

# Tampa, Florida area police operate as guardians of Walmart's profits

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A special investigative report performed by the *Tampa Bay Times* and published in their Sunday newspaper this week provides details on the extent to which police departments in the Tampa, Florida area have become an effective private security force for retail giant Walmart.

The report shows that during one year, law enforcement logged 16,800 calls from Walmart stores in Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, and Hernando counties, which is roughly two calls every hour, every day.

The calls, according to the report, are made for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from removing panhandlers, settling parking disputes, arresting people for petty theft (one man was arrested for drinking a 98-cent iced tea without paying), and checking on "foul-mouthed" teenagers. One Tampa police officer interviewed by the *Times* stated that Walmarts are "a huge problem in terms of the amount of time that's spent there. We are, as a department, at the mercy of what they want to do."

The report relates that retail theft arrests nearly doubled at one particular store in Zephyrhills during the first six months of 2015. The authors of the report note that Walmart stores are "natural" targets for shoplifters and panhandlers due to heavy amounts of foot traffic and their "cavernous" layouts. They are also often located in disadvantaged areas. An increase in the number of shoplifters is a reflection of a deep and worsening social crisis affecting broad layers of the population who shop in these stores.

More than any other retailer, Walmart caters to low-income shoppers and consistently opens stores in neighborhoods where the threat of crime is higher. The reports refer to experts who insist that Walmart knows this but does not do enough to address these problems,

despite having a mountain of resources. They instead rely on taxpayer-funded police officers to do their security work for them.

The report goes on to suggest that one of the drivers of this strategy is the razor-thin margin Walmart operates within. Even the theft of a \$4 pair of socks, the report relates, can negatively affect the return of a further \$100 in sales. The retailer therefore relies heavily on the police to protect its bottom line. They quote Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, who famously wrote in his autobiography that theft is "one of the biggest enemies of profitability."

One of the conclusions drawn by the report is that Walmart makes enough money to hire their own private security and that the problem would be solved with the presence of uniformed security guards or better training of managers and associates. This solution is predicated on the main thrust of the report, that Walmart is irresponsibly wasting taxpayer money, not that the problem is the result of a prolonged social and economic crisis. This is despite interviews, like one from a former Walmart employee, who concluded that many shoppers "are struggling, so there's just a lot of stress."

While some of the police officers who the *Times* interviewed spoke negatively about Walmart using them for private security, others defended the retail giant. Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gaultieri insisted in an interview that Walmart is a "commercial citizen" that pays taxes and is entitled to these government services. It "doesn't deserve to get ripped off by people," he argued. The *Times*' report responded to this by pointing out that Walmart uses an inordinate amount of government resources compared to other similar outlets in the area like Target and Publix, and even high-end shopping malls. Their studies show that Walmart's

volume of calls is consistently larger than the percent of taxes it contributes.

A Walmart spokesperson sought to deflect this criticism by pointing to the millions of dollars the company contributes to charities across all of Florida, including toy drives and sponsored community events—painting the company as a generous benefactor that creates job opportunities and strengthens communities. Here the Walmart executives are to be revered and communities should be happy to support them with a public police force.

One result of the barrage of calls coming from Walmart locations around the clock is that many officers routinely show up at Walmart stores without even being called. One officer told reporters, “Look, I either get called there later, or I go there now and prevent things.”

The former employee quoted above stated that he sometimes saw patrol cars parked near the supercenter in which he worked, even when nothing was happening. “It’s almost like they were kind of waiting to get a call.”

A former assistant police chief who worked for Tampa police told the *Times* that shift supervisors would conduct daily roll call in Walmart parking lots and they would even park a jail transport van outside the store for good measure, hoping to “stop troublemakers before they even walked inside the store.” Reporters found that these police operations happened exclusively at Walmart as opposed to other retail stores.

The report’s web site features visual aids and security camera footage to highlight the data they have collected, and many examples are given that highlight the large amounts of public funds utilized to protect Walmart’s profit margins. The aforementioned man who was arrested for drinking a 98-cent bottle of sweet tea spent 10 days in jail, had to post bail, and ultimately cost the county \$1,230.



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