

Earlier this week, Bloomberg published an article that referenced the Wal-Mart in Tulsa, OK. That article indulged in two of modern journalism's favorite pastimes:

- 1) Sensationalizing a local issue to whip up populist anger, and
- 2) Beating up on Wal-Mart

Don't believe me? When was the last article you read that cast anything relating to Wal-Mart in a positive light?

The article highlights the high number of call volumes at some Wal-Mart supercenters due to shoplifting and other crimes. What is lacking is any context.

The Wal-Mart mentioned in the article is the farthest north big box store in Tulsa. The next closest are about 2 miles further south. It is an island of retail in a sea of blight.

North Tulsa has no retail to speak of, other than dollar stores (which are getting stolen from so often that they hired off-duty Tulsa Police). The police presence hasn't really curtailed the theft – as much as it has moved it to the stores that aren't covered by officers.

Every grocery store that has opened for the last 10 years within 4 miles of there has closed because of unsustainable theft.

K-Mart closed a store (back when K-Mart was still profitable) a mile down the road because of theft. A nationally known drug chain hires 3<sup>rd</sup> party LP to make apprehensions at their North Tulsa stores, while their competitor has in-house LP. All of them stay very busy.

North Tulsa is wrapped in crime and poverty. That Walmart is just the closest point for people to steal from.

Also the local flea market is walking distance away – so it's easy to convert stolen goods to cash there. Shoplifting arrests in Tulsa of misdemeanor amounts (currently less than \$500 – going up to \$1000 November 1<sup>st</sup>) are treated as municipal infractions.

The shoplifter is issued a summons to appear in city court 30 days later – where they are routinely given a sentence of 30 days suspended, a \$500 fine and \$125 in court costs if they plead guilty. After that 30 days, the conviction goes away.

It's a routine occurrence in Tulsa to arrest a shoplifter who still has their copy of a summons from their last shoplifting arrest in their wallet/purse. Sometimes issued the same day!

That Wal-Mart reportedly does about 1,300 shoplifters per year. In comparison, the four anchor stores of Woodland Hills Mall in south Tulsa do about 1,200 per year between them (this information is drawn from the Tulsa Police website Crime mapping tool plus a bit of insider knowledge).

Since that is broken up between four separate addresses – it doesn't draw Tulsa Police's ire quite the same way, even though they both occupy roughly the same size footprint.

Tulsa Police Sergeant Robert Rohloff is quoted in the article with his complaints about his squad being tied up for hours on end at the north Tulsa Wal-Mart. I agree with him – having to deal with the same problem in the same place day after day gets tiresome. However, his frustration is misdirected at the victim instead of the perpetrators.

This is where 'context' is important. Part of the reason Sgt Rohloff's squad is "tied up" there, is that 14 years ago – TPD entered into a settlement with the Tulsa Police Black Officers Coalition.

This was a response to a federal civil rights case filed by the BOC, alleging (among other things) that white officers routinely failed to back up black officers on calls.

In response to that, TPD mandated by policy that two officers will be ASSIGNED to every call.

So now, whereas most departments send just one officer to write a ticket to a shoplifter in custody – TPD sends TWO. One to write the ticket, one to hold up a wall.

Of course this depletes his squad.

TPD is already understaffed – then adding to the problem is that they still assign squad positions every August to officers who have already submitted retirement paperwork, and are using up their accrued vacation/leave time before exiting. In essence – filling a spot with someone who will never be there.

Tulsa Police has had layoffs and canceled academies, and their staffing has never recovered.

In addition to this, Tulsa Police still uses an almost 40-year-old paper based reporting system called TRACIS for every arrest. This system requires a *minimum* of three paper pages be filled out by hand for every arrest: A narrative, a subject information cover sheet, and a property list. This paperwork then has to be turned in by the officer, and hand entered into the computer later, then shredded.

Never mind that almost every LP agent/manager in the city fills out this paperwork for the officer before he arrives – while also filling out their in-house report. It is a horribly inefficient way to handle calls for police and Loss Prevention alike.

By comparison Oklahoma City Police Department, 91 miles down the turnpike responds with only one officer, and will accept the retailer's in house report of the incident, if they take any paperwork at all.

Another part of the problem is the disconnect between our experience as LP Professionals, and the experience of someone coming from a strictly Law Enforcement background. Sgt Rohloff demanded that Wal-Mart “take out” all Self-Checkouts. Of course, that didn't happen.

He also insinuated that WM should hire off-duty police officers to curtail theft – even though there is zero proof they reduce theft, are a tremendous expense, and have zero extra arrest powers beyond LP when being paid by private employers (See: Dillard's). Other ‘helpful’ ideas that were suggested to Wal-Mart in meetings to deal with their theft problems included: “If you think someone is going to steal – why don't you just confront them and kick them out of your store?” (ummm, maybe because we don't want to get sued?), or “Why don't you just lock up all of the merchandise? (Service Merchandise tried that. How'd that work out for them?)”.

During this time, Tulsa Police have not substantially changed how *they* respond to this address. No use of Volunteer Reserve officers to take these calls (Tulsa Police has a wonderful Reserve Officer program - not to be confused with the infamous Reserve Deputy program at Tulsa County Sheriff's office). No responding with less than two officers. Not one more officer has been added to that squad. No changing the way the time killing reports are filled out (although there is a push to switch to a computer based system underway). Despite all of this, *some* in law enforcement feel free to publicly pressure Wal-Mart to change their operations. Who works for who here?

Tulsa Police are funded through the City of Tulsa general fund. The City of Tulsa does not collect property taxes. They are almost entirely funded through sales tax collections. Tulsa is also an ‘oil town’. As the price of oil has dropped, so have sales tax revenues needed to fund vital city services – including public safety (note: this year the city did pass a dedicated sales tax solely to fund public safety).

Of all of the retail locations in Tulsa, the locations that collect more sales tax revenue for the city than any other are Wal-Mart supercenters. An estimated \$3.1 million dollars per year flow from each supercenter into city coffers.

In addition – each one of those misdemeanor shoplifting arrests that seems to be a point of contention in the article results in a \$500 fine (+\$125 court costs) collected upon conviction. That's roughly an extra \$650,000 in fines collected annually from Wal-Mart shoplifting convictions. Just for reference – staffing

the store with a full time off duty police officer at \$35/hr would cost a reported \$150,000 per year. If the complaints about an officer being tasked full time to that store are taken at face value – Wal-Mart has paid for that staffing, PLUS an extra \$500,000 to the city!

Despite what the press would have you believe, there is no disharmony between Tulsa Police and the retail community. Tulsa Police has been and will continue to be wonderful partners. They have an amazing Organized Retail Crime unit that is among the best in the country. Dedicated street officers are consistently going out of their way to work with retail to get a handle on our exploding property crime rates (among the highest in the country according to FBI uniform crime statistics).

The press loves to sensationalize. It sells papers and attracts clicks and let's face it, Wal-Mart is an easy target. If you want to whip up uninformed anger in the press – tell people that Wal-Mart is mooching off of them. If you want to be intellectually honest however, you'll be sure to tell people that they're paying for that theft through higher prices. The estimated \$2 million in sales taxes that Tulsa loses to stolen merchandise annually doesn't help fix the roads or put out the fires – and costs the city a lot more than an officer filling out shoplifting tickets his whole shift.

There is a reason that no other national retailer has moved into the area this Wal-Mart occupies. This Wal-Mart operates just like the Wal-Mart seven miles south of it that doesn't have the same theft problems. The problem is the location – not the retailer.