

# Convenience-store robberies: Understanding the dynamics of workplace violence can improve employee health and safety

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Workplace violence is a pervasive problem with tremendous costs for individuals, organizations, and society. A new study published this week

in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* focuses on convenience-store robberies, one of the most common forms of workplace violence, and finds that robbers are significantly more likely to injure employees who are present on the sales floor rather than behind the cash register when a robbery begins. But industry standard safety training practices encourage employees to get out from behind the register for their safety.

"Unlike past studies, we used video of convenience-store robberies to examine why and when injuries during robberies occur," says co-author Katherine DeCelles, a professor of organizational behavioral and [human resource management](#) at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, who hold a cross-appointment to the University's Center for Criminology and Sociolegal Studies.

"We suggest that an understanding of the interactive dynamics of workplace violence and emphasize the critical need to verify that common practices for organizations are evidence based for [employee health and safety](#)."

Prof. DeCelles and her colleagues first examined 196 surveillance videos and archival data of convenience store robberies collected over a four-year period. The results showed a significant correlation between employee location at the beginning of the robbery and injury, with lower risk of injury if employees were behind the register when the robbery began than if they were on the sales floor.

Follow-up studies involving 648 people, including both formerly incarcerated individuals and retail clerks, found that when presented with robbery onset scenarios, more than 81% of participants expected employees to be behind the register and anticipated significantly more violence during the robbery if the employee was on the sales floor rather than behind the register.

Finally, the authors conducted a three-year longitudinal field study with revised safety protocols that provided a behavioral script to follow in case of a robbery while employees are on the sales floor. The authors found, in an additional 368 robberies, a significantly lower risk of injury when employees were on the sales floor as the [robbery](#) began following the protocol change, relative to before the intervention.

"This understanding of the dynamics of [workplace violence](#) and how to mitigate it is relevant for any retail organization and for developing effective policies which promote employee health and safety," says Prof. DeCelles.

The research was co-authored with Maryam Kouchaki of Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management and Nir Halevy of Stanford University's Graduate School of Business.

**More information:** Katherine A. DeCelles et al, Unexpected employee location is associated with injury during robberies, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2200026119](#)

Provided by University of Toronto

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