

A Critical Review of: *Crime and Wal-Mart- "Is Wal-Mart Safe?"*

Read Hayes, PhD, CPP

**Loss Prevention Research Council, and
Loss Prevention Research Team, University of Florida**

Good research often generates more questions than it answers. But so does poor research. A brief review of the May 1, 2006 white paper *Crime and Wal-Mart- "Is Wal-Mart Safe?"*: *An Analysis of Official Police Incidents at Wal-Mart Stores* raises many questions about the motives, methods and conclusions of its unnamed authors due to serious and avoidable flaws.

The Wal-Mart paper starts out in part headlined "...*An Analysis of Official Police Incidents at Wal-Mart Stores*," possibly leading readers to look for an analysis of problems with police officers rather than a look at police calls for service on a sampling of Wal-Mart store properties (the study's authors presumably meant to indicate their paper provided a look at police incident reports rather than police incidents). The problem with the paper's title is mentioned since it sets the stage for further confusion created by this report as it continues onward. The study authors start out the paper's initial summary with claims that there is a growing public debate on crime levels on Wal-Mart properties, as well as a claim that anecdotal news accounts of crimes on Wal-Mart (WM) properties have raised a public concern that WM stores may be a magnet for crime. The study authors do not however provide readers with supporting research literature citations for their claims - thereby immediately reducing the credibility of the study's basis and thesis.

The authors also purport their paper provides rate of crime differences between a very small sample of Wal-Mart versus Target stores, when it appears only raw reported crime level data are cited. Crime data are made more relevant and useful when rates per thousand visitors, store square footage and/or store sales revenue are used. Further, the paper's retailer crime level comparisons are for distant stores (a ten mile radius can be considered quite large in urban and suburban environments due to significant demographic and transportation mode changes and differences in relatively short distances; these differences can influence crime event rates).

The white paper also presented data that are not easy to reference, or even very useful, in their current format. The paper fails to segment the collected crime incident data into usable categories such as address of origin (for example- crime started versus ended on WM property), by victim such as WM (as in store robberies, burglaries and shoplifting), versus individuals (such as customer, employee and other visitor), or even by WM property location (such as parking lot, store interior, etc.).

The paper's authors unfortunately also commit a very serious mistake by extending their stated conclusions and recommendations way beyond the scope of the data they collected and cite. A scan of this white paper shows its authors looked at case reports and summaries provided by law enforcement agencies. These reports provide a description of reported problems and crime types on Wal-Mart properties, as well as the names of involved people, and other incident information. Also reported collected for the paper

were some crime incident and public hearing news accounts, and a 1996 *Security Management* article. But the study authors do not mention their analyzing tax and cost data, crime control research literature, or any original crime reduction field experiment or survey data of their own. Incredibly, despite the lack of any taxpayer cost versus benefit data, or crime control efficacy data, the paper's authors go on to estimate the possible costs of hosting Wal-Mart stores for local taxpayers, as well as to estimate the cost to Wal-Mart of providing roving parking lot patrols at all of their stores.

In the first case, the unnamed authors' failure to rigorously collect and analyze, or even cite the work of any empirical studies on the costs and benefits of hosting Wal-Mart (or any other retail stores) does not provide the reader any credible or useful information on this topic. The current study might have been useful if overall crime levels and rates in a given city or county boundary had been shown to have substantively changed after a WM store was opened- after controlling for other explanatory factors.

Likewise, the decision by the author(s) not to cite or even mention any research findings on whether or not guards or roving patrols actually affect offender decision-making, or known crime levels (the efficacy and/or cost effectiveness of these efforts) renders this report useless for community leaders, law enforcement officials or retail executives on the subject of crime control. It might have been somewhat useful if the author(s) at least provided data on whether the Target stores they reported had lower crime levels used roving patrols, when the "nearby" Wal-Mart stores that were reported to have higher crime levels did not. Additionally, it could be helpful to know if any, or how many, of the Wal-Mart stores that are specifically mentioned in the paper had roving patrols on duty at the time of the reported crimes, versus the percentage of stores where a highlighted crime took place did not.

In conclusion, the reviewed paper did not provide useful information due to its unsupported premise, poor research design, confusing data reporting, and the proclamation of conclusions that go far beyond any collected data. Despite these concerns, the study authors might consider revealing their identity, and sharing their data with other researchers to rigorously search for useful clues to enhancing protection.

This research review was conducted for the Retail Industry Leaders Association on May 15, 2006.