Wal-Mart's Impact on Local Police Costs

Many cities and towns are reporting that big-box retailers generate large numbers of police calls—far more than local businesses do. Shoplifting, check fraud, and traffic accidents are the most common causes. Each call can absorb hours of police time, creating new costs for local government and reducing police presence and response times in other areas.

Harrisville, Utah
Calls to the local police department climbed by one-third following the opening of a Wal-Mart supercenter, forcing the town to hire two more officers. (Associated Press, May 22, 2004)

Tucson, Arizona – For four years running, the Wal-Mart supercenter on the southwest side of town has generated more police calls than any other site in Tucson. Police responded to 908 calls in 2005 and 1,195 calls in 2004. Nearly half were for shoplifting. "Wal-Mart's aggressive security staff doesn't hesitate to call police," said a department spokesperson. (*Arizona Daily Star*, Jan. 11, 2006)

Vista, California — A constant stream of arrests at Wal-Mart contributed to a 24 percent rise in the crime rate. (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, Jun. 5, 2003)

Port Richey, Florida — One in four arrests are made at Wal-Mart, which is straining the police department. Since the store opened, non-emergency response times have risen significantly, while traffic citations have plummeted. The town hired one additional officer when Wal-Mart arrived and the police chief says they need two more, which would cost the city more than the $75,000 the store generates in tax revenue. (*St. Petersburg Times*, May 20, 2002)

Royal Palm Beach, Florida — The arrival of Home Depot, Lowe's, Wal-Mart, and other chains along State Road 7 has resulted in an additional 1,500 police calls each year, forcing the town to hire more officers and build a new police station near the retail strip. (*Sun-Sentinel*, Feb. 21, 2005)

Beech Grove, Indiana — The town hired an additional police officer at a total cost of $75,000 a year to handle the additional burden of a new Wal-Mart. (*The Indianapolis Star*, Mar. 17, 2004)

Fishers, Indiana — The town reported over 400 police calls a year from a Wal-Mart supercenter. (*The Indianapolis Star*, Mar. 17, 2004)

Photo by Ryan Ozawa

Epping, New Hampshire — Police Lieutenant Mike Wallace said, "Because there's a lot of time spent at Wal- Mart, the rest of the town is affected by that . . . There's not as much time for direct patrols." Town officials turned down Wal-Mart's request to have its store open 24-hours, because the store was already overburdening the police force. Calls to the police, arrests, and complaints filed at the store in its first four months of operation led to a 7.5 percent increase in the crime rate. (*Union Leader*, May 23, 2004 and Nov. 16, 2005)

Bethlehem, New York — After three years in business, Wal-Mart is a constant destination for police in this affluent Albany suburb. The supercenter, which was given a property tax break of nearly $50,000, has taxed cops to the tune of 1,175 calls for service since 2004. The developer of the store had predicted only a "minor impact" on police, estimating 4-5 calls a month in an impact report submitted to the town. "He was extremely low on his estimate," Bethlehem Police Lt. Thomas Heffernan said. (*The Times Union*, Dec. 28, 2006)

Dallas, Texas
Small towns are not the only ones reporting problems. A memo from the Police Department said a new Wal-Mart store would dramatically increase the workload for officers and result in longer response times for calls. (*The Dallas Morning News*, Jun. 5, 2002)

Pineville, North Carolina — The town added some six million square feet of new retail, including a major shopping center, big-box stores, chain restaurants, and gas stations. But the stores are costing the town a fortune in police time, forcing Pineville to raise property tax rates across the board in 2002. (*Charlotte Observer*, May 28, 2003)

Canton, Ohio — In the first half of 2008, Canton police were called to the city's two Wal-Mart stores a total of 425 times. Shoplifting accusations accounted for 190 of those calls. The crime-related problems faced by both stores are a problem for the Canton Municipal Courts, so much that Court Administrator Michael Kochera said an additional bailiff may be hired just to handle booking misdemeanor offenders. (*Canton Repository*, Jul. 16, 2008)

Moraine, Ohio — Police calls almost tripled after a Wal-Mart opened in 2003. (*Dayton Daily News*, Aug. 11, 2005)

East Lampeter, Pennsylvania — District Judge Ronald Savage has had to add more days to his monthly court calendar just to deal with crimes at Wal-Mart, which generates almost one-third of his non-traffic criminal violations, criminal misdemeanors, and felony complaints—a number the judge described as "astronomical." (*Intelligencer Journal*, Aug. 18, 2003)

Ephrata, Pennsylvania — A 203,000-square-foot Wal-Mart had dramatically increased the police force's workload. "Bad checks, use of stolen credit cards. ... During a busy week, we'll have three to five retail theft arrests, and with each arrest, that ties up an officer who has to go down, take a person into custody' and follow up with paperwork and possibly a court appearance," said police detective Brad Ortenzi. (*Sunday News*, Jun. 8, 2003)

North Lebanon, Pennsylvania — A new Wal-Mart generates 200 police calls a year for this small township. "If we had known the number of calls, we probably would have considered an increase in officers," police chief Kim Wolfe said. "We just had no idea what it would be like. It doesn't matter what time of the day or night; we get calls there." (*The Lebanon Daily News*, Jan. 27, 2005)

South Strabane, Pennsylvania — South Strabane police have experienced a sharp rise in calls since Wal-Mart opened in 2000. Wal-Mart generates more police calls than any other place in town, averaging about one a day, which strains the 15-man force. "It's a burden. It costs me overtime," police Chief Don Zofchak said, noting the department has had to cut back on neighborhood patrols because of Wal-Mart. Officials have not undertaken a fiscal impact study and do not know whether Wal-Mart costs the town more than it generates in tax revenue. (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 27, 2005)

West Sadsbury, Pennsylvania — Police calls rose dramatically when Wal-Mart opened. "It has overwhelmed us at times," according to Police Chief John Slauch, who said added tax revenue from the store did not cover the extra costs. (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, Apr. 12, 2004)

Rock Hill, South Carolina — Rock Hill Police Chief John Gregory needs to hire six more patrol officers, a major issue as the city works out its annual budget. Police are expecting a new burden when a second Wal-Mart supercenter opens, generating waves of traffic and the potential for hundreds of more calls. The existing Wal-Mart is the top location for car accidents in the city. (*The Herald*, Apr. 17, 2008)

Woodstock, Virginia — The chief of police reported that one-quarter of the town's police calls in 2001—127 calls in all—were for Wal-Mart. He described it as a "nightmare." (Memo from the Front Royal, Virginia, Chief of Police, 2003)