world and makes billions in profits every month. Spend some time planning, consult with experts, and don't try to take the fastest cheapest solution—there are very creative and effective ways to protect your stores and your people without breaking the bank.*

**DH:** **According to the data you've collected, what states or regions have the highest concentrations of these incidents, and can any inferences or conclusions be drawn from that?**

**RR:** *Florida and Pennsylvania have high rates of convenience store crashes, as does California and Texas. But no states or regions are immune.*

**DH:** **Would it be more impactful and/or cost-effective to try to change drivers' behavior through awareness-raising campaigns or is it something that industry/gov't needs to address with regulatory action?**



**RR:** *As I mentioned, the causes of these accidents are well known, and demographics indicate they are going to be increasing. The aging of the American driving population is going to result in more pedal error accidents, the increased use of in-car entertainment and smartphones is going to increase distracted driving accidents, and medical events caused by diabetes or other medical conditions are also increasing as the population ages. Add the rate of DUI and “driving while high” in legal marijuana states, and it is clear that the rate of storefront crashes and convenience store is not going to be coming down for a long, long time.*

*The Storefront Safety Council is comprised of volunteers from a variety of backgrounds who are passionate about ending vehicle-into-building crashes. Founding members include experts in perimeter security, parking, personal injury law, risk management, architecture and related professions and industries. For more information, please visit [www.storefrontsafety.org](http://www.storefrontsafety.org) and email [Rob Reiter](mailto:Rob.Reiter@storefrontsafety.org).*

*THIS INTERVIEW CAN BE FOUND ON LINE AT: <http://www.cstoredecisions.com/2015/03/24/storefront-crashes-why-they-occur-and-how-to-prevent-them/>*