



# The Hidden Epidemic of Storefront Crashes

SARAH GOODYEAR AUG 01, 2013 21 COMMENTS



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Mark Wright was leaving a 7-Eleven store that he had visited "hundreds of times," by his own estimation. But this time was different. On this August day in 2008, when Wright stopped in to buy a Diet Coke and some Hostess Sno Balls, a driver parking her car in front of the store went over the curb and hit Wright, then plowed on through the doors of the store.

"The lady that hit me was a nice lady," he says, with remarkable equanimity. "She didn't mean to do it." Somehow, he says, she just got confused and made a terrible mistake.

And because of the way the parking spot was pointing directly at the storefront, her error left Wright badly injured. "My left knee will never be the same again," he says.

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That day changed the way Wright saw the world. With Rob Reiter, who has worked extensively in the security barrier industry, Wright co-founded the [Storefront Safety Council](#). The two now devote much of their time to tracking storefront crashes and advocating for changes in the way pedestrian areas near stores are designed and protected. (Thanks to Jonathan Maus at [Bike Portland](#) for tweeting about the organization.)

Hard numbers on storefront crashes are hard to come by, but Reiter recently [published a paper](#) with the Texas Traffic Institute at Texas A&M University that hints at the extent of the problem. Reiter and his co-authors looked at data showing that between 1991 and 1995, there were 1,500 crashes into the 7,000 7-Eleven stores that then existed nationwide. Using those numbers and other data from similar convenience stores, they estimate that gas and convenience stores around the nation could be experiencing as many as 20 storefront crashes daily, maybe more. An analysis of media reports on a single month of crashes nationwide indicated that "pedal error" – or driver confusion – was the most-cited cause of the crashes, accounting for 41 percent of the cases.

Despite the apparent frequency of these kinds of crashes, most Americans don't really think about them, says Wright. When he tells people how common storefront crashes actually are, "Their reaction is surprise," he says. "People are as unaware of this as I was before my own encounter."

Wright keeps his own running tally of cars crashing into storefronts by tracking incidents that are reported in local media outlets. The flow of reports is constant. In one year, he clocked 584.

On July 30, for instance, he found a story about [a driver smashing into a nail salon in Los Angeles](#), injuring seven. He also logged an account about an SUV that smashed into a Cadillac parked outside a day-care center, [propelling it into the storefront](#) and injuring three children and an adult. Two children were pinned under the car inside.

You might think that large retail chains would be interested in taking a comprehensive approach to protecting their stores – not to mention their customers – from vehicle incursions. But Wright says that he and Reiter have not gotten any meaningful response from [the major chains they've reached out to on the issue](#). Wright says he thinks fears about liability are probably responsible for that.

Wright says that his group wants to see a full range of solutions to what remains an under-appreciated problem. Bollards or other types of crash-tested barriers are one thing they'd like to see. Driver education is another. Wright notes that senior drivers, who might be more prone to confusion, are "conspicuously well represented" in storefront crashes, as are teen drivers, who lack experience and might be more likely to engage in distracting activities such as texting.

And he admits that he himself has a couple of times shifted into reverse instead of drive, or vice versa. "As a driver, it's alarmingly easy to do," he says. "And I'm a middle-aged guy who knows all about this."

What Wright would really like to see is a comprehensive rethinking of the way we design the interface between parking and retail. Angling parking in such a way that an out-of-control driver doesn't head straight into a store is just one idea. Channeling pedestrians away from parking is another.

But making the issue visible is the first step. Right now, so much of the country is constructed this way that the status quo seems inevitable.

"Right now, we are so used to the built environment acting the way it does and vehicles acting the way they do that we aren't even aware of the problem," he says. "We can't continue to be naïve about the built environment and how it channels cars into exactly the places where they shouldn't be."

Top image: [anutkak43/Flickr.com](#)

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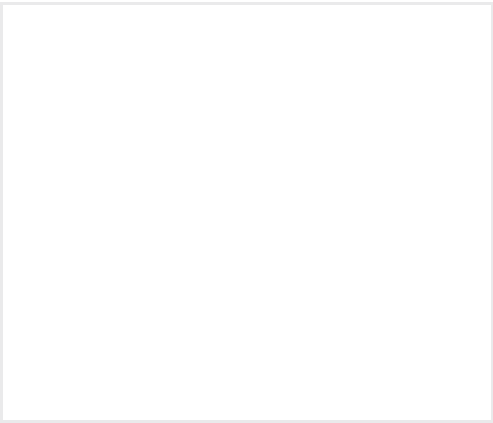


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