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SPRAWL AND WORK-FAMILY BALANCE  

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Katharine B. Silbaugh
Essay

Wal-Mart's Other Woman Problem: Sprawl and Work-Family Balance

KATHARINE B. SILBAUGH*

I. INTRODUCTION

Wal-Mart has been criticized as well as sued for its treatment of women employees. The retailer is under ever increasing scrutiny in the media and among lawmakers for its employment practices. This brief Essay asks about the other women affected by Wal-Mart: its shoppers. It argues that contrary to intuitions, over the long-term Wal-Mart may increase the time and financial pressures that women attempting to manage work and family obligations experience.

Wal-Mart has long-term effects on local development, and either encourages or emblemizes sprawl. Sprawl increases travel times and reliance on cars, and is not easily reversed as it becomes built into the environment. The price paid by consumers in time and travel resources is born almost completely by the consumers themselves. Little of that cost is internalized by Wal-Mart and other large retail stores. In the short term, we can attribute this to consumer choice: many consumers are choosing Wal-Mart’s lower prices over the convenience of a higher-priced local retail store. But it is harder to attribute to consumer choice the long-term effects of the built environment on people’s daily lives. The consumer does not experience the choice to shop at Wal-Mart as a choice to give up

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the availability of closer goods altogether, although over time the choice to shop at Wal-Mart has just that effect.

There is an increase in logistical burdens that accompanies the closing of Wal-Mart’s smaller competitor stores. When Wal-Mart’s price competition drives local retail and grocery stores out of business, it creates “deserts,” where these goods are no longer available anywhere but at a distant Wal-Mart. This leads to a reduction in an individual’s choice over how to use her time; she must spend more time traveling to purchase necessities in Wal-Mart’s world of centralized retail and grocery buying. The consumer’s time spent on travel becomes a by-product of both the built environment and the competitive economic effects of Wal-Mart.

The market does not easily adjust to these changes by modifying prices. This may be because of the significant capital expenses associated with opening and closing retail businesses by small owners, as well as the inability of small business owners to obtain the regulatory relief Wal-Mart obtains from local government units. It may be that consumers respond to low pricing rather than time pressures because their decision-making process does not include deliberately connecting and balancing the two. The consumer does not identify land use planning as a focal point in responding to the contemporary time crunch. It may also be because residential development planning, which has its own market and non-market engines, interacts with sprawled retail development to the advantage of big-box retailers. When local stores lose a portion of their business they cannot survive on the consumer base that remains. Convenience becomes a public good, one not easily obtained by a single individual consumer.

These prices are paid by women, who are the overwhelming majority of Wal-Mart’s shoppers, as well as by their dependents. Most of these Wal-Mart shoppers are starved for time in much the way they are starved for money. They can choose to shop Wal-Mart for its low prices at times, and shop local retail for convenience at other times, only until the local retail disappears. The short-term need for low-cost goods prevails over the

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3 Id.

long-term cost of reduced regional availability of goods. These consumers are unlikely to blame Wal-Mart for the time pressures it may add to their lives. Becoming habituated to longer drives, they may not see their consumer decision-making as tied to reduction in control over their time.

II. WAL-MART’S SHOPPERS: CASH AND TIME-STARVED WOMEN

Most of Wal-Mart’s consumers are middle to low-income women. The availability of low-cost goods is very attractive to the Wal-Mart shopper, who is more price-sensitive due to her more limited means than are upper and middle class shoppers. At the same time, exactly this demographic experiences greater time pressures than their middle and upper class counterparts as well. Low-income workers are less likely to have access to professional elder care, professional childcare, a car, flexible scheduling at work, expensive household labor replacement services, or paid family leave. The time pressures familiar to all families fall more heavily on those whose wages can necessitate working more than one job and whose inability to afford care for dependents can mean swing shifts.

III. WAL-MART’S SITING: A DESTINATION FAR FROM EVERYTHING

Smaller retail is sited where its developers think people are going to be. It is sited with a mind toward travel convenience from work and from residential areas for its target customers. That travel convenience includes walking, as well as public transportation. Wal-Mart’s sitting, by contrast, is

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5 See generally Susan L. Handy & Kelly J. Clifton, Local Shopping as a Strategy for Reducing Automobile Travel, 28 TRANSPORTATION 317 (2001) (arguing that while at times the availability of local goods does not stop people from driving to purchase goods at a distance, the availability of local goods is nonetheless a quality of life improvement that is valued by consumers because it makes driving a matter of choice, not necessity).


7 See generally Jennifer E. Swanberg et al., A Question of Justice: Disparities in Employees’ Access to Flexible Schedule Arrangements, 26 J. FAM. ISSUES 866 (2005) (discussing the “reinforcement of occupational stratification that disadvantages some groups of employees because flexible scheduling is more available to professional employees than to administrative staff”); Joan C. Williams, One Sick Child Away From Being Fired: When “Opting Out” Is NOT AN OPTION (2006), available at http://www.uchastings.edu/site_files/WLLonesickchild.pdf (finding that “[w]orking class families face inflexible schedules that clash with family needs”).

likely to reflect the particular needs of a big-box store. First, it needs a very large plot of land, and second, it must be located in a town that will grant exemptions from ordinary land use and zoning regulations.

Most Wal-Marts are sited in rural and ex-urban communities. Presumably, Wal-Mart must decide that there is a market, so that there are customers, in its chosen locations. But this constrains Wal-Mart less than other retailers. Wal-Mart’s catchment area will be much bigger, due to both their prices and the variety of goods available in one store. These undeniable benefits mean that Wal-Mart does not need to be sited adjacent to where people reside to attract customers. Therefore, practical issues associated with building a 150,000–200,000 square foot store, and a parking lot three times that size, will have a relatively greater impact on Wal-Mart’s site choice. Zoning, and the ability to get variances from zoning because of a supportive governmental unit, as well as the availability of large land plots of twelve or more acres, send Wal-Mart into open land.

Once Wal-Mart arrives, the character of the surrounding space changes in obvious ways. The area soon becomes highly trafficked. Access roads close to Wal-Mart and further away may need to be widened. The impact on traffic and economic development in neighboring towns can be significant. For some set of communities where zoning is primarily handled at the town level, Wal-Mart may receive zoning concessions from one township while imposing many of its external costs on neighboring towns. This is a common problem with local zoning that has regional effects, one that is sometimes addressed through regional planning bodies. But in the case of Wal-Mart, these effects can be especially large when the Wal-Mart has a significant economic impact on a mixed-use retail zone as far as fifteen or twenty miles away.

Big-box is sited with the idea that it will become a destination. The market plan includes changing where people are going, changing travel patterns and behavior, moving people around in the world spatially in a significantly different way than they would without big-box retail. Smaller retail stores in areas zoned and developed for mixed-use try to catch people as they move from home to work to school, not to re-direct them substantially. Thus big-box’s plan for influencing consumer conduct is more ambitious socially, even though the plan relies on market forces.

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9 See BLANCHARD, supra note 1, at 3 (noting that 70% of Wal-Marts are located outside urban areas).
11 See generally MYRON ORFIELD, AMERICAN METROPOLITICS: THE NEW SUBURBAN REALITY (2002) (arguing that inter-local competition is largely a zero-sum game with negative effects on the regional economy).
Sprawl lays down new roads that are quickly jammed with frustrated drivers in cars. There is no role for a pedestrian in Wal-Mart’s sprawled world; you cannot walk to a Wal-Mart as a matter of distance, or even as a matter of technical design, because Wal-Marts tend not to have sidewalks leading to or around them. Pedestrians can be found in places where density and mixed-use zoning create short trips; where easy, quick errands are thrown into complicated days. By contrast, transportation to Wal-Mart is defined by long trips.

IV. WAL-MART AND SPRAWL: THE COSTS

We hear about the impact of Wal-Mart on local businesses—that they close in the face of the price competition Wal-Mart brings. The impact on small businesses is dismissed by Wal-Mart proponents as anti-competitive complaining by those businesses who are unable to compete on price. But instead of viewing the effects of the price competition from the perspective of the small business owner, we might consider the effects of the disappearance of the local businesses on the consumer.

Once smaller local retail and grocery businesses shut down, the consumer loses choices over whether to drive to purchase goods, or instead to walk or use public transportation. She can no longer mix longer trips to Wal-Mart for low-cost goods with shorter trips to local retail for relatively higher-priced goods. The invitation to drive longer distances for low-priced retail shopping becomes a requirement of driving longer distances. That change raises problems of feasibility for those without cars, additional financial burdens for those with access to cars, and logistical strains on time use for women managing the stress associated with significant family responsibilities and increasing wage labor hours.

A. Feasibility of Access: The Effect of Wal-Mart on the Non-Driver

There are a set of consumers for whom long-distance car travel for shopping is not practical or feasible, whether because of age, disability, or the capital outlay associated with car ownership. For those people, losing the local store option may mean that many goods are practically speaking nearly unavailable to them where they live. The development of Wal-Mart “Supercenters,” which sell groceries, has led to what one set of scholars have labeled “Food Deserts”—areas where Wal-Mart has driven satellite grocery stores out of business, and all consumers need to travel great distances to get the most basic items.12 According to one report, with every new Wal-Mart Supercenter that is opened, two regular grocery stores will

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12 See BLANCHARD, supra note 1, at 3–4.
close. In some cases, Wal-Mart will drive local retail stores out of business, only to then close itself while opening a larger Wal-Mart at a more regional level that attracts customers from a wider catchment, leaving consumers to drive even further to the next nearest Wal-Mart. For some set of consumers, the creation of these food deserts means they have no practical access to groceries. For the elderly, this means their independence is threatened by the most familiar attribute of sprawl: they need a car to do everything.

As individuals age, their access to cars declines. One-fifth of Americans do not drive by the relatively young age of sixty-five. Big-box development is one force that makes already challenging transportation limitations more difficult for older people because sprawl centralizes retail at greater distances from residential life. Walking and public transportation are not options for accessing Wal-Mart, and Wal-Mart drains the region of retail that may be reached by those methods. Wal-Mart thus reduces the accessibility of goods to those whose age or disability deprives them of the ability to drive.

Another set of people are non-drivers because the costs of car ownership are too steep. While they are stranded in the same way as the elderly and disabled by a non-driving life, their situation is mutable, tied to the price of car ownership. We consider their circumstances next by examining the role of the financial costs of transportation in a sprawled world.

B. Cash Expenses: Car Ownership and Transportation

The added cost of transportation to families living under sprawled conditions is substantial. Consumers are not likely to blame Wal-Mart or any big-box retailer for these additional expenses, as they are unlikely to link these expenses to the siting needs and decisions of a Wal-Mart. The role of big-box developers in creating sprawl, and thereby increasing the need for individual investments in transportation, are not obvious to a consumer. The consumer may not be conscious of land use planning and transportation policy, instead viewing car ownership as a matter of personal choice uninfluenced by government or commercial actions. Most of the additional direct costs associated with sprawl are absorbed by consumers, not by the retailer, but the focal point for consumer frustration

14 See id. at 2, 12.
over those additional costs is unlikely to be Wal-Mart. Presumably, the retailer does suffer marginal loss in business from those who choose not to shop at Wal-Mart due to travel costs. But the demand curve is not as flexible as it would be were the shorter-travel retail options to remain in business. In choosing Wal-Mart’s pricing, we don’t know how directly consumers weigh the additional transportation costs against better-priced consumer goods.

How substantial are these transportation costs? One report concludes that after housing, transportation costs consume the largest proportion of Americans’ household budgets. It is in front of food, utilities, education, health care, or pensions. Transportation expenditures rise as the level of sprawl in a person’s community rises. The effect of sprawl on a household’s transportation costs is pronounced.

The cost of transportation for low-income households is a larger proportion of their income than is the cost of transportation for higher-income households. The figures are sobering: 36% of household expenditures of the lowest income families are devoted to transportation, compared to 14% for the highest income households. These expenses are regionally-dependent: consumers subject to sprawl spend more on transportation, consumers with access to public transit and in walkable neighborhoods pay less. Wal-Mart’s role in solidifying sprawl effectively taxes low-income individuals, even as they may love Wal-Mart’s low consumer prices.

Given the proportional expense of car ownership for lower income people, we could expect many to be priced out of the car market altogether, leaving them unable to access goods in the food and retail deserts Wal-Mart’s price competition has created. In fact, low-income women have lower rates of car ownership than middle class women, for whom car ownership is nearly universal. Government figures pertaining to women on public assistance put car ownership among that group as between 20–40%. Other studies put the group’s rate of car ownership over 59%,

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17 Id. at 9.
18 Id. at 17-18.
19 Id. at 10.
20 Id. at 6-7.
which is still lower than it is for middle-income households. Wal-Mart and its sprawled big-box counterparts raise the price of transportation for all consumers, but those at the lowest end of the income spectrum are hit hardest by this expense.

The costs of car ownership are direct, in that they include car purchase payments, maintenance, insurance, and gas. Perhaps those costs are weighed by consumers against the lower prices found at Wal-Mart and consumers prefer the low Wal-Mart prices. But low-income women are less likely to own cars, so some number of struggling women, practically speaking, cannot access a Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart probably absorbs some of these direct costs, by needing prices competitive enough to get people into their cars, and by losing some customers at the margins for whom that calculation doesn’t favor Wal-Mart shopping. But consumers will absorb most of it as car ownership has a relatively inflexible threshold cost in addition to its variable costs of operation. Some consumers will find it difficult to access goods at all in Wal-Mart’s car-dependent sprawled environment.

C. The Non-Financial Costs of Wal-Mart

In addition to the substantial costs of transportation, which we have already reviewed, Wal-Mart imposes other costs on consumers that are not likely to be attributed to the retailer.

1. Time

There are indirect costs to travel patterns, too, and the indirect costs are absorbed almost entirely by the consumer, not shared evenly with Wal-Mart. These indirect costs are less easily evaluated, either by scholars, or by consumers themselves. The most salient of those costs is time spent traveling. Women at all income levels are more pressed for time than their male counterparts. They have greater responsibility for dependents, which they combine with ever increasing hours of wage labor. They need to move between wage labor and family labor throughout the day. Women can ill-afford additional drains on time associated with travel to buy basic necessities like groceries. Women make more trips daily than men, and

/ Legacy/DHS-4450D-ENG (noting that 51% of Minnesota Family Investment Program aid recipients lacked access to a reliable car).
24 Silbaugh, supra note 2, at 6–12 (reviewing data on women’s time use).
their mileage continues to increase at a dramatic pace. According to one study:

Americans are now driving 88 percent farther than they did in 1969 to go shopping and an overwhelming 137 percent farther to accomplish family and personal errands. Much of this errand running is conducted by women, and it is taking place in areas where stores are widely scattered, and are often far from housing subdivisions or office parks. Because of this, women are making more trips and covering more miles. The way we’ve built our communities is literally giving mothers the run-around.  

Perhaps Wal-Mart provides some counterbalance to the additional distance traveled by reducing the number of trips: women can do all their shopping in a single visit. If planning for trip consolidation accurately described consumer behavior, this argument might have some power. It is undermined significantly, however, by data suggesting that women make “trip-chaining” decisions daily. This may indicate that trip consolidation does not match well with consumers’ apparent need to make shopping decisions in a shorter time frame. Transportation studies indicate that women do significantly more travel related to family needs. Family responsibilities means responding to the needs of dependents as they arise, and that may not be easily scheduled for a single weekly outing.  

2. Health

Travel in cars is bad for both the physical health of the women who shop at Wal-Mart, and for the health of their children. For many Americans, walking is the only exercise they can fit into a day; the longer they sit in a car, the worse the overall impact on their health.

Living the car-dependent life associated with sprawl has been found to correlate with less walking and higher rates of obesity, even after

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28 See Mauch & Taylor, supra note 26, at 374.
controlling for other factors such as age and ethnicity. Even when the study controls for differences based on whether individuals walk as a chosen method of exercise, an obesity difference remains for those living in more sprawled areas. This is presumed to be due to a reduction in the incidental walking that is taken out of the entirely car-dependent economies of big-box retail. Cars travel long distances to Wal-Mart to buy goods that were once available a block away from grocers or retail stores that are now out of business. The impact extends to children. The typical car that travels to Wal-Mart has a woman behind the wheel and children riding along in the back seat.

V. WAL-MART AS A CONSUMER CHOICE

Wal-Mart and other big-box stores cause consumers to increase their driving distance to obtain goods. This is especially true when the Wal-Mart is a Superstore, and sells groceries. Wal-Mart “causes” consumers to do this in two senses: consumers choose to because of price competition, and Wal-Mart drives closer retail and grocery outlets out of business, so that consumers must drive, or for those already driving, drive farther, to shop. This exacts a financial and non-financial toll on people that is probably not “on the books” in a family’s consumer and residential calculations. The distances traveled and the evaporation of retail and grocery options closer to home and work exact a larger toll on women, who do substantially more retail shopping than men, and on children, who ride along with women on these longer excursions (and have no meaningful control over residential and consumer choices).

If consumers value local convenience, why don’t high-priced local stores pop-up to replace those driven out of business? Those businesses depend on the consumer choosing them every time, when convenience matters and when it does not, in order to move enough volume to support the consumer’s convenience-motivated trips. Consumers are not choosing to run their local stores out of business, they are choosing to divide their

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29 Reid Ewing et al., Relationship Between Urban Sprawl and Physical Activity, Obesity and Morbidity, 18 AM. J. HEALTH PROMOTION 47, 54 (2003); Russ Lopez, Urban Sprawl and Risk for Being Overweight or Obese, 94 AM. J. PUB. HEALTH 1574, 1576–77 (2004).
31 See id. at 18.
shopping between the local stores and Wal-Mart. But the local stores, due to the smaller volume they sell, need their shoppers to be full-time, or they will need to price a larger share of their shoppers out of their stores permanently. This assumes that Wal-Mart achieves its lower prices through larger volume and its highly effectively managed supply chains. If however, as many allege, Wal-Mart achieves its lower prices through illegal behavior such as violations of employment laws; immigration laws; labor laws; and child-labor protecting trade laws, the inability of a local business to price-compete cannot be viewed as a market result reflecting desirable social benefits as judged by our regulatory standards.

Residential choices and consumer patterns are not a simple response to the availability of properly priced goods, but rather a multi-variable decision involving practical matters such as convenience and school quality, legal rules such as zoning, as well as cultural matters relating to community and the evolution in norms of family and residential life. Therefore the ability of the consumer to use market power to change the time and flexibility effects of sprawl may be more limited than a classical economist might assume. This is in part an application of the basic legal realist insight that property rules structure choices. The norms of residential and commercial decision-making are likely in need of more complicated analysis of the sort commonly seen in the literature on emotions in decision making, on bounded rationality, and on social norms.

VI. CONCLUSION

Women of all classes are struggling to manage their balance of time, work, and family. Having family, work, and errands at great distances from one another is an underappreciated enemy of this balance. Wal-Mart’s arrival draws people in, and only after time will they learn that they

34 See, e.g., WakeUpWalMart.com, Wal-Mart & Child Labor Violations, http://www.wakeupwalmart.com/downloads/wal-mart-child-labor-facts.pdf (reporting that Wal-Mart has repeatedly violated child labor laws and settled a number of child labor violation charges, and yet has received assurance from the Department of Labor that they will give Wal-Mart fifteen days notice before visiting stores or investigating allegations of improper behavior).


37 Silbaugh, supra note 2, at 40–42 (discussing the limits of free market analysis in explaining how individuals make residential decisions).

have lost their ability to run a much-needed five-minute errand, or for their neighbors without cars, much of any errands at all. Driving longer distances and reducing the amount she walks, the individual has endangered her physical health and added to the time and stress in her life without appreciating this impact of big-box sprawl on her well-being. It is difficult to call the impact this sprawl has on the activities of daily life a choice, as they creep up on an unconscious consumer who may never tie the stress she does recognize with the shopping patterns she does not question.

Wal-Mart is an underappreciated contributor to the time pressures in the lives of women balancing work, family, and community, the financial pressures they experience through increased transportation costs, and the negative health effects of unwalkable communities. Just as consumers do not mean to endorse unethical labor practices when they shop at Wal-Mart, we should not assume that they mean to endorse all of the effects of big-box sprawl, either. Women’s travel patterns and daily activities differ from men’s, on average. The practical consequences of this kind of development on the quality of life of working women with dependents should be brought into focus in discussions over Wal-Mart’s impact.