

TARGET- WAL-MART



Are “Big Box” retailers knowingly putting employees and customers at risk for violent crime?

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Death row at a federal penitentiary is an appropriately grim place under any circumstances. It seemed particularly so on a cold February morning as I trudged through the snow on my way to keep an appointment with a killer.

I am always struck by the absence of color at prisons. The real world washed away to reveal a muted institutional neutral. In fact, the only bright and cheery object was the row upon row of towering razor wire. Even on this overcast morning, its giant teeth glittered.

I had reviewed the file of course, spending hours going through the details concerning the abduction of the wife and mother from the Wal-Mart parking lot in broad daylight and of her subsequent rape and murder. I had read the investigative files, the court transcripts. I had been struck by the arrest photo of the killer. He sneered into the camera, defiant and empty. A portrait of malevolence. How terrible, I thought, that the last images an innocent woman would have on this earth would be of this monster.

It was perhaps a mercy of sorts that the body had never been recovered. While it denied a sense of closure, I have seen far too often the terrible pain and deep scars left on families and loved ones exposed to autopsy photos and endless clinical details of a wrongful death.

I didn't recognize him at first. He sat in a wheelchair (from a self inflicted wound carefully designed not to cause too much damage) his blond hair once cropped in a military brush cut had grown out and was styled in a grotesque page boy style. His watery blue eyes glowed with self pity.

The appeals filed on his behalf were typical. He had a bad childhood, he came from difficult circumstances, he abused alcohol and drugs, and he wasn't responsible. A young legal intern that had worked on one of the obligatory appeals wrote of the convicted killer:

“He sickened me. I mean, here I was trying to keep this guy from being executed, and I found him disgusting. He was a drama queen and a manipulator who thought he was smarter than everyone. He wasn't.”

I wasn't surprised when the first thing out of his mouth in my interview with him was an offer to “lead us to the body.” The terrain where he confessed to leaving the corpse of the woman he killed had been searched and re-searched by teams of trained professionals. Corpse sniffing dogs and crews on the ground, helicopters from the air, and dive teams in the surrounding water.

The search lasted months.

Almost three years had passed since an innocent woman was senselessly murdered and the creature who was responsible sat in front of me thinking he would get a field trip.

I explained I wasn't there for that.

I wasn't a lawyer, a cop, a psychologist, or a reporter.
I didn't care about his life story, his angst, or his "new found Christianity".
I wanted something more specific.
I wanted to know why this predator chose Wal-Mart as his hunting ground.
I was soon to discover that it wasn't by chance or accident, but by design.
He spoke at length, softly and mostly avoiding my eyes.

Over a short period of time he had become a prolific "opportunistic offender" i.e. like most criminals he sought targets that offered a quick and easy take with little risk to him.

"I'd been breaking into cars and stuff since I was about twelve. You just go there (Wal-Mart) and if you park, you can just watch people pull up. Like some people, they will put stuff in the trunk. And if you sit there and watch the people, you know which ones put stuff in their trunk or got stuff in their cars."

Over a period of a decade, he had frequented Wal-Mart parking lots, stealing purses and packages, developing cons and scams to get cash for "returns" on stolen items, negotiating bad checks and more. His luck ran out in a Wal-Mart parking lot one afternoon when his wife, tired of being physically and emotionally battered and terrified at the rant he was on in their car, called the police from inside the store and reported him. The police arrested him and found a gun he had been brandishing together with stolen items and forged checks.

In jail, it didn't take long for him to find a like minded creep. A fellow thief who was easily manipulated and willingly led. He got word that the police intended to file additional charges against him, and two days later, together with his newfound partner, the two of them escaped custody. In the four week, multi-state crime spree that followed, there was a constant thread in all of their activities: Wal-Mart.

Not only did they find a safe haven and targets of opportunity in perpetrating crime at Wal-Mart stores across the country, Wal-Mart even served as a safe refuge for them to spend the night, sleeping undisturbed in their car in the store parking lot.

"Like if I was driving and I was falling asleep, we would pull over. It was sort of like I knew that was a place that we could make money breaking into cars."

"In fact, you slept the night and the next morning broke into a truck parked right next to you?"

"Yeah."

"So, Wal-Mart is a 24 hour opportunity?"

"Yeah. We didn't want to go nowhere where there was security."

Over a period of days and weeks, fueled by alcohol and methamphetamine, and emboldened with their successes, the two predators collided with their victim on a bright afternoon in the parking lot of a Wal-Mart. Concerned that their car was known to the FBI and police searching for them since their escape, they sought to steal a fast and reliable car. It would not have surprised them to learn that 17 cars had been stolen out of this lot in previous months. It wouldn't have concerned them that the violent abduction of the victim was caught on grainy surveillance footage.

Just as there was no form of security present or patrolling the lot at these stores, neither was anyone ever assigned to watch the cameras or review the footage. By the time anyone was able to determine that a wife and mother had been seized in broad daylight and driven to her death, days had passed. After raping and murdering the woman, they continued an erratic cross-country run.

Several days later a 15-year-old girl was confronted by a man holding a gun as she entered her car. What he hadn't counted on was the girl's mother, a few feet behind him. His target interrupted, the assailant fled on foot while the quick thinking mother was able to call police who gave chase and ultimately apprehend one of the two fugitives. And where did this take place? A Wal-Mart parking lot.

For me, this sad story was in the words of the immortal Yogi Berra, "Déjà vu all over again." Just the year before I had been consulted on another case involving the abduction and brutal rape of a young college girl from the parking lot of a Wal-Mart. Again, no security was present and no one patrolled the parking lot. The young woman displayed enormous courage in fighting back against her attacker, screaming and struggling as she was seized from the Wal-Mart. She survived the attack managing to flee bleeding and naked to a nearby home. Her assailant is still at large. The Wal-Mart parking lot where the attack took place had been the scene of two violent homicides only a short time before.

So is the fact that Wal-Mart parking lots offer a disproportionate opportunity for criminals come as a surprise to Wal-Mart?

"Three years ago management conducted a survey that looked at crime statistics for a one year period on Wal-Mart properties. The survey showed that 80% of crimes at Wal-Mart were occurring in the parking lot.

To combat this outdoor crime a team of loss prevention members tested a new parking lot security program in 1994 at several Florida stores. The results have been outstanding. During the four months of operating the patrol vehicles at that store (in Tampa Florida which experienced 226 stolen cars from the parking lot previously) the reported incidents dropped to zero. The patrol program costs Wal-Mart \$45,000.00 dollars per year per store"

Loss Prevention Racks Up Success by Dave Gorman, then vice-president of loss prevention Wal-Mart Bentonville, Arkansas

Yet the overwhelming majority of these facilities open 24 hours a day, accommodating up to 2,000 parking spaces on an average, who's shopping demographic are a majority of female customers still do not provide security to their patrons where they know they are vulnerable.

“A quick review of reported cases reveals that Wal-Mart parking lots are a virtual magnet for crime”

-Justice Starcher, West Virginia Supreme Court *Doe v. Wal-Mart, Inc.* 210 W. Va. 664, 558 S.E. 2d 663 (2001)

After 30 years in the security industry, dealing with the aftermath of over a hundred and fifty homicides and other brutal crimes, I am often asked if I have difficulty sleeping, if the horrors and vivid details of these heinous and brutal crimes haunt my dreams. Of course they do.

I wouldn't give a damn for someone who could become numb to this senseless carnage. Indifferent to the lives torn apart by vicious crimes, many of which might have been prevented. My question is how does someone sleep who makes a conscious decision to put innocent lives at stake day in and day out?

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing”

-Edmund Burke 18th century Irish Statesman

The corporate masters at Wal-Mart have made a decision when it comes to the basic and reasonable safety and security of their employees and patrons. The decision is to do nothing. Their choice of putting profit over life is, in the words of Hannah Arendt, the very banality of evil.

Additional Web Resources:

<http://www.walmartcrimereport.com/>

About The Author

J. R. Roberts is a security consultant in private practice with over 30 years of practical experience.



Mr. Roberts served as Director of Risk Management for Valor Security, one of the country's largest providers of security to the shopping center industry. In addition to providing training and consultation to clients across the United States, Mr. Roberts has served as an expert witness in over 150 lawsuits concerning safety and security and for both defendant and plaintiff. Mr. Roberts makes his home in Savannah, Georgia.

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