

*PROTECTING STORE EMPLOYEES*  
*FROM*  
**VIOLENT SHOPLIFTERS**





## Abstract

Research into retail violence, specifically associated with shoplifting, has sent ripples throughout the retail loss prevention / asset protection landscape, beyond the traditional methods of external theft prevention. This paper identifies five benchmarking and research exemplars to illustrate how the findings from shoplifting and violence research will influence retail programs, practices, and policies. The shoplifting studies revealed considerable alignment across the industry, yet a very provocative paradox emerged. Retailers unanimously agree that employee safety is a priority while shoplifting violence continues to soar. These findings are at considerable odds with one another. Retail executives have choices to make regarding how their priorities, and values as an organization, translate into outcomes that align with their messaging. We will explore potential solutions that allow for shoplifting mitigation and employee safety to coexist.

The first exemplar documents how shoplifting violence over the last five years has continued to increase. Additionally, how Organized Retail Crime (ORC) suspects are exhibiting higher levels of aggression during the commission of their crimes. The second

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describes how the transition of crimes from exterior locations, such as parking lots, to interior retail locations has resulted in more aggressive consumers, which has been increasing over the last two years, leading to record death rates. The third exemplar, which illustrates how some of the biggest retailers in the US, representing 40% of all retail (based on sales), are experiencing shoplifting violence associated with their respective shoplifting policies. The fourth exemplar documents and personalizes shoplifting violence via headlines in the news media. The final exemplar describes retail commitments to safety, why and how it is applied. In conclusion, these exemplars of retail research offer a compelling argument for open and honest discussion around the current shoplifting practices and policies that better support retail's commitment to workplace safety and well-being.

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# Introduction

The year 2020 was perhaps the most disruptive start to a decade in the history of retail. The disruption, a global pandemic affecting every corner of the globe, highlighted the prioritization and acceleration of employee well-being. Nothing was more important than the safety of the 15 million employees across the US retail industry - a mantra all retail leaders could agree on. Retailers joined together, shared best practices, and collaborated for the greater good of the industry. The reason - Covid-19 was everywhere. It was a well-documented threat to the retail brick & mortar existence. Something had to be done. A return-to-work strategy was necessary for commerce to re-start and ultimately survive. Employees needed not only to be safe, but to also feel safe.

This was not always the case, however. There was a time when productivity overshadowed safety, and obligation to the firm trumped everything else. It was our tarnished history that laid the groundwork for today's Department of Labor regulations and the evolution of Safety First!

In the 1920s, President Herbert Hoover had a vision for protecting Colorado River farming communities and supplying enough energy to power a growing populous across the Southwest. His plan would require continuous construction and over 21,000 workers. This five-year construction project would famously be known as the Hoover Dam. A job so big, it was all but impossible.

Imagine, for a moment, being tasked with preparing a steep cliffside for the pouring of more than 3 million cubic yards of concrete, as a high scaler, during the construction of this modern wonder. Dangling from a rope 800 feet above the ground, armed with explosives and jackhammers. No safety harnesses or protective gear to protect your fall. One wrong move by you or a colleague meant certain injury or worse, death. As you check your surroundings and fellow high scalers, you are forced to do the math. Statistically, some will never make it back home. In fact, 96 never did. Sadly, each of them, committed to the cause, fell victim to the theorem of probability during that five-year span. The high scaler would be known as one of deadliest jobs in United States history.

Those were typical working conditions 100 years ago, before workplace safety regulation was recognized by employers. Today, that may seem a little barbaric. But is it?

The high scaler job still exists today, in a different form. These high scalers are not charged with building dams anymore. They have traded their coveralls for nametags and instead of jackhammers, they operate cash registers. These modern-day high scalers serve our retail community as store employees. Of course, retail store employees are not falling from the high, rocky cliffs of the Colorado River valley, but they are falling victim to shoplifting violence at an alarming rate.

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## Shoplifting Violence Statistics

The Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program provided by the FBI and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) are great resources to see aggregated crime trends across geographies, demographics, and severity levels over specified time frames. However, the data lacks the necessary detail to measure violent crimes involving shoplifting incidents. For this, we must turn to our trusted industry partners. Industry leading

associations, such as the National Retail Federation (NRF), Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA), and industry researchers have worked tirelessly to survey and collect data to help retailers make informed decisions. These indicators irrefutably demonstrate that the frequency and severity of violent shoplifting confrontations have been increasing significantly across all of retail, for several years.

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## NRF ORC Benchmarking Survey

Retail theft in the United States, as reported by the retail community, continues to increase year over year. Moreover, since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, retailers are reporting shoplifting crimes at a staggering rate. A study by Business.org reveals that 40% of small-business owners say shoplifting has increased since the beginning of the pandemic. The National Retail Federation's (NRF) 2020 Organized Retail Crime (ORC) Benchmarking Survey found 75% of loss prevention executives, at a cross-section of large and mid-sized retail companies, said ORC activity had increased in the past year, up from 68% from the previous year. "Retailers are seeing more cases and higher losses as organized crime continues to target [retail] stores," NRF VP for Research Development and Industry Analysis Mark Mathews said (Shearman, 2020).

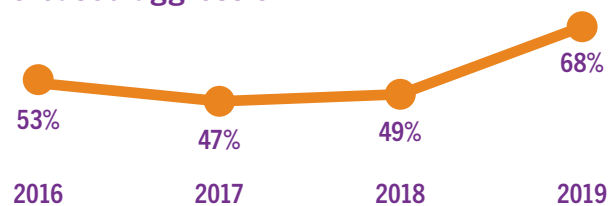
A growing number of retailers say that the criminals are becoming bolder and that, on average, more than one in ten ORC apprehensions (13%) result in some level of violence, including physical assault and/or battery. This survey marked the first time that NRF has asked loss prevention executives about the number of apprehensions that lead to violence, so there is no comparable data. (The National Retail Federation)

In addition to the financial impact felt from ORC, retailers continue to see rising violence and aggression from ORC gangs.

The number of respondents who report that ORC gangs are exhibiting more aggression continues to rise. This year, **over two-thirds** said this, compared with half in 2018.

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### Percent who feel ORC gangs have shown increased aggression



**68%** feel ORC gangs are exerting more aggression and violence than they did last year

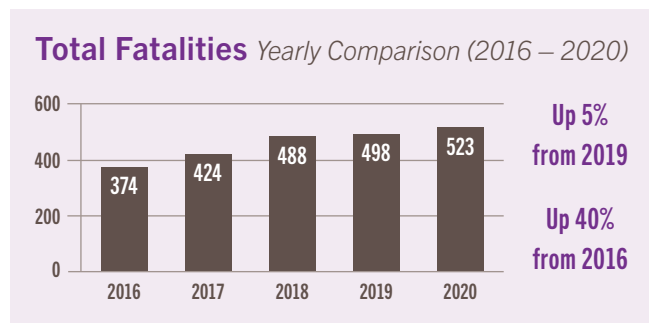
Source: NRF 2019 ORC Report



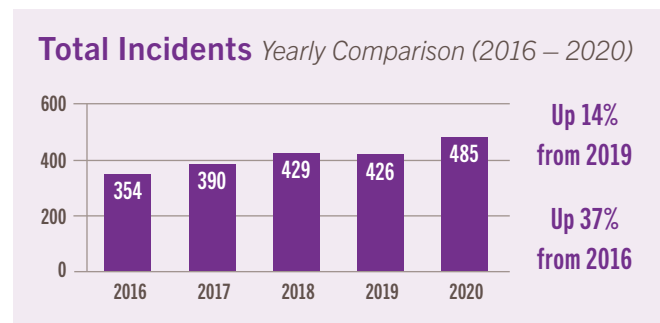
# D&D Retail and Fatalities Report

Statistics, facts, and figures have their place in the scientific method and research studies, but oftentimes the message is not fully received until it becomes real. The D&D Daily gathers retail-store specific information from public news media sources throughout the United States and publishes a comprehensive retail violence report, based on publicly reported incidents. According to the D&D Retail Violence and Fatalities report, there has been a Five-Year 40% Spike in Retail

Fatalities. This further reflects the nation's increasing murder rate and gun violence trend. One alarming trend was the gradual movement of fatalities occurring in the parking lots and off-premises to more recently occurring inside stores. This has resulted in more aggressive consumers, which has been increasingly reported over the last two years, leading to an all-time-high 70% of violent retail fatalities occurring during the commission of theft incidents.



Source: D&D Daily 2020 Retail Violence Report



## News Media Headlines

A Google news search for “shoplifting violence” returned 64,900 results. When it comes to employee safety, that is 64,900 too many. One of the more recent headlines involves a fatal encounter with a shoplifter, over a baseball cap. Sadly, headlines like these have become commonplace. Every day, front-line employees and loss prevention staff are tasked with identifying and apprehending shoplifting suspects, trading their safety and well-being for the merchandise they were hired to protect. We have all heard the story. It plays out the same way every time. The retailer might be different, the merchandise might be different, and the degree of the violence might even be different. However, the post-incident response is always the same to our teams: “No amount of merchandise is worth compromising your safety.” Yet, we continue sending our greatest and most valuable assets to the front lines as if nothing has happened.



- Cops arrest shoplifter who fatally stabbed Yonkers store clerk
- Shots fired in Indiana Walmart during arrest of suspected shoplifter
- Grenade-wielding alleged shoplifter arrested in North Bay
- Shoplifter killed in shootout after wounding Home Depot guard, CPD officer in Brighton Park
- Store worker hit by fleeing shoplifter, suspect charged with attempted murder
- Boise shoplifter with knife on the run after injuring store employee
- Gas station clerk stabbed, seriously hurt trying to stop shoplifter

# Benchmarking the Loss Prevention Industry: Policies & Practices

Industry experts Adrian Beck, Walter Palmer, and Colin Peacock authored a research study titled, Policies and Practices on Managing Shoplifting in Retailing: Benchmarking the Loss Prevention Industry (2017). The study surveyed 58 retailers to benchmark how some of the biggest retailers in the US are experiencing shoplifting violence associated with their respective shoplifting policies. The survey sample represented 40% of US retail market, totaling 92,489 stores with over \$1.3 trillion in sales.

## High-level Findings

According to the findings, the respondent retailers recorded 3.9 million shoplifting incidents in the last 24-months. Over the same timeframe, retailers also experienced 45,960 instances of shoplifting violence.

- On average, each retail store will record 28 incidents of shoplifting although for small and medium retailers, it was 11 or fewer and for large retailers it was 44.
- Half of respondents record the number of incidents that involve violence.
- 2.3% of shoplifting incidents involve violence
- One-third allow the use of force in self-defense (35%), just 15% allow the use of reasonable force in making the apprehension, and 1 in 5 allow the use of handcuffs by LP staff (20%)

For those retailers that track the number of shoplifting incidents they have experienced, this equates to an average of 28 shoplifting incidents per store. Rates varied considerably by size of retailer (as measured by sales), with larger companies experiencing higher rates of shoplifting incidents and instances of violence per store. Rates of shoplifting violence varied between

1 and 11 incidents per 100 stores. However, there is a strong correlation between the number of shoplifting incidents and the number of times that violence occurs. As staff witness and possibly try to detain more people, they are more likely to be involved in a violent altercation simply because they are exposed to more opportunities when a would-be thief could turn violent (Beck, Palmer, Peacock, 2017, p.6).

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Table 5: Ratio of Violence to Incidents by Size of Retailer and Year

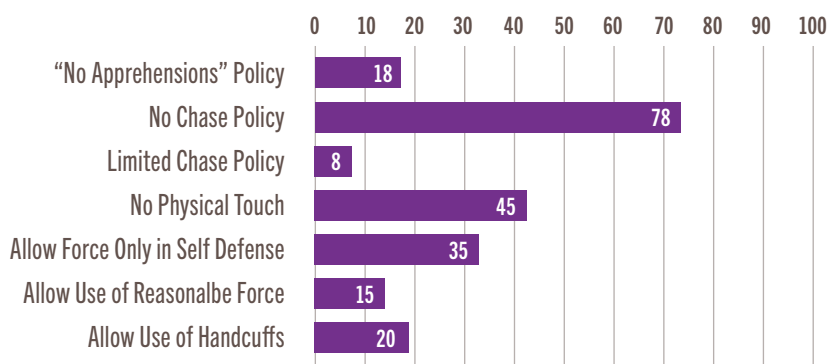
Size of Retailer	Number per Store	
	Most recent 12-month Period	Previous 12-month Period
Small	216	330
Medium	30	38
Large	44	35
All Retailers	84	86

Source: Benchmarking the Loss Prevention Industry (2017)

## Potential Factors

Just over one-half (58%) stated that they did not allow store staff to engage in shoplifter apprehensions, while slightly fewer said that only store management staff should be involved (42%). The survey found no statistical difference between those retailers where LP-specific staff were employed compared with those where they were not. There was also no difference by size of retailer and likelihood to allow store staff to make apprehensions.

**Figure 5: Policies and Practices on Apprehending Shoplifters**



Source: Benchmarking the Loss Prevention Industry (2017)

Retailer shoplifting apprehension policies did not have a statistically significant effect on the number of shoplifting incidents that happen in a store. Due to the small number of respondents taking part in this part of the survey, it was not possible for the authors to perform analysis on shoplifting apprehension policies.

No conclusions could be drawn on whether having any given policy was related to higher or lower rates of shoplifting incidents or rates of violence (Beck, Palmer, Peacock, 2017, p.9).

However, store employees can only experience shoplifting violence if two main conditions are satisfied:

1. The presence of a shoplifting suspect
2. Physically engaging with a shoplifting suspect

According to the survey, 45% of the respondent retailers have a "no physical touch" policy regarding shoplifting apprehensions. Conversely - the other 55% are, in some fashion, becoming physically engaged with shoplifting suspects, creating opportunities for violence. Also, 22% of retailers go on to report that their policies do not prohibit chasing. Failing to recognize the reasons for shoplifting violence, such as running, to avoid getting caught, just adds unnecessary risk by inviting the violence to happen. Also exemplified by

handcuff usage, allowed by 20% of organizations. There is clearly a disconnect between duty and duty of care. But that philosophy is not lost on everyone. "We were playing the same game year after year with many of the same people. Agents would roam the floors looking for shoplifters and apprehend them. Sometimes it was for things that only cost us a few bucks, yet we were willing to go out the door and pursue the person, risking harm to

our employees, just to bring the suspect back and have them arrested. It seemed ridiculous to me, so I sought to come up with a way to stop the cycle of this whole process", said Frank Johns, LPC, Chairman of the Loss Prevention Foundation (Johns, 2019)



### Connecting the dots

In the United States, 9.75 million shoplifters were apprehended in the last 2 years. I will invite you to do the math on that:

- 10% of all pushout thefts end in violence <https://pushouttheft.com>
- 2.3% of shoplifting incidents involve violence Policies and Practices on Managing Shoplifting in Retailing: Benchmarking the Loss Prevention Industry

**...we were willing to go out the door and pursue the person, risking harm to our employees, just to bring the suspect back and have them arrested. It seemed ridiculous to me.**



That is 112,125 acts of violence against our retail store employees each year. If only a fraction, say, one-half of one percent (.005%) resulted in life-threatening injuries, our industry would be hospitalizing or mourning the loss of 560 employees every year (more than 1 per day). That is not a statistic our industry can live with and quite frankly, neither can our retail store employees.

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## Safety as a Value

The pandemic required retailers to make significant changes to their operation. Many retailers, particularly those not designated as essential, took a phased approach to reopening. They instituted protocols to ensure workplace safety, such as wearing protective equipment, face coverings, social distancing measures, and enhanced sanitation. Industry associations, such as the Retail Industry Leaders Association (RILA) and NRF, collaborated with their retailing partners to publish and distribute detailed blueprints for safety. These guidelines take a data-driven approach as directed by the Centers of Disease Control (CDC). The RILA Blueprint for Shopping Safe and NRF Operation Open Doors can be found on their member websites.

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### Safety as a necessity

The speed at which the retail industry sprung into action, to produce the plans necessary for reopening and employee safety, was nothing short of impressive and should be commended. This accomplishment was key to restarting the economy, saving retail, and most importantly - getting people back to work safely. Employees and the communities they serve were genuinely grateful for the work and sacrifice that went into designing and producing these well-thought-out plans. But was the retail industry genuine in their rationale for working so hard and moving so fast? That is up for debate.

Does the retail industry even care about their employees? Of course, but let us not ignore the fact that all the work that went into safety protocols and blueprints were required by law. Much of the implementation was CDC guidance and later required by OSHA. Furthermore, employees needed to feel safe to reclaim their roles for store reopening. This raises a

**Would employee safety be at the forefront if retail survival were not dependent on it?**



lot of important questions. Would employee safety be at the forefront if retail survival were not dependent on it? Would OSHA even exist if retail businesses had a strong track-record of taking care of its employees?

Consider all the research and studies that have been published by the retail associations and industry experts documenting the dangers of violent shoplifters. Every day, there is a violent encounter between a

store employee and a shoplifter. Countless incidents go unrecognized while serious injuries and fatalities continue to be reported in the media, and families continue to grieve the loss of loved ones. We

**When it comes to shoplifting violence, why do we continue to look the other way?**

know the problem exists. We know our employees are in danger. So, when it comes to shoplifting violence, why do we continue to look the other way? Maybe because shoplifting safety is not required.



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# Employee well-being approach to solving shoplifting violence

The factors that contribute to shoplifting violence and injuries, whether they are factors of attitude or related to larger societal, industrial, and cultural conditions – can be changed. Shoplifting violence is preventable. It is important to focus energies on the root causes of shoplifting violence, not just the symptoms. Only by doing this we will be able to break the cycle of retail employee injuries and reduce the impact it has on individuals, their families, and our communities. The underlying motives may be complex; however, the solution is simple:

1. Stop requiring employees to apprehend shoplifters
2. Invest in solutions that prevent shoplifting, especially technological solutions
3. And, drive employee engagement / awareness around non-confrontational approaches to shoplifting prevention

Retail loss prevention and asset protection executives that choose to stand up for employee well-being by

addressing the policies that put our hardworking employees in danger can now say, “Employee safety is a value at my company,” and truly mean it. Changing policies are quick and easy but may create a gap in a company’s external theft strategy. That is why a comprehensive approach consisting of employee awareness and contact-free theft prevention solutions, such as Gatekeeper Systems’ Purchek™ is necessary to supplement the policy change. The Purchek™ system prevents pushout theft by locking one or more wheels on any shopping cart that attempts to exit a store without passing through a working checkout. By doing so, the need for employees to confront dangerous shoplifters is vastly decreased. This is not a composition of faith, but a statement based on evidence. Let us not wait for the law to change or for the next crisis to arise. Demonstrate your integrity by aligning your department’s commitment to safety with doing the right thing for your employees – before someone else gets hurt.



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## About Calibration

Calibration Group, LLC is a full-service marketing, communications, and consulting firm specializing in providing relevant, educational content for the loss prevention, asset protection, and safety professions. We are also the leading provider of Loss Prevention Awareness campaigns that successfully modify employee behavior. Calibration has mastered the ability to move beyond simple awareness and communication. We create. We deliver. We inspire.

For more information about Calibration Group, visit [www.calibrationgroup.com](http://www.calibrationgroup.com).



**Amber Bradley**, founder of Calibration Group, LLC, is a brand-positioning expert with extensive experience across multiple business disciplines, including marketing and public relations. Amber's proven success in creating multi-tiered, strategic marketing and communication campaigns continues to yield unmatched results for solution providers, as well as retail loss prevention and operations professionals. Amber also serves as Executive Director for the Restaurant Loss Prevention and Security Association (RLPSA) and is a contributing editor for the D&D Daily, a daily e-news outlet specializing in providing the most relevant news for retail loss prevention, safety, and security professionals.



**David E. George, CFE, CFI** is managing partner of Calibration Group, LLC. Previously, David served as vice president over Asset Protection for Dollar General Stores, a company with more than 13,000 stores in 43 states. While serving Dollar General, David was responsible for the Asset Protection field team, the asset protection corporate team, the Shrink Improvement team, and the Shrink Analytics team. David also worked in tandem with Dollar General's Inventory Management team to improve stock-on-hand while simultaneously reducing stockroom inventory. Prior to Dollar General, David held the vice president of Asset Protection position with Harris Teeter Supermarkets, Inc., a regional chain based out of Matthews, NC. He served Harris Teeter for more than 14 years and has had previous loss prevention roles with Kmart Supercenters.



**Ryan Bauss, CFI** is Vice President of Calibration Group, LLC. Previously, Ryan served as Director of Asset Protection at The Kroger Co, a company with more than 2,800 stores in 38 states. While serving at Kroger, Ryan was responsible for shrink, best practice execution, and the division asset protection and safety teams. Ryan also led the organization's transformation to a holistic asset protection strategy from a traditional loss prevention approach. Previously, Ryan worked as Director of Asset Protection for Harris Teeter Supermarkets, where he was responsible for asset protection operations, safety, and security solutions. He also held various leadership positions in program development and management on an enterprise scale. Throughout his career, Ryan has led change and awareness strategies that have helped organizations maximize shareholder returns.

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# About Gatekeeper

Gatekeeper Systems' expanded product suite of intelligent cart solutions offers solutions for EVERY retailer's needs to minimize merchandise loss and reduce asset and labor expenditures.

Gatekeeper's loss prevention, retail analytics, and cart containment solutions utilize patented locking wheel technology to put an end to cart-based shoplifting, shopping cart loss, and uninformed decision-making. Cart management solutions increase safety and reduce labor costs by maximizing productivity while simultaneously resulting in a positive store image.

Intelligent pushout theft prevention solutions stop thieves and their cart full of unpaid merchandise from leaving the store. Customizable wheel technology allows retailers to defend their entire store or just a high loss department based on the store's unique layout.

NEW Retail Analytics solutions provide increased visibility for informed decision making. Increase efficiency, optimize fleet size, and perfect the entire customer shopping experience with store and enterprise-level analytics.

Find out why the top 20 retailers that use shopping carts rely on Gatekeeper solutions.

To learn more or to schedule a free consultation, [click here](#).

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