D&D DAILY

2026 / EXECUTIVE WHITEPAPER

THE HOLIDAY LOSS PREVENTION PLAYBOOK

A practical loss prevention and asset protection playbook for safer stores, smarter digital defenses and stronger holiday operations.

ONE CONNECTED RISK MODEL

STORES + SAFETY	COMMERCE	RETURNS
Theft / ORC / violence	Orders / identity	Verification

RESEARCH + PRACTICAL CONTROLS / U.S. RETAIL / NOVEMBER 2026

EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVE

One season. Connected risks.

A unified plan for physical theft, organized retail crime, workplace safety, digital fraud and the handoffs between them.

A NOTE FROM D&D Daily

Holiday loss prevention starts on the sales floor. Crowded stores, high-demand merchandise and stretched staffing can create opportunities for theft and increase the consequences of confrontations. Repeat offenders and organized groups may target multiple locations, while threats, robberies and customer aggression put employees and shoppers at risk.

Those physical risks do not stop at the store door. Fraudulent orders, pickup changes, returns and supply-chain diversion create additional exposure. Effective holiday protection requires store LP/AP, operations, investigators, e-commerce fraud teams and safety leaders to work from shared priorities without treating every suspicious transaction as proof of wrongdoing.

> Editorial objective: Protect people first, reduce preventable loss, investigate organized activity lawfully and preserve a convenient experience for legitimate customers.

THE FIVE OPERATING COMMITMENTS

- No merchandise recovery is worth an avoidable injury.
- Prevent opportunistic theft through measured environmental and product controls.
- Investigate patterns, not merely isolated incidents, when evaluating possible ORC.
- Use proportionate, reviewable digital and returns controls.
- Measure outcomes, false positives and employee impact together.

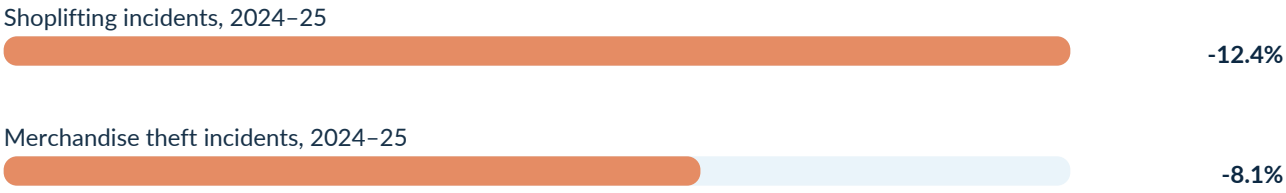
EVIDENCE AND INTERPRETATION

What the data actually says

National findings establish context. They are not store-level forecasts or proof that one control will work.

2026 NRF retail theft and violence survey

AVERAGE CHANGE AMONG RESPONDENTS



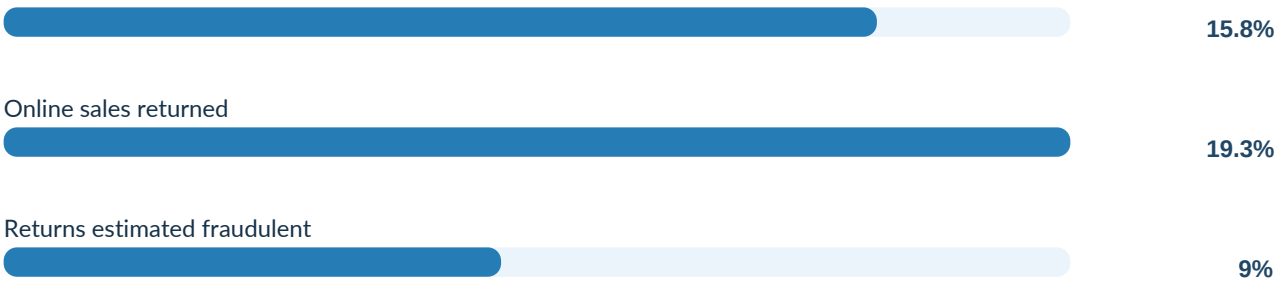
The NRF's 2026 study reports declines in these two incident categories among surveyed retailers. It also finds continuing ORC adaptation and persistent violence concerns. The earlier 2025 study reported increases for 2023–24; the periods and samples differ. Neither result should be generalized to every retailer. [1, 2]

2026 holiday sales forecast

$1.013 trillion in projected U.S. November–December retail sales, up 4.2% from 2025, according to NRF. This is a sales forecast, not a theft estimate. [3]

2025 returns estimates

DIFFERENT DENOMINATORS — DO NOT ADD



Source: NRF / Happy Returns, 2025 Retail Returns Landscape. Figures are industry estimates with different denominators; they should not be added together. The estimates are not specific to the 2026 holiday season.

Reduce theft opportunities

The most useful store controls make theft harder without creating unsafe or hostile interactions.

Start with a location-and-item risk map

Rank exposure using verified inventory variance, incident history, repeat loss locations, merchandise portability and time-of-day patterns. Distinguish known loss from suspected theft and from process errors. Prioritize interventions where both frequency and impact justify them.

Build a layered merchandising strategy

Use sightlines, active customer service, high-value item placement, secure displays, EAS/RFID and selective access controls where evidence supports them. Evaluate whether locked cases cause excessive queues, employee workload or customer abandonment. An intervention that shifts theft to another aisle is not automatically a success.

Make staffing part of prevention

Assign coverage to entrances, exits, high-risk departments, fitting rooms and self-checkout based on traffic and observed incidents. Train seasonal associates to recognize concerns, request help and document observations; they should not be expected to act as investigators.

Validate with a pilot

Compare matched stores or comparable periods using item-level shrink, availability, incidents, sales, labor time and customer complaints. Track displacement and changes in reporting, not only alarm counts.

> Field decision: Which three store zones account for the greatest verified exposure, and which controls can be tested without increasing confrontation risk?

STORE OPERATIONS

Checkout, inventory and receiving

Holiday losses can result from theft, scanning mistakes, miscounts, damaged goods and weak handoffs. Separate them before acting.

Checkout and self-checkout

Review voids, overrides, non-scans, mismatched product lookups and repeat exception patterns. Use POS-linked video only under approved privacy policies and validate alerts manually. Coach process mistakes before treating exceptions as intentional misconduct.

Inventory accuracy as a control

Use targeted cycle counts on fast-moving and shrink-prone SKUs, reconcile negative on-hand balances and compare pick failures with replenishment records. Investigate recurring variance by store, shift and item, rather than equating every shortage with theft.

Receiving, backroom and temporary labor

Confirm chain of custody at delivery, record discrepancies promptly, restrict backroom access appropriately and audit transfers and damages. Seasonal staffing changes increase the need for simple, repeatable procedures and clear supervisory review.

A practical escalation ladder

Process error: coaching and reconciliation. Unexplained variance: targeted review. Repeated high-confidence pattern: authorized LP investigation. Threat or violence: safety response immediately, regardless of loss value.

> Do not use: alarm counts, exception flags or an employee’s appearance as standalone evidence of wrongdoing.

ORGANIZED RETAIL CRIME

From incidents to networks

ORC investigation requires stronger evidence, better linkage and disciplined collaboration — not assumptions about a single theft.

Separate repeat theft from organized activity

A repeat offender is not automatically part of an organized network. Look for corroborated patterns across dates, stores, items, vehicles, transaction records and resale or fencing indicators. Use lawful data sources and document uncertainty.

Create a common case architecture

Give related incidents a consistent case ID. Capture timestamps, locations, SKU and value details, incident narratives, available video references, known associates and chain-of-custody records. Limit access and apply retention schedules consistent with policy and law.

Coordinate across stores and jurisdictions

Central investigators should review linked cases, avoid duplicate or contradictory submissions and build factual packages for law enforcement. Participate in ORC associations and task forces using approved information-sharing agreements; review privacy and antitrust constraints as applicable.

Protect the investigation

Keep frontline staff focused on safe observation and timely reporting. Do not encourage pursuit, detention or confrontation to obtain better evidence. Separate intelligence leads from confirmed findings and maintain an auditable review process.

> Illustrative case: Three stores report similar high-value product losses within days. Central LP compares incident timestamps, video and SKU records; only corroborated connections enter a shared case. Investigators preserve originals and coordinate an authorized referral — rather than asking associates to intercept a suspected group.

ORC OPERATIONAL RESPONSE

A defensible case workflow

Make it easier to connect incidents, preserve evidence and refer cases without compromising employee safety.

01 OBSERVE AND REPORT

A store reports a suspected event with a neutral description, the time, product details and whether any threat occurred. Do not fill gaps with assumptions.

02 VALIDATE

An authorized reviewer confirms inventory, video and transaction records. Document what is known, unknown and inconsistent.

03 LINK

Central LP searches approved cases for repeated tactics, items, locations or other corroborated connections. Record the basis for any link.

04 PRESERVE

Apply evidence handling, access controls, original-file preservation and retention requirements; keep an auditable chain of custody.

05 REFER AND LEARN

Provide law enforcement with a concise, factual case package when appropriate. Use outcomes to improve store controls, not to create arrest quotas.

> Useful measures: verified case-linkage rate, time from incident to review, evidence completeness, referrals accepted and employee safety incidents. Do not equate arrests or dollar values alone with program effectiveness.

WORKPLACE SAFETY

Prevent escalation and violence

Safety is an operating system: store design, staffing, training, reporting and post-incident support.

Before the incident

Assess robbery exposure, isolated work areas, lighting, entrances, closing shifts and customer-service pressure points. Establish clear non-confrontation expectations, discreet assistance signals, emergency contacts and incident roles. OSHA and NIOSH emphasize worksite assessment and training. [5, 6]

When behavior escalates

Teach associates to create distance, avoid arguing or chasing, summon trained help and follow the emergency plan. If a weapon or immediate threat is present, prioritize escape, shelter and emergency response as circumstances require. Specific tactics must match employer policy and local emergency guidance.

After an incident

Secure the area, seek medical assistance, preserve relevant evidence, document threats and offer appropriate support. Provide a non-retaliatory reporting channel and conduct a short after-action review; do not pressure staff to resume work before safety concerns are addressed.

Train for realistic holiday scenarios

Rehearse a suspected walkout, an aggressive return dispute, a robbery and an employee working alone at close. Test who calls whom, who protects customers and who manages recovery and communications.

> Safety rule: Merchandise protection must never depend on untrained employees physically intervening with suspected offenders.

Translate policy into decisions

These are illustrative exercises, not documented incidents or proof of outcomes.

Scenario A | High-value pushout

A person exits with unpaid merchandise as a queue builds. An associate alerts the designated team, observes from a safe location and does not pursue. LP preserves available evidence and checks inventory. A manager verifies that no employee was pressured to intervene.

Scenario B | Threat at the service desk

A customer disputes a return decision and threatens an employee. The associate disengages and requests trained support. Staff protect nearby customers, follow the emergency escalation plan and document the threat. Any refund decision is secondary to safety.

Scenario C | Repeat loss across locations

Several stores report similar losses. A regional investigator checks timestamps, SKU patterns and available video, distinguishing coincidence from verified links. The team reviews merchandising controls while central LP evaluates a possible ORC case.

Questions for a tabletop drill

Who owns the response? What triggers emergency escalation? What evidence is collected without confrontation? Who informs affected employees? Which control change can be measured next week?

> Training standard: Practice the handoff between frontline associates, store leaders, LP/AP and emergency responders — not just the written policy.

DIGITAL COMMERCE

Protect orders and identities

Digital controls matter, but should complement — not overshadow — the physical-store safety and theft program.

Account takeover and bots

Apply rate limiting, bot detection, risk-based authentication and verification for sensitive account changes. Track account recovery friction and false positives so legitimate customers are not unnecessarily blocked.

Payment and promotion abuse

Use processor-supported authorization and fraud tools, monitor unusual order velocity and coupon patterns and establish review thresholds based on observed losses. Avoid treating a single device or geographic signal as proof of fraud.

Fraud-to-store handoffs

Define who can hold an order, how store staff receive the decision and how customers can resolve errors. Never ask an associate to confront a suspected fraudster at pickup.

Operational resilience

Coordinate with IT on outages, credential hygiene, logging and incident response. Fraud detection should have fallback procedures for peak traffic and system disruption.

> Balanced objective: Prevent confirmed fraud while tracking declines, customer complaints, appeal outcomes and fulfillment delays.

Close the handoff gaps

Pickup and returns connect online decisions with in-store people, inventory and customer-service risk.

Order-to-pickup

Validate high-risk pickup-name, address or payment changes through an approved workflow. Make hold-or-release instructions clear to store staff and provide a rapid customer resolution path.

Return-to-refund

Match the return to the original order and payment; use proportionate inspection for high-risk or high-value items. Review receiptless returns and repeat exceptions with human oversight and clear appeal options. Do not equate frequent legitimate returns with fraud.

Inventory-to-fulfillment

Reconcile canceled picks, substitution events, transfer records and negative inventory. Route repeated discrepancies to the appropriate operations or LP team.

Illustrative BOPIS exception

An approved order receives a last-minute pickup-name change. The system flags the change and routes it to an authorized reviewer. Store staff see a simple hold-or-release instruction and do not confront the customer. The outcome is recorded for quality review.

> Control design test: Can every exception be traced to a reviewer, timestamp, supporting evidence and documented resolution?

Buy outcomes, not dashboards

Choose tools that improve decisions, integrate with workflows and withstand operational scrutiny.

THE FIVE-LAYER CONTROL MODEL

DETECT	Video, EAS/RFID, POS exceptions, inventory variance, order and bot signals
CONNECT	Case IDs, store incidents, transaction and fulfillment events
DECIDE	Human review, risk thresholds, safety escalation and documented authority
RESPOND	Store protocols, fraud holds, evidence preservation and customer appeals
LEARN	Post-incident reviews, false-positive analysis and pilot measurement

Procurement and deployment questions

Can the tool integrate with POS, OMS, inventory and case management? Who owns each alert? What are the false-positive and missed-event rates? Can evidence be exported and audited? What access, privacy, cybersecurity and retention requirements apply?

Governance that protects people

Test technology for disparate or unfair outcomes, avoid unreviewed automated accusations and require documented approval for intrusive surveillance or biometric capabilities. Assess applicable law and labor obligations before deployment.

> Procurement principle: A useful pilot measures loss, safety, staff workload and customer friction — not merely the number of alerts generated.

EXECUTION ROADMAP

A 30-day holiday readiness sprint

Use a clear owner, measurable deliverable and escalation path for each workstream.

DAYS 1–7 | BASELINE

Rank stores, departments and SKUs by verified exposure. Review violence incidents, staffing, ORC case backlogs, return exceptions and online fraud trends. Validate emergency contacts and evidence access.

DAYS 8–14 | HARDEN

Test targeted merchandising and checkout controls. Repair camera and EAS gaps. Review ORC case standards, pickup verification, bot controls and return policy ambiguity.

DAYS 15–21 | REHEARSE

Run non-confrontation, robbery and aggressive-customer tabletop exercises. Simulate cross-store ORC evidence linkage and a high-risk BOPIS handoff. Fix unclear ownership.

DAYS 22–30 | OPERATE

Launch brief daily risk huddles and weekly tuning. Review serious incidents promptly, measure control performance and document unintended customer or employee impacts.

> Daily huddle agenda: Safety events • top physical loss exceptions • ORC case links • digital and returns exceptions • staffing gaps • owners and deadlines.

EXECUTIVE MEASUREMENT

Holiday LP/AP performance scorecard

An executive worksheet for measuring safety, loss prevention and operational performance.

HOW TO COMPLETE IT

Baseline = a comparable prior period. Current = the same measure for this period.

Set an internal target for each measure; status reflects performance against that target.

Use identical units and account for changes in traffic, sales and incident reporting.

PERFORMANCE INDICATOR	BASELINE	CURRENT	STATUS
PEOPLE & PHYSICAL STORES			
Employee threats / injuries / near misses count or rate			
Verified shrink / inventory variance % of sales or $			
Checkout exception resolution % resolved			
ORGANIZED RETAIL CRIME			
Case evidence completeness % complete			
Time to case review hours			
Corroborated cross-store case links count			
DIGITAL & OMNICHANNEL			
Confirmed fraud loss $ per $1,000 sales			
Pickup exception resolution hours			
Return exception review accuracy % correct			

STATUS OPTIONS On target / Needs attention / Action required

EXAMPLE (ILLUSTRATIVE)

Employee threats: baseline 12, current 8, internal target 8 or fewer.

Status: On target, assuming comparable periods and consistent reporting.

Interpret results carefully: more complete reporting may increase recorded incidents.

LEADERSHIP QUESTION

Did the control reduce verified loss or harm without shifting risk, burdening associates or unnecessarily penalizing customers?

LEADERSHIP CLOSE

The holiday control checklist

The strongest program connects safe store execution with disciplined investigations and proportionate digital controls.

- Store-level risk maps identify priority locations, departments and SKUs.
- Non-confrontation, violence reporting and emergency protocols are rehearsed.
- Self-checkout, inventory and receiving exceptions have named owners.
- ORC investigations use corroborated linkage and evidence standards.
- Cross-store sharing and law-enforcement referrals follow approved rules.
- Digital order holds and pickup exceptions have a safe store workflow.
- Return reviews are proportionate and provide customer recourse.
- Technology pilots measure outcomes and false positives.
- Daily huddles and weekly reviews drive documented adjustments.

> Bottom line: Holiday LP/AP is not a choice between preventing theft and protecting people. The goal is a coordinated system that reduces preventable loss while making stores safer and keeping legitimate commerce moving.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Prepared by D&D Daily as an editorial planning resource for retail loss prevention and asset protection professionals. The scenarios are illustrative. Recommendations should be adapted to retailer policy, staffing, law and operational evidence.

REFERENCES AND METHODS

Evidence base and editorial notes

Source dates, scope and limitations are stated to prevent misleading comparisons.

[1] National Retail Federation, The Impact of Retail Theft & Violence 2026 (2026).

https://nrf.com/research/the-impact-of-retail-theft-violence-2026

[2] National Retail Federation / Loss Prevention Research Council, The Impact of Retail Theft & Violence 2025 (2025).

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[3] National Retail Federation, NRF Forecasts 2026 Holiday Sales Growth (Oct. 15, 2026).

https://nrf.com/media-center/press-releases/nrf-forecasts-2026-holiday-sales-growth-as-consumers-remain-resilient

[4] National Retail Federation / Happy Returns, 2025 Retail Returns Landscape (Oct. 2025).

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[5] OSHA, Workplace Violence: Overview and Prevention Programs.

https://www.osha.gov/workplace-violence/

[6] NIOSH, Help for the Holidays: Preventing Fatigue, Violence, and Stress in Retail (2023).

https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/bulletin/2023/holiday-retail.html

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

NRF findings are industry survey results, estimates or forecasts, not measured outcomes for every store. The 2025 and 2026 theft studies cover different reporting periods; trend comparisons require care. The 2025 returns data are not a 2026 holiday-specific measure. Operational controls in this report are editorial recommendations, not claims of proven causal effectiveness.

Editorial safety note: Review local law, employment obligations, privacy, surveillance rules and retailer policies before implementing intervention, investigation or data-sharing procedures.