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Wal-Mart shoplifters strain police services

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The 58-year-old man was caught stealing Sea Bond denture cream from Wal-Mart.

Its price, including tax: \$3.87.

Wal-Mart nabbed him and called Port Richey police. The cops working that Wednesday night in March headed to the supercenter for the second time in less than 40 minutes - each time to arrest a shoplifter.

Wal-Mart's national policy requires that when someone steals, it presses charges, even for denture cream. That's meant a lot of work for the city's 14-member police force, so much so that the police are:

- + Taking longer to respond to other calls.
- + Working extended overtime.
- + Looking to hire more officers.
- + Writing half as many traffic tickets.

Today, one in every four arrests made by the department is made at just one location: Wal-Mart.

Where are the police?

Greg Burkett of Port Richey couldn't find a police officer, even at the police station.

The 49-year-old lost his cellular phone in December while trying to break up a road-rage incident on U.S. 19. Frustrated and upset, he drove to the Police Department about 8:45 p.m.

"I assumed that within a reasonable amount of time somebody would have been free to take my report," Burkett said.

It didn't happen like that, he said.

When he got there, no one was free. He was told to wait around or come back later. He left.

An hour later, he returned. Chief William Downs - stuck in the office because of an onslaught of calls - took his report. No other officers were free.

Downs said his men were tied up with shoplifters from Wal-Mart.

"It's absolutely ridiculous to take the whole force off the road for a Wal-Mart theft," Burkett said. "They don't focus on the things that are really important."

Downs said he doesn't have a choice. If Wal-Mart calls, the police must respond. And that makes others wait.

"Our response times are, in some cases, slower," he said. "Our calls are backed up now more than ever before."

Based on a Times analysis of Port Richey police response times, which are compiled as monthly averages, Downs is correct.

The Times compared the monthly averages the 12 months before Wal-Mart opened to the 12 months after it opened. They show no significant slowing in responses to serious incidents such as an alarm sounding, a domestic dispute, an auto burglary or a crash.

"If there's somebody at your door with a knife or hatchet chopping your door down, somebody will still be there," Downs said.

But when it comes to not-so-serious citizen services, the monthly averages climbed after Wal-Mart arrived.

Two examples that stand out:

If someone called police to report a drunk or suspicious person, it took police longer to arrive. (In the year before Wal-Mart opened, they never took longer than 8 minutes to respond to a drunken pedestrian call. In the year after, they took as long as 51 minutes to respond.)

If someone complained about noise, it took police longer to get there. (In the year before Wal-Mart, the police's average response time was never higher than 8 minutes for a given month. In the year after, it was 8 minutes or higher for six of the 12 months.)

The night Burkett came to the station, officers were guarding four Wal-Mart shoplifters in holding cells at the police station, Downs said. Two officers at a time typically patrol

Port Richey (population 3,021). For safety's sake, they respond in tandem. So when someone is arrested at Wal-Mart, the city's only officers are inside the mega-retailer.

Shoplifting cases often keep them off the streets for hours. There are other types of cases as well. In the parking lot, kids are left alone in cars. Cars bump into each other. In the store, people trespass and have domestic disputes.

A supercenter will open late this summer in Zephyrhills. Chief Downs has some advice:

"You might want to consider additional personnel," he said, "otherwise your other areas of services may suffer."

Mandatory overtime

When it opened March 14, 2001, on the formerly blighted lot at Ridge Road and U.S. 19, Wal-Mart was touted as an economic boon to Port Richey. It will pay about \$75,000 in property taxes this year.

Downs looked at it as an entire shopping center under one roof. He knew the store would create work for his department. Just before it opened, he had 13 full-time officers - including himself, a lieutenant and a detective.

He asked the City Council for two more. It gave him one.

Now, he has ordered his officers to work mandatory overtime. The Police Department was budgeted to spend \$22,180 on overtime this fiscal year, which started Oct. 1, 2001, and runs through September.

Through April, it had already spent \$72,275, city finance officials said. That puts the department on pace to spend more than six times its budget.

Much of that has to do with vacancies, but extra calls at Wal-Mart ensured that the police could not slide by with just one officer on patrol, officials said.

Two officers logged an average of 10 overtime hours per week last year. Several others were close behind.

"My fear is the officers are going to become tired and possibly ineffective in their duties," Downs said.

Wal-Mart's impact is widespread:

- + From March 14 through Dec. 31, 23.5 percent of the people arrested in Port Richey were arrested at Wal-Mart.

- + From its opening until year's end, Wal-Mart was responsible for one in every 16 calls

for a Port Richey officer.

+ Over the past six years, the most calls for police came from the mobile park on River Gulf Drive (average of 125 per year) and the nursing home on Pine Hill Drive (50 per year). In just 9 1/2 months last year, an officer was called to Wal-Mart more than 400 times.

This year, Downs will ask the City Council for two new officers because of the rising number of calls. Police officers start at \$26,818 a year.

Sacrificing service

Port Richey police pride themselves on offering small-town courtesies.

"We're trying to do more of that," said Lt. Bill Sager, the agency's No. 2 man. "If (people) see you trying to do those things, they know you care."

But already officers are sacrificing duties that previously were routine.

During the day, officers check a list of homes for anything suspicious. Absentee snowbirds and residents on vacation can add their home to the list.

At night, officers stop at businesses to check for unlocked doors or prowlers.

"The time with the calls to Wal-Mart and the arrests, of course, has had an effect on our ability to perform our other duties," Downs said. "I can't get specific because I don't have numbers."

The Times found some.

Traffic tickets are one of the best ways to measure Wal-Mart's impact. Most police work is reactive, but tickets are proactive. Officers only write them when they have time. According to county records:

In March through December 2000, Port Richey police issued 2,069 tickets.

In the same 10 months after Wal-Mart's March 2001 opening, they issued 1,077.

"Traffic enforcement to me is a top priority because it saves lives," Downs said. "We don't have as much time to do it as we did before."

Who pays?

In Beloit, Wis., (population 35,775) Wal-Mart gave the police space for a substation inside its store.

In North Versailles, Pa. (population 11,125) Wal-Mart sparked development that caused the police force to grow from 10 to 26 officers over the past four years.

In Tappahannock, Va., (population 2,068) Wal-Mart "is a strain on services," Police Chief James Barrett said.

"If they moved out tomorrow," Barrett said, "it wouldn't upset me."

But the eastern Virginia town's supercenter has eased the police burden by hiring off-duty officers as weekend night security guards. So Wal-Mart is footing some of the bill for extra police work.

Not so in Port Richey.

Store manager Rick Serina had little to say to the Times and scoffed at the notion of paying for police.

"As a citizen and a taxpayer I expect them to take care of my needs," he said.

When told of the high percentage of arrests his store generates, Serina said, "Apparently their case load was pretty soft before."

Then he referred all questions to regional and national officials at the headquarters of the No. 1 Fortune 500 company.

National spokesman Tom Williams in Bentonville, Ark., said he had never heard of any of the nearly 1,100 supercenter stores overwhelming police. He said store managers have the authority to hire off-duty police and that his company actively seeks out shoplifters.

"We don't wink and nod when someone tries to take merchandise from us," he said.

"Anything that's going to affect our everyday low prices, we tend to get itchy."

For proof of that, look no further than the smiling greeter at the door, said Bob Ortega, who authored *In Sam We Trust*. A large part of the greeter's job is to deter shoplifting.

Wal-Mart operates with a thin profit margin and can't afford to lose merchandise, said Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Ellen Dunham-Jones, who has written about the impact of Wal-Mart on towns. The company's surveillance is top-notch, said Iowa State University professor Kenneth Stone, who has extensively studied the impact of Wal-Marts on small towns.

Stone said he has never examined the effect on police departments, but it makes sense that a town could be overwhelmed. Small town governments often don't prepare for the stores, he said.

"The city councils get so enamored with trying to get these stores in with all their

property taxes, that they don't even think of all the downsides such as services they'll require," he said.

The Port Richey Wal-Mart moved from county property on U.S. 19 into the 230,000-square-foot supercenter at Ridge and 19. Since then, its loss prevention workers have caught 20 to 30 percent more shoplifters, officials said. What used to be handled by the Sheriff's Office, which has 250 deputies responding to calls, is now the responsibility of the Police Department, which has 11 patrol officers.

The Sheriff's Office barely notices the impact of a Wal-Mart, spokesman Kevin Doll said.

"It's hard for us to just focus on new large businesses," he said. "We have more far-reaching responsibilities than some of the smaller police departments."

The Zephyrhills supercenter under construction will replace the existing Wal-Mart, which is already in the city limits. Police Chief Robert Howell said he expects it to have little additional impact on his force, which is more than twice the size of Port Richey's.

"A very small percentage of our calls are from Wal-Mart," Howell said.

After learning of the effect on Port Richey, professor Stone said he planned to look into the phenomenon.

Taking a bite out of crime

On a Wednesday night in March, Cpl. Jay Galassi took his regular seat in the Wal-Mart office. He was surrounded by 12 VCRs recording from security cameras and a shopping bin of Neutrogena makeup, berry sponge cake Smackers and other items seized from would-be shoplifters.

The most recent shoplifter clutched his dentures in his right hand. He had a job interview the next day, he said, and only \$3 in his pocket.

Galassi read the denture cream thief his Miranda rights, filled out an arrest report, completed a trespass form, took fingerprints, took pictures of the suspect and cream and searched the man.

"You can put down your teeth if you want to," Galassi told the man as he patted him.

Galassi finished his work in record time, 25 minutes. But he still had nearly an hour of arrest paperwork to complete at the station. He would get to that later. Now there was a report of a man with knife trying to kill himself.

He had to go.

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