

Convenience store safety is difficult

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

Convenience store clerks are the keepers of many American treasures — beef jerky sticks, Scratch-its and Slurpees, to name a few. But they also face a more dangerous occupational hazard than most — the possibility of being robbed at gunpoint while working.

Though it's not a frequent occurrence, convenience stores in Umatilla County periodically see armed robberies. In the past three years there have been robberies at several stores, including Sinclair Station, 7-Eleven, 11th Street Market in Hermiston, Center Market in Stanfield and the Astro Station in Pendleton.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2015, first-line supervisors of retail sales workers suffered the most workplace fatalities nationwide, at 40. There were 35 fatalities for cashiers, 34 for police and sheriff's patrol officers and 27 for taxi drivers. Robbers were the most common perpetrators, followed by coworkers, and then by spouses or domestic partners.

Local store owners and managers said while such incidents are scary, they're hard to predict and prevent.

Gurpal Singh and Jaswinder Kaur, managers of the Center Market in Stanfield, said their business has been robbed twice, once in December 2015, and in February 2016. In the first incident, the thief took \$379 and in the second, about \$1,100. The first time, Kaur was working alone and was robbed at gunpoint. The second time, Kaur was training a new employee, and the robber did not take out a weapon. Both robberies took place around 1 or 2 a.m.

The thief in the first robbery, Alfredo Lopez Rodriguez, was sentenced to 70 months in jail. The second theft has not been solved.

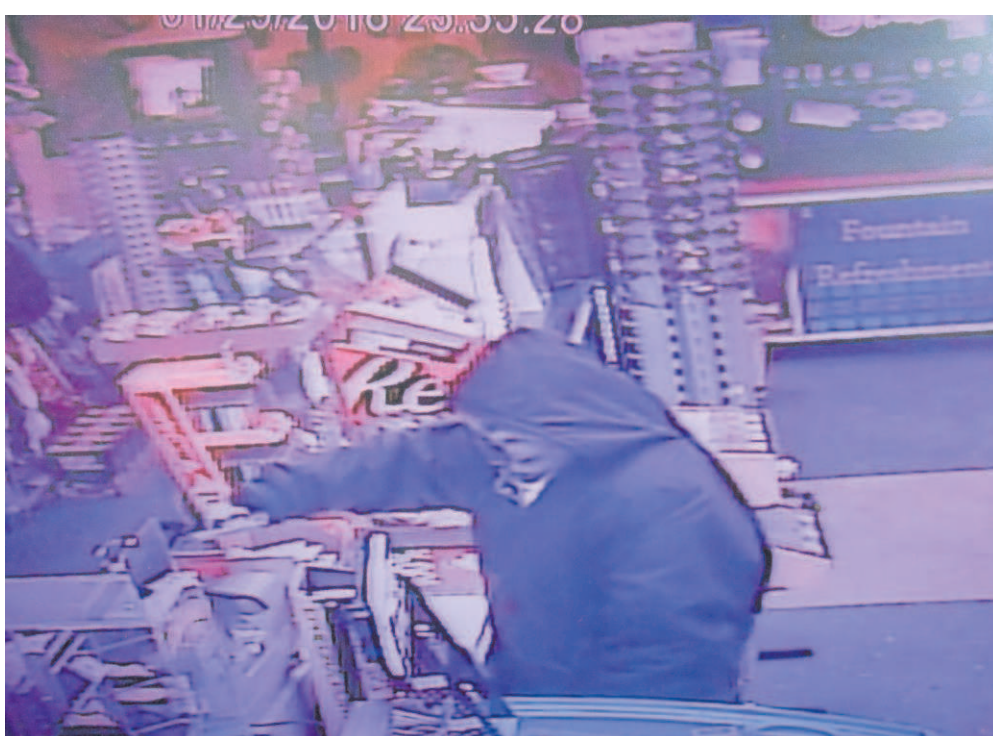


PHOTO COURTESY OF HERMISTON POLICE DEPARTMENT
Surveillance footage of an armed robbery at 11th St. Market in January. This suspect has still not been caught. The suspect brandished a gun and took the small amount of cash.

Singh noted that in one of the incidents, security camera footage later revealed that the robber had come into the store three times that day.

He said the police have been diligent about checking in on the market, and will often station themselves on a nearby street to keep watch during overnight hours.

He said the store is insured against theft, and the business policy is simple: don't argue with the robber, and cooperate.

"What's important is your life," he said. "Not the money, not the store."

Brandt Koo, owner of Hermiston's 11th Street Market, said their approach is similar.

"Our rule is pretty much just give them the cash," he said. "There's no sense dying for a few hundred dollars."

Koo has owned the store since late March, after it was robbed twice in January. He said they try not to keep too much cash on hand, keep the store well-lit, and have several security cameras and alarms.

Hermiston Police Capt. Travis Eynon said there have not been any specific patterns with robberies at local convenience stores.

"Now I'm a little better. I had bad dreams after that."

Jaswinder Kaur,
Co-manager, Center Market

"It's hard to say what triggers these kinds of trends," he said. "With some, it's kind of the nature of the business — they can be a target just because they're open at night, or odd hours."

While police are usually on scene pretty quickly, they rarely catch someone in the act, and it can be difficult to track robbers.

"Several of the investigations are still active," Eynon said.

Koo said that while there was a rash of robberies earlier in the year, he's not too concerned. He said many of his family members have

owned stores in larger areas like Los Angeles, where the problem is much more serious.

"They didn't get very much," he said of recent robberies. "Hermiston police have been really good about it."

Kaur said she had a hard time returning to work after the robberies, and attended counseling until recently.

"Now I'm a little better," she said. "I had bad dreams after that."

She no longer works the night shift and generally works with someone else. But at most stores, only one person works at night.

"You have to stay alert," Singh said. "I always say that to my night workers. If you're working in the cooler or in the back, if you hear the bell ring, come out and see who is there."

Singh said the majority of their regular customers have been supportive, and even protective of their family following the robberies.

"Everyone gave me their phone numbers, said any time, for anything, call us," Kaur said.

POM programs for teachers, students

HERMISTON HERALD

The Port of Morrow will become a classroom this month, with two new programs focused on educating people about careers in manufacturing and industrial technology.

The Port of Morrow will host a teacher externship, as well as a camp for junior high school students.

The camp, called "Nuts, Bolts and Thingamajigs," will take place from Monday, July 23 to Friday, July 27. The port applied for a grant last year from the Manufacturing and Fabrication Association. Students from around Morrow and western Umatilla counties will tour businesses at the port, including Lamb Weston and Portland General Electric, and hear from speakers at Amazon Web Services and Boardman Foods. Students will also spend half of each day working on a manufac-

turing project, applying the skills they've learned.

There are only a few spots left in the camp, but those interested can contact Port of Morrow Workforce Training Coordinator Kalie Davis at kalied@portofmorrow.com.

Five teachers from around Eastern Oregon will also study some businesses at the port, in order to develop lessons that help their students understand careers in the manufacturing industry.

Davis said the teachers are from different disciplines, including math, career counseling and science. The teachers will spend a few days in Portland, and then will spend July 19, and July 23 through 26 at the port. They will shadow someone at Lamb Weston, meet with the Port of Morrow Road Crew, Amazon Web Services, PGE and several construction groups.

Umatilla County Sheriff's Office recovers property, seeks theft suspect

HERMISTON HERALD

The Umatilla County Sheriff's Office remains on the lookout for a theft suspect after recovering stolen vehicles and more.

The sheriff's office in a written statement reported detective Loren Westmoreland on July 11 received a tip regarding several stolen vehicles at a property on Echols Road near Hermiston.

"Detectives went to the location," according to the sheriff's office, "and saw some of the stolen vehicles."

The sheriff's office obtained a search warrant for the property, according to the statement, and recov-

ered two Chevrolet pickups, a John Deere front loader, a dump trailer, copper wire and much more.

But suspect Zachary Lawrence Bartz, 25, was not at the location and remains at-large. State court records show Bartz has convictions from 2011 through 2014 for vehicle theft, fleeing police, theft, burglary and more.

Sheriff's investigators questioned two other individuals at the scene and released them. The sheriff's office now is asking for the public's help and would like anyone with information on the case or the whereabouts of Bartz to call the agency at 541-966-3651.

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