

Everything in Moderation



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BY [Sherman Smith](#)

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Is grandpa more dangerous than a terrorist? A statistical look at vehicles into buildings



Rob Reiter is a cofounder of the Storefront Safety Council, which aims to "end vehicle into building crashes."

It's a good thing Topeka doesn't have a [7-Eleven](#).

About 1.3 times per day, a vehicle crashes into one of the convenience store locations, according to statistics kept by [the Storefront Safety Council](#).

Rob Reiter, a council cofounder, reached out to me recently after noticing [our slideshow of vehicles into buildings](#).

We started the slideshow in 2012 (backfilling it with several months of accidents) partially for our own amusement and mostly to keep track of how often it was happening. At the time, the rate seemed to have rapidly increased, becoming a popular topic in comments by CJOnline readers. Although our reporters don't get out to every accident, we probably cover about 90 percent of them.

We always knew Topeka wasn't unique to these accidents. It turns out, we also aren't the only news media keeping track of them. Reiter pointed out similar projects in [Buffalo, N.Y.](#), [Dayton, Ohio](#), and [Fresno, Calif.](#)

According to council statistics, which Reiter said he gathers from fire departments and litigation records, vehicles crash into commercial buildings 60 times per day and residential buildings 120 times per day. Combined with accidents involving other structures, such as bus stops, there are 60,000 accidents like this every year in the United States.

“People aren’t shocked that it happens,” Reiter said, “because they quote-unquote know about it. But, you know, 60 times a day nationally is just a really big number.”

About 20 of those involve convenience stores. Of those, 20 percent involve alcohol. Legal records, Reiter said, revealed 7-Eleven reported 1,500 crashes in a five-year span.

Talk about a [Big Gulp](#).

Convenience stores are a high-risk group because they are open 24 hours and people are constantly coming and going. But they aren’t the only frequent targets.

“You would be really scared about Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts if you knew those two combine to have more than one per day as well,” Reiter said. “So be careful where you sit and have your coffee, and be careful where you sit and eat your burger, because if the cars are parking 6 feet away from you, statistically, someone’s going to hit the gas instead of the brake, or is going to come in drunk, or is going to drop their cellphone while the kid’s crying and just — boom.”

Reiter pointed to outdated infrastructure as part of the problem, where storefronts are too close to the curb. Nose-in parking is a bigger problem, especially considering the two biggest factors in commercial building crashes are pedal error and mistakenly thinking the car is in reverse.

“A lot of that is older drivers,” Reiter said. “Older drivers are five times more likely to do the pedal error thing.”

I should note that Reiter’s solemn dedication to the subject stems from a fatal crash involving an older driver. Reiter’s focus was on anti-terrorist protection for embassies and air force bases in 2003 when George Weller, 86, plowed his Buick LeSabre through pedestrians at an open-air farmer’s market in Santa Monica, Calif. The crash killed 10 people and injured 63.

[The city wound up paying \\$21 million to settle civil lawsuits as a result of the crash.](#)

“I realized,” Reiter said, “there were far more people getting hurt by grandpas in Buicks than were getting hurt by Osama in [dump trucks](#).”

He shifted his concern to what he calls “a major public safety issue.” In 2012, he formed the Storefront Safety Council with a friend he met through his research. The friend had been a victim of a crash at — where else? — a 7-Eleven, where he was hit while buying a diet Coke, snowballs and a lottery ticket. Reiter said such accidents cause 4,000 serious injuries and 500 deaths each year.

Council statistics show [45 percent of commercial accidents involve drivers over the age of 60](#). The largest block is people ages 20-29, who are responsible for 18 percent of the accidents.

But when Reiter says “this is a problem that’s not going to get better,” he points to aging [Baby Boomers](#) and notes that [10,000 people per day turn 65](#).

“That’s a scary number in terms of drivers, but what’s really interesting is 8,000 people a day are turning 75,” Reiter said. “And they’re mostly still driving. There have never been as many drivers over 70 as there are now. And there’s never been as many drivers on medication as there are now. And that, I think, is the main reason we are seeing so many of these accidents.”

Reiter said the council’s goal is to raise awareness about vehicles crashing into buildings as a “major public safety issue.” He also lobbies for city and state ordinances. In California, for instance, he is pushing for lawmakers to change the building code to include a safety barrier for nose-in parking and encourage insurance discounts for those who have the barriers.

“At the end of the day, this is all about nose-in parking,” Reiter said. “This is all about fast food and convenience stores and restaurants. The really scary ones are when people get killed because they are literally just sitting there having dinner, and suddenly there’s a car inside.”

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