

Dollar Store Health and Safety Survey



April 2024



Executive Summary

Dollar stores are transforming communities and the U.S. economy. Their race-to-the-bottom business model is built on underpaying and under-protecting workers who are becoming a massive workforce as the Dollar General and Dollar Tree/Family Dollar corporations push out local businesses and become the sole source of food and household goods in many communities.

To better understand this phenomenon and its impact, Step Up Louisiana and the Center for Popular Democracy conducted a survey of more than 300 Louisiana dollar stores in the summer of 2023. This survey found widespread safety violations, many of which pose an imminent threat to both employees and customers:

- **Surveyors found a total of 347 potential health and safety violations across the 322 stores visited including electrical hazards, fire extinguisher violations, and sanitation issues**
- **Surveyors identified “serious safety concerns” in one-third of the stores they visited, including stores where emergency exits were blocked and stores that had no working phone or panic button**
- **Stores were pervasively understaffed, with only one or two employees working at 59% of stores visited**

These findings represent a snapshot of the safety situation at Louisiana dollar stores at one moment in time. Rather than a collection of isolated incidents, they suggest a systemic problem with these retailers.

What role dollar stores play in Louisiana communities and the state’s economy is a matter for public debate, but the dangers posed by these stores are indisputable. There are simple steps the two major dollar store chains can take to address this situation, and we call on them to adopt the demands detailed by their workers at the end of this report. We have also detailed the policies that policymakers at all levels can implement to safeguard dollar store workers and customers.

While Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar have been pressed by the growing safety crisis into some initial action, they have not yet shown a willingness to respond to the problem with the speed and scale needed. Rather than hope that they change their approach, policymakers must step in to protect Louisiana residents. We cannot wait for a fire with blocked exits, a shooting at an unsecured store or another tragedy to take place before we take action.

Introduction

Step Up Louisiana is a community based organization committed to building power to win education and economic justice for all. We work with multiracial and intergenerational Louisianans to “Step Up” by campaigning, organizing from a racial justice perspective, and holding public officials accountable. We organize with parents, workers, students, and community members to disrupt systemic oppression in our schools and workplaces through voter education, advocacy, and action.

Step Up aims to transform the economy and educational system by organizing with those directly impacted by the issues we want to change. Workers from Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar have been a core part of our efforts for economic justice for five years. They advocate at the local, state, federal, and corporate levels for policy changes that will improve their working conditions. The two main priorities of dollar store workers are better pay and safer working conditions. They also have shared their stories and testified for paid sick leave, fair scheduling, stopping LGBT+ workplace discrimination, affordable health insurance, and more.

With more than 30,000 locations and 1,000 new stores built per year, the footprint of dollar stores has transformed the retail landscape.¹ Low-income urban and rural communities that lack supermarkets and home goods stores rely on these low-cost retailers to fill the gaps between more distant big box stores and online shopping. Louisiana has one of the highest densities of stores of any state, with more than 1,000 across the state.²

Safety is a top concern for both dollar store workers and customers. In 2023, Dollar General shareholders approved a worker safety shareholder resolution³, while Dollar Tree was forced to reach a massive settlement with the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) over persistent safety issues.⁴ Despite these concessions, dollar store workers and customers still face the threat of physical violence, including disproportionate numbers of armed robberies compared to other retail establishments. The threat of violence at dollar stores was highlighted in the summer of 2023 by the mass shooting at a Jacksonville Dollar General by a white supremacist who targeted the store after being unable to enter more secure establishments nearby.⁵

This report is meant to raise awareness about the safety issues faced by dollar store workers and customers in Louisiana and to provide reform recommendations for governments and corporations. It presents survey data from more than 300 stores collected by Step Up Louisiana and the Center for Popular Democracy during the summer of 2023, which reveals alarming, widespread health and safety issues at rural and urban dollar stores.

Most importantly, the report lays out detailed steps that policymakers and dollar store corporations can take to safeguard employees and customers. The recommendations come from thousands of conversations with workers and policy experts, and five years of research into best practices for what actually makes stores safer for workers and customers.



Dollar Store Model and Safety Issues

The proliferation of dollar stores has surged in recent years to more than 35,000 stores in the United States.⁶ The scale and growth of dollar stores has profoundly affected local economies and presented safety issues for workers and customers.

Dollar stores typically target poor rural areas and predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods in urban settings.⁷ Step Up members and working class Louisianans like dollar stores because they are an affordable place to buy basic goods, often within walking distance or closer to home than a larger supermarket.

The Institute for Local Self Reliance (ILSR) reports that the “dollar store invasion” has become a catalyst for poverty.⁸ Dollar store workers struggle under low wages, and the stores’ low-price model undermines existing local businesses, driving a race to the bottom that leaves local residents with fewer, lower quality options for where to work and shop.

The dollar store model relies on understaffed stores where workers are often forced to work alone. This leads to overworked managers, and can threaten the safety of employees who lack the time to maintain a safe store and the shiftmates to watch out for them. Dollar General is the first retailer to be designated a “Severe Violator” by OSHA through a program that targets manufacturing corporations or construction firms with high numbers of on-the-job injuries.⁹ Following a year of plummeting stock prices and a slew of bad press about this safety crisis, Dollar General CEO Todd Vasos committed in December to investing \$150 million in increased worker hours in stores this year.¹⁰

Dollar Tree has also paid tens of millions of dollars in OSHA fines and recently signed a landmark settlement that requires the company to identify the root causes of its persistent safety violations and make operational changes to correct them within two years.¹¹ There is a direct connection between the two companies’ understaffing model and the safety issues, which workers and customers can see clearly.



“Low wages barely keep your lights on or water flowing. Your employees deserve a pay raise. Safety is important. Do you care about my well-being? We need improved safety measures.”

David Williams

Dollar General, 8201 Earhart Blvd, New Orleans, LA.

Compounding the understaffing and high turnover, dollar stores pay notoriously low wages. The Economic Policy Institute’s 2022 Wage Tracker found that 92% of Dollar General workers are paid less than \$15 per hour.¹² The median annual salary for dollar store workers is \$12,571, according to ILSR’s report. Store managers, earning around \$40,000, often work very long hours, much of it unpaid overtime. Working long and inconsistent hours while juggling multiple jobs to make ends meet can also negatively impact the health of dollar store workers and make them more prone to accidents and trauma.

“My lowest check was about \$223 and I’m paid weekly. That’s less than \$1,000 per month and only helps with groceries that week. If I was paid more I could afford groceries and rent.”

Kenny Arbuthnot

Dollar Tree, 11701 Morrison Rd, New Orleans, LA



Dollar Stores have also become magnets for shoplifting and armed robberies. Since 2014, at least 149 people have been killed and another 400 have been injured in gun-related incidents at dollar stores, according to the Gun Violence Archive.¹³ Investigations from CNN¹⁴, ProPublica¹⁵, ILSR¹⁶, United for Respect¹⁷, and Bloomberg Magazine¹⁸ all point to the same thing: inadequate staffing, minimal safety features, and the absence of safety personnel that collectively result in perilous working and shopping conditions.

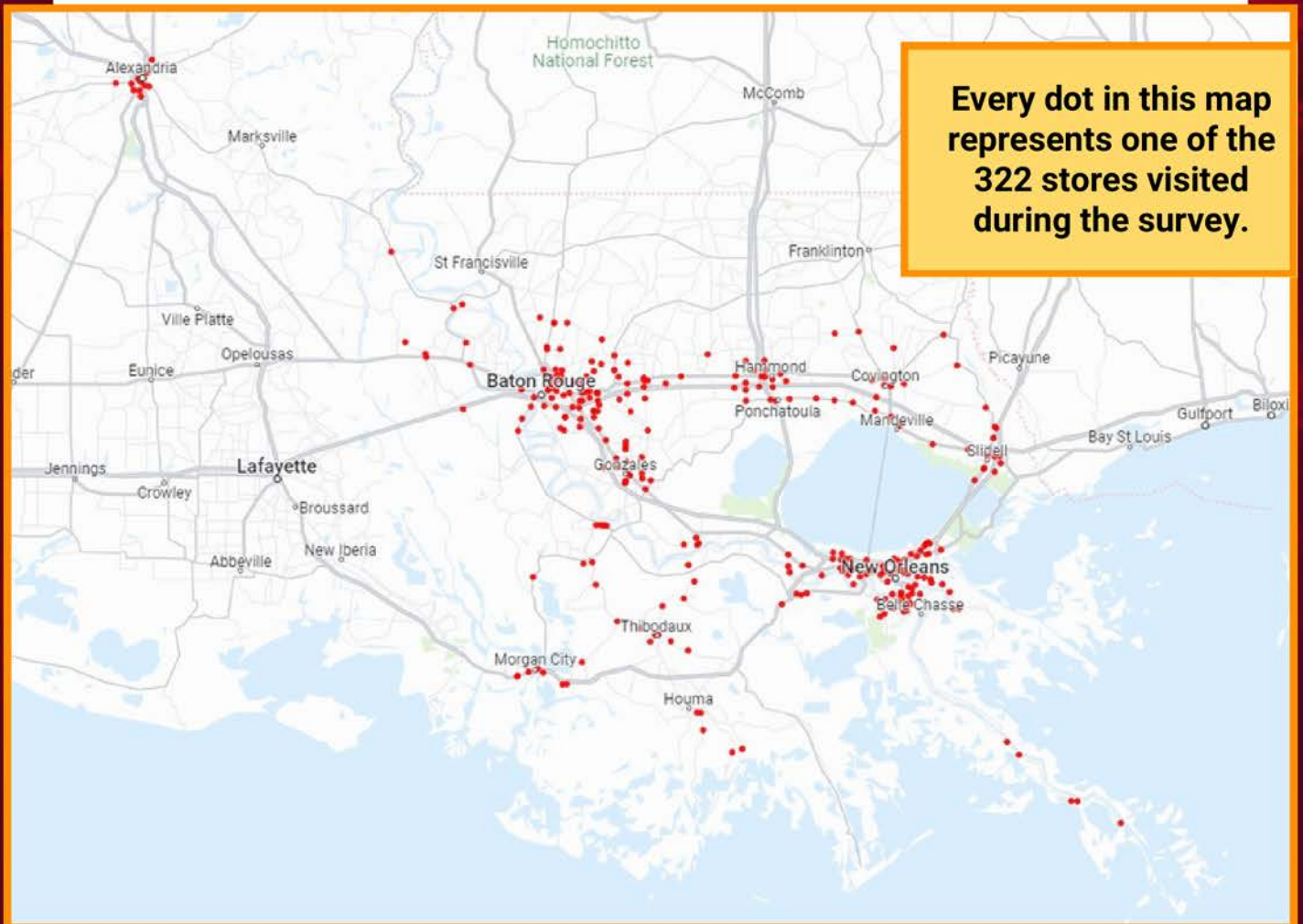
In addition to safety from physical violence, the dollar store lean staffing model can lead to other safety issues for workers and customers. Blocked aisles and exits are the norm at dollar stores across the country, with stocking carts and boxes crowding stores. Missing fire extinguishers, electrical equipment not maintained, air conditioning and heat issues, and boarded-up windows were all pervasive across Louisiana, according to our survey.

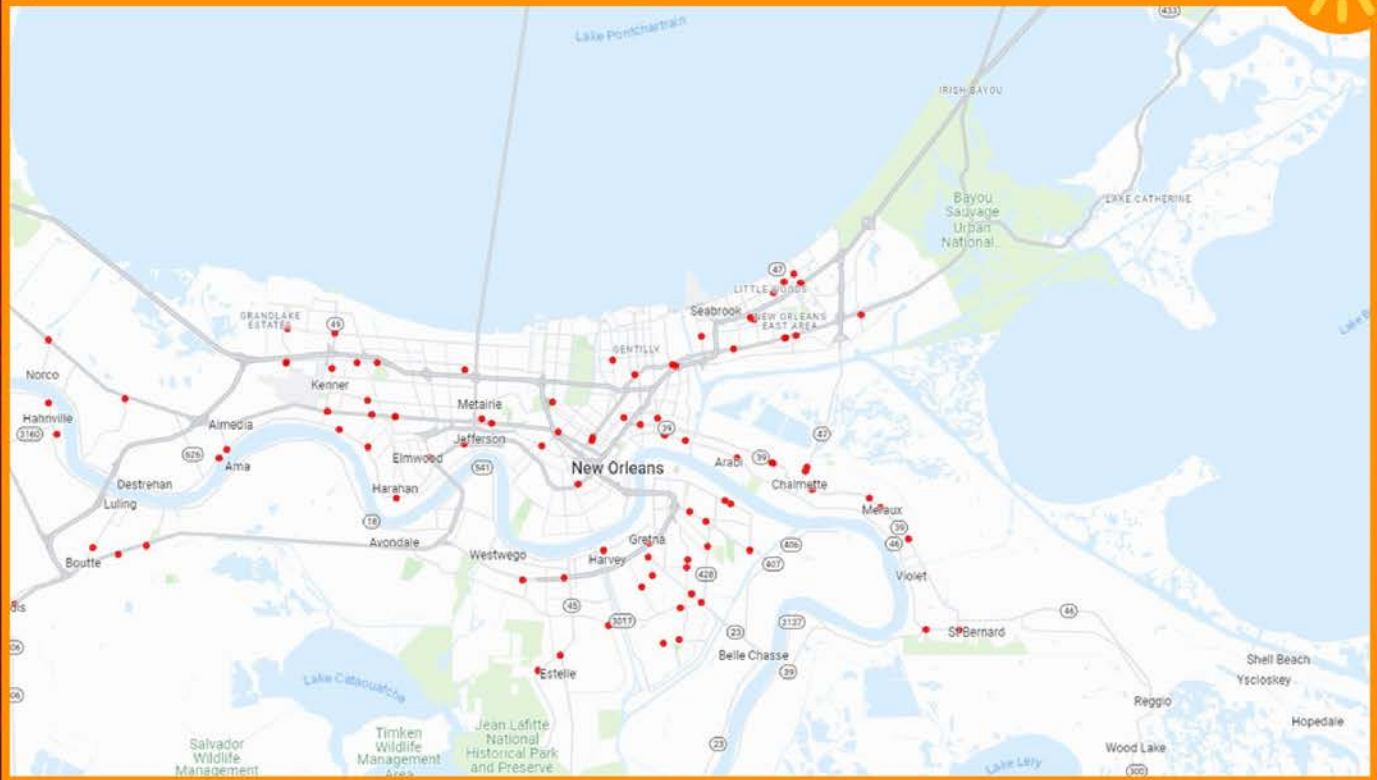
Louisiana has some of the highest concentration of dollar stores in the country. The density map below illustrates the saturation of dollar stores in the New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive examination of their impact on local communities.

Dollar Store Health and Safety Survey

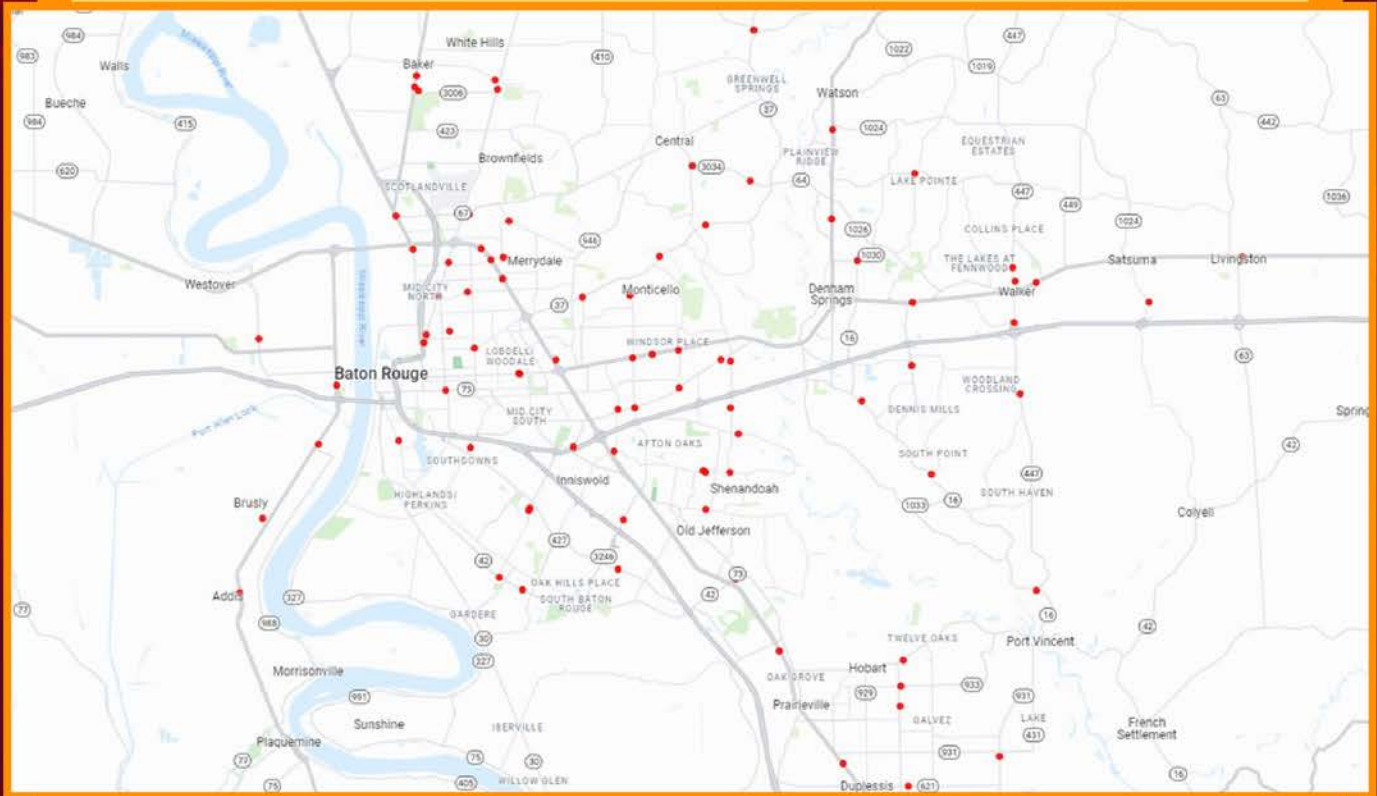
From July 10 through July 18, 2023, Step Up Louisiana visited as many dollar stores as possible to document store conditions and record health and safety violations where present. The survey found that Louisiana's dollar stores are in a state of crisis, with blocked emergency exits, chronic understaffing, clogged aisles, and missing fire extinguishers. The numbers are shocking, but are also almost certainly conservative: Step Up Louisiana's members and volunteers only walked through public parts of the stores they visited and only made a single visit to each store. From this snapshot of the conditions in Louisiana's dollar stores during a single week, we can clearly see the need for a systematic and comprehensive overhaul to the way these stores are run.

Step Up members and volunteers visited 322 dollar stores across 19 Louisiana parishes. Of these, 174 were Dollar General stores, 62 were Dollar Tree stores, and 86 were Family Dollar stores.





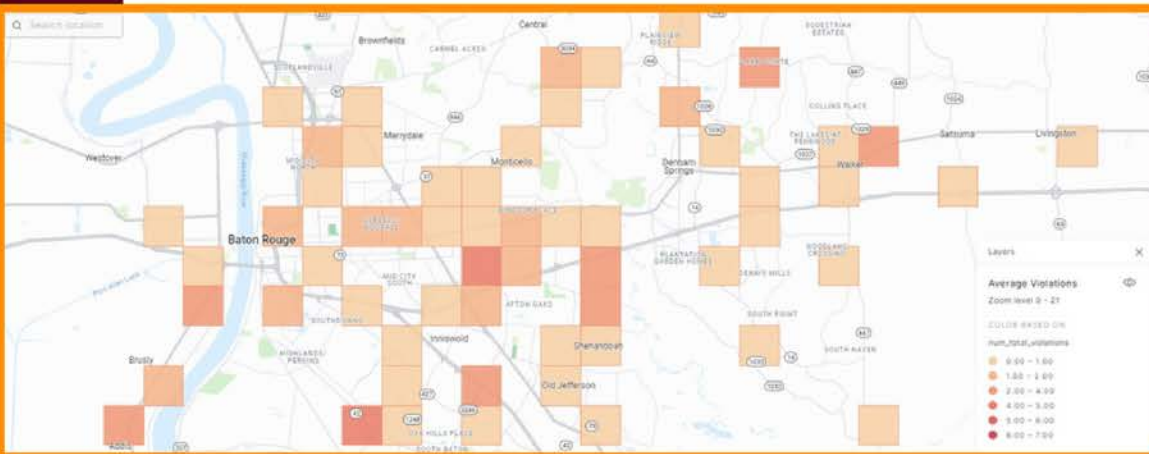
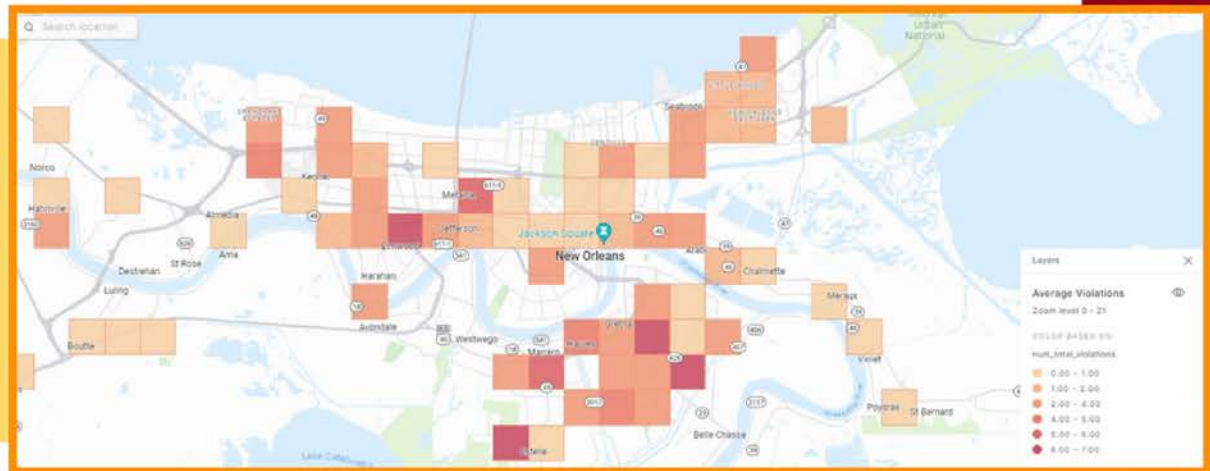
New Orleans and Baton Rouge have a large concentration of stores, most of which were visited.



Surveyors were asked to look for potential violations of the Occupational Safety and Health Act (the “OSH Act”). In training the surveyors, Step Up Louisiana reviewed a year’s worth of citations issued by OSHA against Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar to see what kinds of violations the agency had identified at the companies’ locations nationwide. From this list, surveyors focused on the violations that are easily recognized and which had already resulted in significant penalties. The primary categories of potential violations were exit violations, handling violations, electrical violations, fire extinguisher violations, and sanitation violations. A total of 347 of these potential health and safety violations were identified by Step Up Louisiana surveyors across the 322 visited stores.

These heat maps show the average number of violations per store in the greater New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions.

In Orleans Parish, surveyors identified potential violations in 56% of the stores they visited (19 of 34 stores).



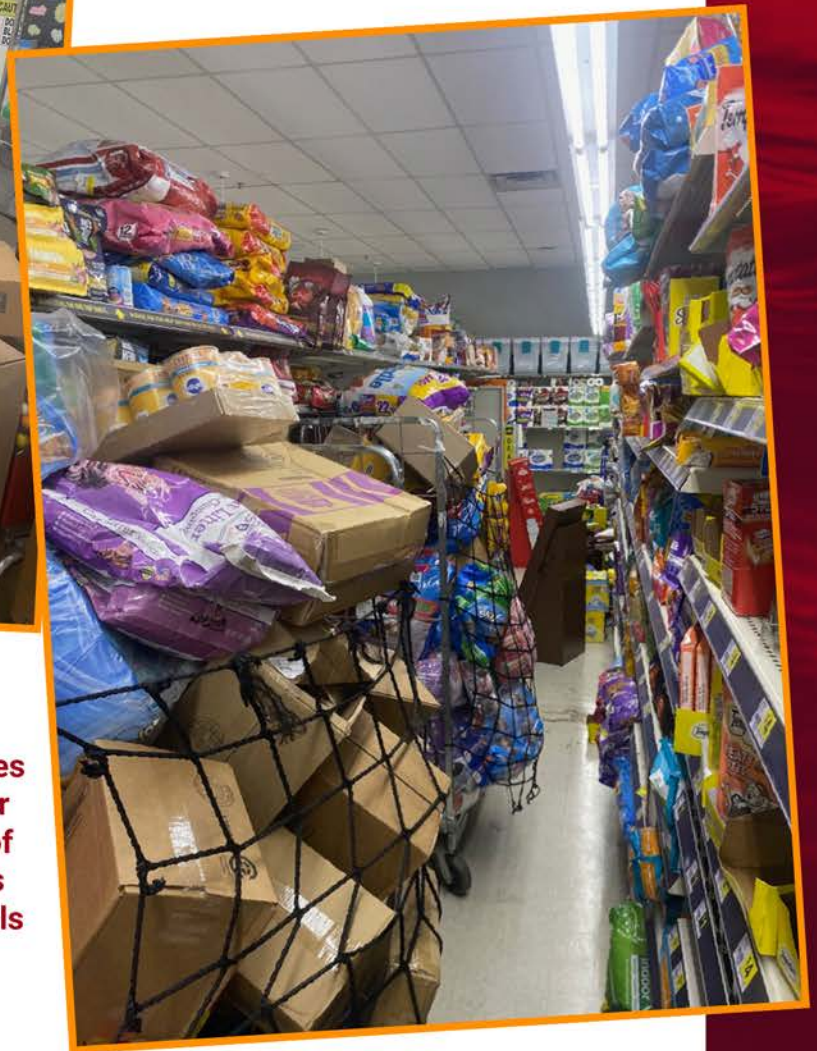
In East Baton Rouge Parish, surveyors identified potential violations in 46% of the stores they visited (29 of 63 stores).

In total, surveyors identified potential health and safety violations in 48% of the stores they visited (156 stores). Violations occurred across the diverse regions of the state and were not just relegated to large cities.

In some parishes, an overwhelming portion of stores had potential health and safety violations. Surveyors identified potential violations in 96% of stores visited in Ascension Parish (22/23 stores) and 87% of stores visited in Jefferson Parish (33/38 stores).



The danger of these potential violations are often very easy to recognize. For example, here is a blocked emergency exit identified on July 12, 2023 at a Family Dollar store in St. Bernard Parish.



In 41% of stores visited (131 stores) surveyors found handling violations, which includes an accumulation of boxes or materials that could cause tripping or that might contribute to the harboring of rats and other pests, boxes or materials blocking the aisles, or boxes or materials stacked so high that they are unstable. Surveyors found aisles blocked with boxes and unstocked products in this Dollar General in East Baton Rouge Parish on July 14, 2023.

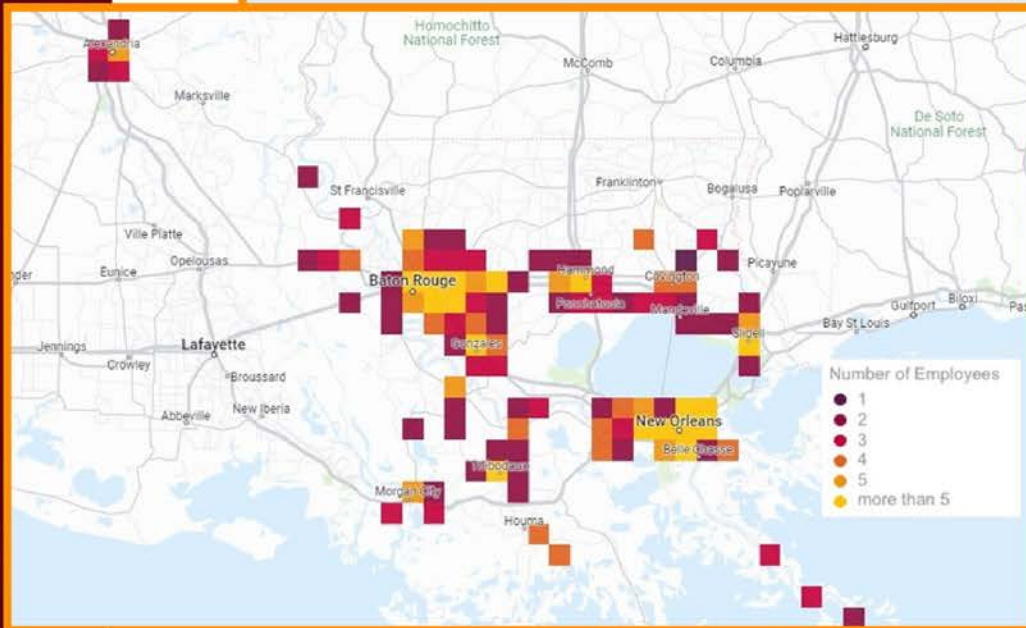
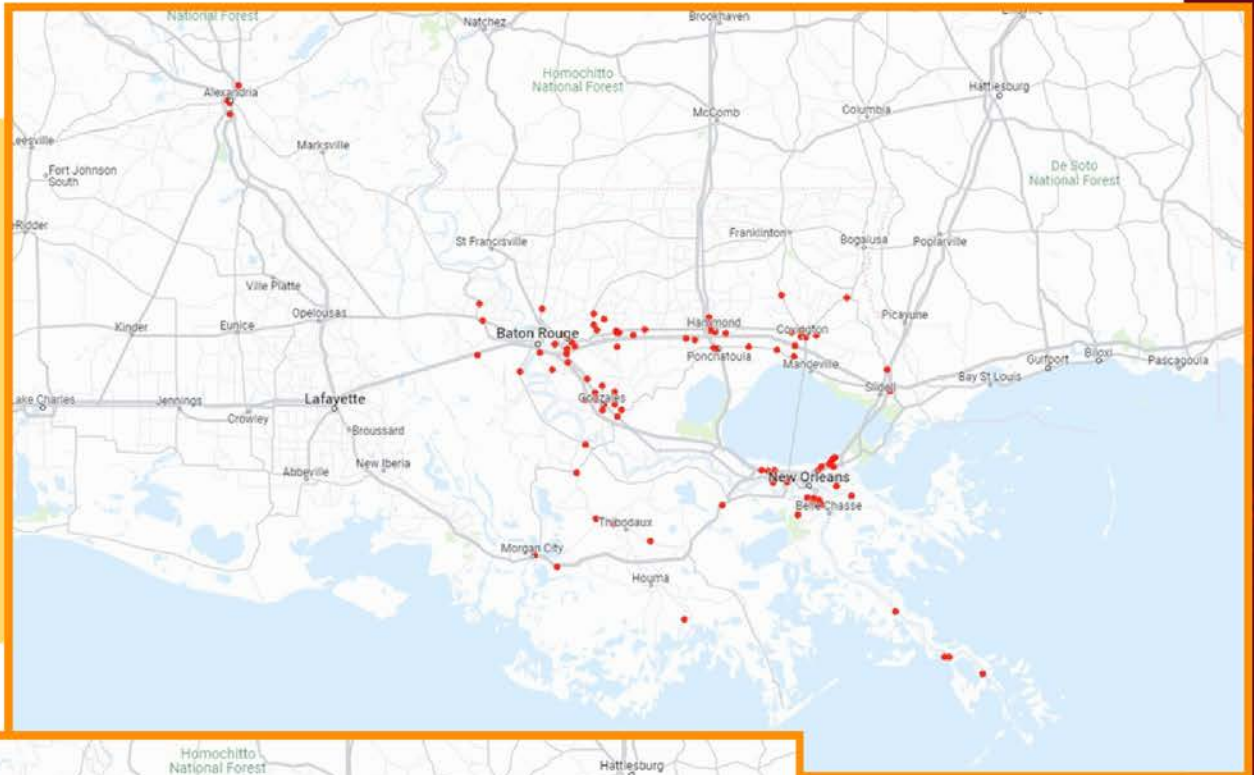
Handling violations also include boxes that are stacked so high that they are a hazard to workers and customers, such as these stacks found in a Family Dollar store in St. Charles Parish on July 11, 2023.



Sanitation violations can include active leaks and pools of water. Many of the stores visited had leaks, including this Dollar General in Orleans Parish visited on July 18, 2023.

In addition to logging possible OSHA violations, surveyors also looked for what Step Up Louisiana has identified as “serious safety concerns” in dollar stores. Serious safety concerns include stores with only one employee working, blocked emergency exits, a blocked line-of-sight from the front of the store to the register, or no working phone or panic button. Surveyors identified “serious safety concerns” in 32% of the stores they visited (103 stores). Thirty-seven percent of Dollar General stores visited during the project had serious safety concerns (64/174).

This map shows the stores where surveyors found at least one serious safety concern.



Understaffing in dollar stores makes it difficult to safely handle the volume of goods passing through stores and leaves them more vulnerable to theft and robbery. A shocking 59% of stores visited had only one or two employees working (189 stores). **Understaffing was a statewide problem, as evidenced by this heatmap.**

Methodology

In July 2023, a group of over 20 surveyors visited dollar stores in Louisiana to look for health and safety issues. The surveyors included members and staff of Step Up Louisiana along with staff of the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD). Before their visits, surveyors were trained by Step Up Louisiana and Center for Popular Democracy to be able identify common health and safety violations in dollar stores, violations for which the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has issued citations to Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar dating back to July 2022.

The surveyors visited 322 dollar stores in the greater New Orleans-Baton Rouge area. The dollar store locations were identified by CPD staff using the Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar store locator pages on the companies' websites, along with Google Maps searches of the area.

Each day, the surveyors were given lists of addresses, instructed to visit each site, and asked to use a Google Form questionnaire specifically created for this project. Surveyors were instructed to only inspect public areas of each store and were asked to record "yes or no" responses to questions like, "Is the emergency exit door of the store obstructed?" Surveyors recorded the number of employees working in the store and were given the opportunity to record additional information about their findings in open-ended fields on the Google Form. When possible, surveyors also talked to employees to learn whether there was a working phone line or panic button at the location.



Following the completion of the store visits, all recorded health and safety issues were grouped into five broad categories: exits violations, handling violations, electrical violations, fire extinguisher violations, and sanitation violations. A formula was used to count the number of observed violations in each category for each store, and to calculate the total number of observed violations. Additionally, observed violations that have been identified by Step Up Louisiana as "serious safety concerns" (stores with only one employee working, blocked emergency exits, blocked line-of-sight from the front of the store to the register, or no working phone or panic button) were aggregated to determine whether a store had serious health and safety concerns.

Policy Recommendations

Dollar General, Dollar Tree, and Family Dollar have not prioritized safety or invested in their workers and communities. Governments at every level also have the responsibility to protect workers and customers.

Louisiana State Policy Recommendations

- Define a Dollar Store as a retail store between 6,000-12,000 square feet where the majority of items sold are under \$5 and develop a set of policies to address needs;
- Require community safety managers at all Dollar Stores at all times;
- Ensure access to paid sick leave and paid family leave;
- Ensure access to paid leave after encountering a violent incident at work;
- Foster collaboration between federal, state, and local authorities to address crime prevention strategies;
- Develop a centralized federal database to collect and analyze data related to safety violations, labor practices, and community impacts within the dollar store industry;
- Utilize the database to monitor trends, identify areas of concern, and guide policy adjustments.

Federal Policy Recommendations

- Create a task force to enforce Wage and Hour, OSHA, and NLRA violations at Dollar Stores;
- Ensure access to paid sick leave and paid family leave;
- Change OSHA regulations to include protections for safety from physical violence;
- Collaborate with relevant agencies to comprehensively review and update Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) standards applicable to retail environments, specifically dollar stores;
- Establish specific guidelines addressing common safety concerns identified in Dollar Store settings, such as enforcing the late night retail guidelines checklist;
- Strengthen anti-retaliation measures to protect workers who report safety concerns or unfair labor practices;
- Implement federal oversight mechanisms for Dollar Store expansion;
- Allocate federal funds to support the implementation of security measures in Dollar Stores, especially those located in high-crime areas;
- Require enhanced security infrastructure, including surveillance systems and the presence of security personnel;
- Require Dollar Stores to share crime data with local law enforcement agencies.

Local Policy Recommendations

- Use zoning laws to require community engagement to promote safety at Dollars Stores;
- Evaluate store safety infrastructure and staffing levels.

Dollar Store Corporate Recommendations

Safe Staffing

- **WHY:** Full staffing is critical and promotes safety.
- **WE DEMAND DOLLAR GENERAL, DOLLAR TREE, AND FAMILY DOLLAR:**
 - Allocate enough hours and enough people to staff every store so no worker is ever alone, overstretched, or vulnerable.
 - Give additional hours to existing staff when they want it. Experienced workers mean safer stores.

Hire Community Safety Managers

- **WHY:** Having trained staff present at every shift is a powerful and simple way to promote safety.
- **WE DEMAND DOLLAR GENERAL, DOLLAR TREE, AND FAMILY DOLLAR:**
 - Create and hire a new staff position designated to promoting safety. Clearly reflect roles and responsibilities of this position within the job description, and provide staff additional compensation for these responsibilities.
 - Train Community Safety Managers in de-escalation and self-defense techniques.
 - Ensure the Community Safety Manager position will be in-house, not police personnel or private security contractors who escalate situations, protect property over community safety, and focus on arrests.
 - Create opportunities for Community Safety Managers to engage in community care and resource connection for people in need.

Store Infrastructure for Safety

- **WHY:** Every store should have a thoughtful and intentional layout with an emphasis on safety with every design decision.
- **WE DEMAND DOLLAR GENERAL, DOLLAR TREE, AND FAMILY DOLLAR:**
 - Design and maintain stores with layout and infrastructure that prioritizes safety.
 - Improve store visibility.
 - Ensure the customer service and cash register areas are visible from outside the establishment;
 - Place curved mirrors at hallway intersections or concealed areas.
 - Limit cash availability.
 - Use functional, discreet drop safes to limit the availability of cash, and post signs stating that cashiers have limited access to cash.
 - Prioritize prompt repairs of property damage, and close the store when the company is repairing damaged windows or store exteriors.
 - Provide a reliable response system where emergency medical personnel can easily support life threatening or emergency incidents if necessary.

A Right to Heal

- **WHY:** Workers should have support from their company, without fear of repercussions, when recovering from a violent work incident.
- **WE DEMAND DOLLAR GENERAL, DOLLAR TREE, AND FAMILY DOLLAR:**
 - Provide paid time off and compensation for mental health resources after exposure to harm, violence, or dangerous incidents in the workplace.

New Safety Code & Policy

- **WHY:** All changes to increase safety in the store through training and improved infrastructure should be institutionalized in a new safety code.
- **WE DEMAND DOLLAR GENERAL, DOLLAR TREE, AND FAMILY DOLLAR:**
 - Create and implement a new comprehensive safety code and policy;
 - Develop in-person training for all workers that includes response protocols for emergency situations focusing on de-escalation tactics to protect workers;
 - Fully inform all workers of their rights to safety in the workplace;
 - Ensure accountability through quarterly safety risk assessments in each store to ensure compliance and enforcement of safe workplaces.

Worker Input on All New Safety Practices

- **WHY:** Workers should have input on the new safety measures that are designed to keep them safe.
- **WE DEMAND DOLLAR GENERAL, DOLLAR TREE, AND FAMILY DOLLAR:**
 - Ensure that workers have a seat at the table in developing these new policies and training protocols.

“The part time DG employees barely make enough for household bills. What can you pay making \$10.50 per hour at 27 hours per week? Basically nothing. I shouldn't have to choose between paying rent and buying groceries.”

Brittany Claiborne

Dollar General, 2001 St Bernard Ave, New Orleans, LA



Endnotes

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