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Wal-Mart's Impact on Local Police Costs

Many cities and towns across the country are reporting that big-box retailers are generating large numbers of police calls—far more than local businesses do.

One reason for this is that Wal-Mart and other big chains, as a matter of company-wide policy, involve the police in every incident, no matter how small. While someone caught shoplifting a \$3 item from a local store might simply be told by the owner never to come back, that same \$3 shoplifting incident at Wal-Mart will cost the city hours of police time in responding to the call, filling out paperwork, and a possible court appearance.

Another factor is that big-box stores seem to attract criminals passing through, particularly those outlets located near a highway interchange and open 24 hours. Perhaps they prefer the anonymity of a supercenter's aisles to the intimate environment of Bob's Hardware on Main Street, where Bob himself greets you from behind the counter.

Below we have culled reports of this problem from around the country. Studies have found that big-box stores can also increase other municipal costs, particularly road maintenance, and eliminate tax revenue from small businesses that are forced to close or downsize. Altogether, these costs may even *exceed* the tax revenue a big-box store generates.

For more on these studies, go to www.HometownAdvantage.org.

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 local 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 that 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)

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. 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)

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)

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)

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)

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)