

*Safety in crowded stores, parking lots a hot topic this holiday shopping season.*

As stores gear up for the biggest holiday shopping day of the year, it may be easy to forget that Black Friday isn't always a sign of holiday cheer. A new poll reveals that personal safety inside stores and outside in store parking lots is the No. 1 holiday safety concern for Americans—particularly women and seniors.

Nearly half of the more than 800 respondents (49 percent) who participated in a national survey reported that personal safety in stores and parking lots is their primary safety concern this holiday season. For holiday shoppers, the worries over personal safety outpaced concerns over merchandise being stolen and children going missing in the store.

The survey was conducted by Signal 88 Security, a private security company with more than 90 franchises services over 700 locations throughout the US and Canada, including offices in Lincoln.

"While Black Friday should be a fun day for holiday shoppers, the threat to personal safety and security is very real," said Kris Withrow, owner at a Signal 88 Security franchise in the Midwest and former department store loss prevention specialist. "Shoppers may become combative while in pursuit of a popular holiday item, and that may compromise the safety of other shoppers."

Withrow says that electronic items, such as gaming systems, computers and televisions, often cause the most confrontations in a store.

"Getting your hands on a Black Friday deal is great, but it isn't worth becoming involved in a verbal or physical altercation," Withrow said. "Oftentimes, merchandise can be replenished."

In order to remain safe inside the store, Withrow suggests remaining aware of surroundings. "Shoppers tend to let down their guards once inside the doors, but that may make them more vulnerable—especially when it's crowded," said Withrow. "It's not uncommon for thieves to follow shoppers out of the store in order to steal the merchandise once in the parking lot. Report any suspicious activity to a store employee or manager."

In addition to store safety, nearly one-quarter of survey respondents (23 percent) indicated that having gifts stolen from their vehicles or homes was their biggest holiday shopping concern. To keep purchases safe in the parking lot, take the time to follow common sense steps such as locking car doors and keeping purchases out of sight.

"Shoppers are often in a hurry to get into the store and may forget to lock their car doors," Withrow said. "Double- or even triple-check to make sure your vehicle is secure."

If traveling from store to store, keep purchases out of sight, preferably locked in the trunk.

"Make sure nothing of temptation is left in the car," Withrow said. "Even items such as backpacks, which may not contain anything valuable, could be alluring to a thief and make you vulnerable to a break-in."

Nearly one in five survey respondents (19 percent) said their primary safety concern is having their children go missing in a crowded store.

"If possible, leave the kids at home as you do your holiday shopping," Withrow said. "Crowded stores make it easy to lose track of children. Plus, they may create distractions for you that could put you in a position to become a victim of theft."

